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Knowledge Production in Times of Fragility:

An Overview of Syrian Art Production over the Last Decade

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DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

Knowledge Production in Times of Fragility: An Overview of Syrian Art Production over the Last Decade

SIJNIYYA: NEW PRISON SONGS IN SEDNAYA

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Résumé | La recherche *Sijniyya : Nouvelles chansons de prison à Sedydnaya* vise à étudier et analyser les pratiques musicales du point de vue de l'expression personnelle, plutôt que sous l'angle de l'autorité et du contrôle, en contraste avec les études qui se concentrent principalement sur les prisons syriennes. Cette approche repose sur la conviction que se concentrer sur les pratiques personnelles révélera indirectement les dynamiques de pouvoir au sein des prisons syriennes, en particulier à Sednaya. De façon inattendue, et par hasard, une conversation avec un ami a suggéré que même les centres de torture syriens pourraient comporter des traces de pratiques musicales. Pour explorer cette possibilité, la recherche examine des prisonniers politiques affiliés au Parti Communiste Syrien, qui étaient politiquement actifs à la fin des années 1970 et au début des années 1980 avant leur emprisonnement de 1987 à 1996, et qui vivent maintenant en exil en Europe. Existe-t-il une chanson de prison syrienne venant de Sednaya ? Peut-on la nommer « Sijniyya » ? Comment la résistance peut-elle s'exprimer sous forme de rituel ou de performance musicale et artistique à

1- The writing period of this research took place in the ERC grant 851393 The Prison Narratives of Assad's Syria: Voices, Texts, Publics, Starting Grant (851393) of the European Research Council in the Transregional Studies Forum in Berlin. Most of the introductory readings and part of the fieldwork were conducted while I was a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Marburg in the "Turning Points" research group in 2020. In addition, the focus group interviews were jointly funded by SYRASP and Umam: Documentation and Research. This research is part of a project for the coming years, an English-language book project on Syrian prison songs. I would like to thank Anne-Marie McManus, Christian Junge, Ammar Almamoun, Farouk Mardam-Bey, Maher Massoud, Ghada Alatrash, Diana Abbani, colleagues and friends at EUME in Berlin and the SHAKK team in Paris for discussing and meeting with me during the writing process. In addition, this research would not have seen the light of day without the interviews, discussions, reviews, and readings I conducted with former Sednaya Prison prisoners: Hassan Abdulrahman, Faraj Bayraqdar, Ibrahim Bayraqdar, Badr Zakariya, Hassan Kamel, Sayel Nassif, Taleb Ibrahim, Kisra Kurdi, Assaad Shlash, Ciwan Khorshid Youssef, Malek Daghestani, Haitham Alkatreb, and others. It was impossible to mention or quote all of the interviews, but they all undoubtedly informed me about the musical experience in Sednaya Prison and helped me better understand, analyze, and write about the subject.

Sednaya ? Comment la prison de moindre envergure peut-elle influencer la plus grande, en façonnant le champ culturel carcéral syrien ? Cette recherche vise à répondre à ces questions et à éclairer comment le système de domination des prisons syriennes reflète la Syrie elle-même comme une prison, particulièrement en raison de la rareté de la documentation sur les pratiques culturelles en prison.

Mots-clés | Pratiques musicales en prison, archivage et documentation, technologies du soi, résistance musicale, prison de Sednaya.

Abstract | The research *Sijniyya: New Prison Songs in Sednaya* seeks to study and analyze musical practices from the perspective of personal expression, rather than through the lens of authority and control, contrasting with studies that primarily focus on Syrian prisons. This approach is based on the belief that focusing on personal practices will indirectly reveal the power dynamics within Syrian prisons, especially in Sednaya. Unexpectedly, and by chance, a conversation with a friend suggested that even Syrian torture facilities may hold traces of musical practices. To explore this, the research examines political prisoners affiliated with the Syrian Communist Party, who were politically active in the late 1970s and early 1980s before their imprisonment from 1987 to 1996, and who now live in European exile. Is there a Syrian prison song from Sednaya? Can it be termed 'Sijniyya'? How can resistance be expressed as a musical or artistic ritual or performance in Sednaya? How might the smaller prison impact the larger prison, shaping the Syrian prison cultural field? This research aims to answer these questions and to shed light on how the system of domination within Syrian prisons reflects Syria itself as a prison, particularly given the scarcity of documentation on prison cultural practices.

Keywords | Prison Musical Practices, Archiving and Documenting, Technologies of the Self, Musical Resistance, Sednaya Prison

Yes, my friend, prison is a monochrome world, but at least, your oud can make you feel better. What would happen to those who have nothing to kill time? Time might kill them.

Assaad Shlash, *Awtār warā' al-Quḍbān* [Musical Strings Behind the Bars].¹

“I don’t remember anymore” is the answer of Hassan Abdulrahman (a Musician in France ar. 1988-1995) to my questions once I try to delve into past memories of music in Sednaya. Based on this answer to my questions, this research is built upon the memories of former political prisoners who were imprisoned between 1987 and 1996 in Sednaya Prison and seeks to study musical practices there². In one of the interviews I conducted, Faraj Bayraqdar, a poet who wrote several prison songs in Sednaya, was surprised that there were prison songs in Syria as a whole³. However, after the interview ended, we were both surprised to see that several initiatives had been taken in this regard, even though I thought that what happens in political prisons in Syria stays there and ends with the release of the prisoners. This specific act of arresting and releasing is an essential part of Assad’s domination over Syria, which is not limited to prison and prisoners, but extended beyond the prison space. There are no major differences between the political prison and the larger place that contains the smaller prison⁴. Both prisons are part of a knowledge network that relies on a reciprocal relationship in which they depend on one another and feed off each other. What is private relies on public cultural manifestations through folklore, heritage and their individual cultural outcomes, forming what I call here the prison cultural field in the confined space of jail and beyond. This gap between the prison and out of it is not only simply missing, according to fieldwork regarding political prisoners in Sednaya from 1987 to 1996, or at least regarding Sednaya and its relationship with the outside but it is invisible. In this sense, the prison cultural field is the space and general framework for the spread of these practices inside the prison and out of it. Is there a prison cultural field inside the prison that is linked to what is outside? If such a field exists, is it limited only to prison literature, as Syrian literature

1- SHLASH Assaad, *Awtār warā' al-Quḍbān* [Musical Strings Behind the Bars]. Beirut, Dar Al-Farabi, 2019.

2- “I don’t remember anymore” is a sentence used by Hassan Abdulrahman in his interview, while talking about music in Sednaya Prison. I was trying to get him to remember those times. The sentence he used is the title of a play by Wael Ali that was first performed in Beirut in 2014. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3vsN2jb>

3- Born in 1951, Faraj Bayraqdar is a poet and former political prisoner, imprisoned from 1987 to 2000. He has written several poems, and many of his works have been translated and have won various literary and cultural awards.

4- By using Yassin al-Haj Saleh’s idea of “going from the ‘small prison’ to the ‘great prison,’ I am not trying to minimize the sensitivity around what happens inside and outside the prison, but to emphasize the connection and interdependence between the two sides, not only for the prisoners, but also for those who have not gone through the experience of imprisonment, as I will explain later; there is no similarity or analogy between the two, but the painful and cruel prison, surrounded by tightly closed walls, affects the outside as well, resulting in the marginalization of the prisoners. Cf. SALEH Yassin al-Haj, *Bil Khalāṣ Yā Shabāb*: 16 ‘Āman Fil Sujūn Al-Sūriyya. Beirut, Dar Al Saqi, 2012, 215 p.; SALEH Yassin al-Haj, « Fi Al-Manfā, Fi Al-Waṭan Wa Al-‘Ālam, Wa Al-Kitāba », In Al-Ḥiwar Al-Mutamaddin, Issue No. 6443, December 2019, [online], [Accessed August 20, 2022]. Available at: <https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=659580>.

generally describes it, or are there other prison cultural practices that have not been highlighted, and documented? If prison songs exist, why are they absent from the Syrian cultural scene? How do prison songs and musical practices relate to the mutual knowledge between those who are imprisoned and the ones who have never been arrested in the public Syrian space? How do the technologies of power impact on the recognition or visibility of these practices?

In addition to these questions, the present study attempts to understand the relation between the prison song, its genre and the way it is disseminated. It seeks to delve deeper into the testimonies of the participants, with the aim of establishing new frameworks to define the prison song or *Sijniyyāt*: plural of *Sijniyya*, as I will explain later. This research seeks to address many of these questions but hesitates to answer some of them due to the difficulty of navigating this complex space for a variety of reasons. One of these reasons is the dependency, partly or entirely, on the interviews of participants from these imprisonment centers. Another is the responsibility of writing in their voices to tell the story of something I did not experience and to describe a political scene I have only read about, which is different from the current political scene, as well as the political detention scene, in Syria. The present research paper focuses exclusively on the experience of Sednaya's former political prisoners, whose conditions worsened after 2011. This is not meant to dissociate Sednaya now from Sednaya in 1987, but rather to understand how oppression in Sednaya has changed since the research period, which puts us in front of several perspectives, that may converge or diverge, leading us to have a better understanding of what Sednaya is now. The goal is also to avoid any generalized understanding of Sednaya as a single, unchanging reality.

Before tackling the Syrian prison song or *Sijniyya*, as I will refer to it later, this study progresses through several stages. It begins with an overview of literature review relating to prison songs in different contexts and concludes with the broader Arab and musical landscape in order to reach the Syrian prison songs of Sednaya. After structuring, constructing, reordering, and analyzing these practices, I move on to the conclusion, aiming to identify various aspects of prison songs. I will explore how these practices affect and are affected by the cultural field, both inside and outside of prison. By closely analyzing the prison field and studying individuals within it, baseline can be established for mapping these practices. This analysis may transform how we theoretically, politically, and socially approach the overlapping relationships in the public space for cultural production in prisons. As Pierre Bourdieu describes it, the cultural field is “a structured space of positions in which the positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of different kinds of resources or capital”.⁵

I try to define this artistic space in prison itself and outside of it, its impact on the prison public space, and whether this space is affected by the prison artistic products and prison cultural practices. I aim to explore the emergence of

5- BOURDIEU Pierre, « Quelques propriétés des champs », Questions de sociologie, Paris, Minuit, 1980, p. 113-120.

obstacles within the Syrian cultural field to understand the relationship between prison cultural practices and their dynamics of silencing, release, and potential resilencing after the agents of these practices are freed. This is evident in the direct connection between the prison and the outside world, contributing to the balance of cultural production in the prison field before 2011. However, after 2011, the dynamics of this field shifted significantly, influenced by changes in the characteristics of agents, activists, and art producers from outside Syria, as well as the newly emerged space of relative freedom for former political prisoners. Following this, I provide what helped me methodologically and theoretically to write this research and approach the theme of imprisonment, its domination, and the resistance.

There is a Prison Everywhere, Singing in Each One

In Global North, singing in prisons and prison artistic practices are supported by the administration of those prisons, and researchers are able to document and study those practices. In the Syrian prison field, it's the exact opposite. However, in order to provide an overview of the singing context in prisons, it is necessary to quickly go through some cases that may intersect with some prison experiences in different countries and periods. In Nazi Germany, for example, singing was very recognized in Nazi concentration camps for various purposes and reasons. According to Christoph Daxelmüller's extensive work documenting the different forms of culture in these camps, singing and singing practices are divided into two types: singing on command and singing for the sake of singing. The first type consisted of jailers forcing prisoners to sing as a form of humiliation and self-degradation, something that didn't happen in Syrian detention centers and prisons, except when some prisoners were forced to chant slogans expressing love for Assad and deifying him. As for the second type of singing, it consisted of prisoners singing to console themselves and stay strong in imprisonment⁶. This type of singing is the most widespread in Syrian prisons and detention centers, as I will explain later. In Scandinavian countries, singing in prison took different shapes and its conditions were better for prisoners and researchers alike, especially in terms of access to the prison field and allowing scholars to work alongside prisoners to archive and preserve prison musical practices. An example of such work is Dan Lundberg's *Singing through the Bars*, for which he was able to analyze existing prison archives and conduct interviews. In this book, Lundberg studies the cultural heritage and folklore music in the Swedish genre

6- DAXELMÜLLER Christoph, « Kulturelle Formen und Aktivitäten als Teil der Überlebens- und Vernichtungsstrategie in den Konzentrationslagern », In DIECKMANN Christoph, HERBERT Ulrich, ORTH Karin (eds.), *Die nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager. Entwicklung und Struktur*, Göttingen, 1998, vol. 2, 993 p.

of prison songs⁷ and demonstrates how a private prison space can become a public one outside of prison.

In the Arab region, looking more closely at the Syrian prison reality in the context of totalitarian political regimes, and at the cultural and linguistic aspect, I am confronted with a production that may be considered significant in terms of prison practices, including singing. As a general assumption, I believe that prison spaces are larger and wider in countries that have gone through frequent regime changes and numerous transformations at the political level. The prison practices in these countries are more documented and visible than in the countries that have witnessed a single political regime. In any case, this does not imply that the countries with changing regimes have become democratic. Rather, it is a strategy followed by oppressive totalitarian regimes. It does not reflect the interest of these regimes in providing spaces for prison practices, but it is a way for them to provide a space to vilify the previous regime.

For instance, in the case of Tunisia, which is a country that witnessed many regime changes, I think that the succession of political regimes led to the creation of such spaces. It all started during the rule of Bourguiba in 1957 and ended with Ben Ali, who came to power in a coup in 1987⁸. Then, the Tunisian revolution erupted, bringing several presidents to power. This change in political regimes may have provided more space to talk about prison artistic practices, especially after 2011⁹. Therefore, I consider the existence of what is known as “Al-Zindālī” in the Tunisian musical cultural field as a genre that characterizes prison songs in Tunisia, as it is documented through several videos and through books written by musicians¹⁰. This is why I come across the names of prison singers and performers, such as Cheikh El Afrit, Al-Qadali, Salah Khemissi and Salah Farzit, among others, as individuals whose stories were portrayed or

7- Dan Lundberg is Director of the Swedish Performing Arts Agency and Associate Professor in Musicology at the Stockholm University in Sweden. His research focuses on music, identity and ideology as well as Swedish and European folklore from ethnomusicological approach. Cf. LUNDBERG Dan, *Singing through the Bars: Prison Songs as Identity Markers and as Cultural Heritage*, Trans. Fred Lane, Stockholm, Svenskt Visarkiv, 2018, 210 p.

8- MARTEL Pierre-Albin, Habib Bourguiba. *Un homme, un siècle*, Paris, Éditions du Jaguar, 1999, p. 69; ALEXANDER Christopher, *Tunisia Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghreb*, London, Routledge, 2010, p. 3.

9- Several authors started writing and analyzing “Al-Zindālī” music and songs more extensively after 2011. Various documentaries are available online: Al Araby channel, *Al-Zindālī: Nashīd As-Sujūn Al-Tūnisiyya*, YouTube video, April 23, 2018, [Accessed March 20, 2022], 49:28. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3rhOHqg> ; Alghad TV channel, *Al-Zindālī... Tarnimat As-Sujūn Al-Tūnisiyya*, YouTube video, April 18, 2020, [Accessed March 2022], 21:06. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3jwgBLc> ; Telvza TV, *Zaghārīd... Mūsīqā Al-Zindālī* (three parts), YouTube video, March 2020, [Accessed March 2022], 28:53, 33:05, 34:41. Available at: <https://bit.ly/38K394a>, <https://bit.ly/3JsGhmd>, <https://bit.ly/3KyVTGp>.

10- In numerous books, Al-Zindālī is considered a Tunisian musical genre and a part of Tunisian music. Cf. KHAWAJA Ahmad, *Al-Dhākira Al-Jamā’iyya Wa Al-Taḥawwulāt Al-ġimā’iyya Min Mir’āt Al-Ughniya Al-Sha’abiyya, Ḥālat Tūnis Al-Ḥāḍira, Qubail Al-Ĥimāya Wa Athnā’aha Wa Ba’adaha, Silsilat Aḍwa’*. Tunis, ALIF – Mediterranean Publications, 1988, 316 p.; ASRAM Muhammad, *Shadharāt Mutafariqa Fi Al-Mūsīqā*. Tunis: Ministry of Culture, Al Dar Al Arabiya publishing house, 2001, 164 p.

conveyed by Al-Zindālī, or as individuals mentioned in Al-Zindālī.¹¹ This Tunisian musical genre is heavily influenced by Tunisian folk music, especially the popular Mezwed music.¹²

Similarly, the succession of several presidents and political regimes in Egypt may explain the political space that Egyptians have enjoyed, which, although small, is quite large compared to other regimes such as the Assad regime in Syria. Since the rule of Abdel Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak, the Egyptian revolution and the subsequent regime change, the Egyptian cultural field has gone through changes that led to the emergence of individuals who influenced prison musical practices, not only in Egypt but also in the Arab world. Among them were prison singers and poets such as Sheikh Imam, Ahmed Fouad Negm, Naguib Surur, Abdel Rahman al-Abnudi, and many others.

Music Echoes in Syria, but...

After reviewing a significant number of research works related to Syrian musical and artistic production, I observed that there are numerous books, articles, and research papers attempting to address the topic. Consequently, I compiled a list of references on Syrian music and its production, which I will present in this section, first in Arabic and then in English. While the list of references is not exhaustive, it can be considered comprehensive. In many of these papers, studies related to music are often analyzed not as a central theme but as a complement to political discourse, which hinders a thorough exploration of these studies and the various Syrian musical genres. They are also often analyzed as documentary research based on the enumeration of lists and indexes of artistic figures, song lists, or techniques related to specialized knowledge on music and to musical notation. Despite the state of musical research, we can by no means overlook the works that tried to document and write about the situation in Syria. Among those who wrote about and documented Syrian musical production is Adnan Bin Dhurail (1923-2000), who wrote one of the first books in this regard, but with less analytical dimensions¹³. Regarding Majdi Al-Aqili's (1917-1983) collection *Al-Samā' 'Ind Al-'Arab* (The Art of Listening for Arabs), it aimed to frame Arab music but did not extend beyond presenting a few never-documented songs and some classifications across five volumes.¹⁴ Šamīm Al-Sharīf (1927-2012) also dedicated significant effort to indexing the never-documented materials of Syrian music, publishing them in various musicology publications and books. However, he remained committed to the historical method and the technical science of music when analyzing these materials. Several other books have adopted the same

11- AL-HAZQI Haykal, Al-Zindālī: Aghāni As-Sujūn Al-Tūnisiyya, In Maʒazef, December 3, 2015, [online], [Accessed March 20, 2022]. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3LzLjHE>.

12- Ibid.

13- BIN DHURAIL Adnan, *Al-Mūsīqā Fī Sūryā: Al-Baḥṭh al-Mūsīqī Wa Al-Funūn al-Mūsīqīyya Mundhu Mi'at 'Ām*. Damascus: Alif Ba Press, 1963, 222 p.

14- AL-AQILI Majdi, *Al-Samā' 'Ind Al-'Arab*. Damascus, Syrian Association for Postgraduates, 1969, 352 p.

methodology and style.¹⁵ Despite the scarcity of analytical dimensions in Syrian music sources, we cannot deny that some promising attempts have been made by young researchers in the field of music to link the musical product to social sciences, especially after 2011. For instance, some authors analyzed music and songs through various sociological theories, such as the symbolic products in “When They Cried “Forever”: The Language of the Syrian Revolution.” They employed case studies to examine specific songs and analyzed certain groups and their discourse in the research conducted by Sultan Al-Jalabi and Wassim Al-Sharqi¹⁶.

In the studies conducted in foreign languages, Syrian music is portrayed as an idea or a sub-theme of a main topic. It is mainly used either to compare the dominant discourses, or to provide examples without making music the main theme of the research¹⁷. In any case, this does not detract from these studies, but rather places music within frameworks and themes that fall under broader ideas. In Christopher Philipps’ book, a few pages are devoted to the role of Syrian music in the mapping of Arab media. This map of Arab media focuses on music, politics, pop songs, and political songs¹⁸. As for Jonathan Holt Shannon’s book, it is one of the first to dedicate a large part of it to the study of ideas related to Arabism, originality and folklore in Syrian music¹⁹. Another researcher, Rahaf Aldoughli, examined the construction of national identity, masculinity, and the sense of belonging in Syrian nationalist songs. This was one of the first works to consider songs as a fundamental component for analysis, utilizing two different

15- On Syrian and Arabic music, Cf. ARAFA Abdul Menhem, *Tarikh A'lām Al-Mūsīqā Al-Sharqiyya*, Egypt, Anani Bookshop, 1974; AL-MALEH Yasser, *KHADRAKI Amal*, Al-Nagham Wa Al-Kalima Fi Ḥayāt Al-Mūsīqār Suheil ‘Arafa, Damascus, Ministry of Culture, Syrian General Organization of Books, 2014; AL-QABBANI Abdul Salam Ibrahim, Ibrahim Al-Qabbani Wa Atharuhu Fi Al-Mūsīqā Al-‘Arabiyya, Al-Kilani Press, 1977; ISSA George, *Al-She'r Al-Mahkiyy Fi Ash-Shām: Zaman Al-Este'mār Al-Faransiyy*, Damascus, Ministry of Culture, 2012; MESHLEH Abdul Hamid, *Al-Ihzūja Al Sha'biya Fi Idlib*, Damascus, Publications of the Ministry of Culture, Syrian General Organization of Books, 2017; ZERIKLY Gaswan, *‘An Al-Mūsīqā Wa Al-Mūsīqiyyin*, Damascus, Dar Al-Baath, 2011; ABBAS Hassan, *Al-Mūsīqā Al-Taqlīdiyya Fi Sūryā*, Beirut, UNESCO, 2018.

16- BADER EDDIN Eylaf, *‘Indamā Hatafū ilā-al-Abad: Lughat al-Thawra al-Sūriyya’*, [When They Cried “Forever”: The Language of the Syrian Revolution]. Damascus, Mamdouh Adwan, 2018, 228 p.; AL-JALABI Sultan, *Adlajat Al-Ghinā’*, Harmoon Center For Contemporary Studies, December 28, 2018, [online], [Accessed March 2022]. Available at: <https://www.harmoon.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Prostration-of-singing.pdf>; AL-SHARQI Wassim, *Ṣurat Al-Waḥān Fi Al-Ughniya Al-Sūriyya Al-Mustaqila*. In: *Abḥāth Li Ta’amiq Thaḳāfat Al-Ma’arifa: Arba’at Awraq Baḥthiyya ‘An As’ilat Al-Rāhen Al-Sūry*. Damascus, Mamdouh Adwan, 2018, 247 p.

17- Cf. BADER EDDIN Eylaf, *Translating the Language of the Syrian Revolution (2011-2012)*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2023; WEDEEN Lisa, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999; COOKE Miriam, *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2007; WEDEEN Lisa, *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2019; COOKE Miriam, *Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience, and the Syrian Revolution*, New York, Routledge, 2017.

18- PHILIPPS Christopher, *Everyday Arab Identity: The Daily Reproduction of the Arab World*, Oxon, Routledge, 2013, 224 p.

19- SHANNON Johnathon Holt, *Among the Jasmine Trees: Music and Modernity in Contemporary Syria*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2006, 288 p.

time frames as samples: 1973-1990 and 1990-2007.²⁰

As I delved deeper into the topic of the research and the Syrian prison song, I found that this theme had not been explored in academic research, but only in investigative reports, journalistic studies, testimonies, and narratives. This is what this research relied on initially to introduce the Syrian prison song. The first to write about prison musical practices was Malek Daghestani in a documentary article that explored the creation of musical instruments, teaching music, musical gatherings, certain songs, the loss and confiscation of musical instruments, and their recrafting.²¹ On the other hand, Badr Zakariya's work revolved around theater and what happened in Sednaya prison with his fellow prisoners. He begins by discussing his experimentation with known artistic works and then moves on to how he attempted to transform some works into plays using the available prison tools²². In Zakariya's article, he describes the use of music in theater, and in Daghestani's article he documents Sednaya Theater²³. Certainly, I cannot overlook the richness of Ghassan Jbaai's book about his theater experience in general, particularly the section dedicated to theater in Sednaya and his use of music in theater. In Syrian prison literature, I observe that music is mentioned sporadically in various works, such as *Al-Qawqa'a* (The Shell) and Rosa Yassin's novel *Negative*, among others.²⁴ Therefore, the present research paper relies primarily on interviews with prisoners who had gone through this experience in Sednaya.

Data and Interviews

The openness of the cultural field in exile enabled this research paper to communicate and access fieldwork through various initiatives and institutions focused on the concerns of those released from Syrian prisons abroad. Without the dismissal of previous factors and the rise of a militant cultural field in exile, which engages politically with the Syrian interior from other countries, this study would not have come to fruition. The current research was made possible by the availability of a limited number of interviewees and previously undocumented materials, primarily relying on two rounds of interviews. The first one is comprised of twelve remote field interviews, which were conducted

20- ALDOUGHLI Rahaf, « The symbolic construction of national identity and belonging in Syrian nationalist songs (from 1970 to 2007) », *Contemporary Levant* [online], 2018, vol. 4, no. 2, p. 141–154. Available at: 10.1080/20581831.2018.1554233.

21- DAGHESTANI Malek, « 'Alā Maqām "Al-Ṣabā", Mūsīqā Sijn Sednaya », In *Al-Jumhuriya*, August 1, 2017, [online], [Accessed March 20, 2022]. Available at: <https://aljumhuriya.net/ar/2017/08/01/38598/> ; DAGHESTANI Malek, « Qabla Ribī' Qarn, Masraḥ Sednaya As-Serriyy », In *Al-Jumhuriya*, July 14, 2017, [online], [Accessed March 20, 2022]. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3HVitce>

22- ZAKARIYA Badr, *Shahāda Ḥawl Al-Masraḥ Fi As-Sijn Wilādat Masraḥ Wa Mawtuhu*, Qalamoun, October 2021, Issue No. 17, [online], [Accessed March 20, 2022], Available at: <https://bit.ly/3MnhVw7>

23- DAGHESTANI Malek, « 'Alā Maqām "Al-Ṣabā", Mūsīqā Sijn Sednaya », *op. cit.*

24- KHALIFEH Mustafa, *Al-Qawqa'a: Yawmiyyāt Mutalaṣṣa*, Beirut, Dar Al Adab for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, 2008; YASSIN Rosa, *Negative... Min Dhākirat Al-Mu'taqalāt Al-Siyasiyyāt*, Cairo, Cairo Institute For Human Rights Studies, 2008.

from December 2020 to July 2023. The interviewees were prisoners in Sednaya Prison between 1987 and 1996. In total, more than 90 hours of interviews about the prison and prison practices were conducted²⁵. As for the second round, it includes focus group interviews.

I conducted two types of interviews in two rounds. The first type is semi-structured remote interviews. In these interviews, I ask a limited number of questions, giving the interviewee the space to deviate slightly from the main theme of the interview, or to answer questions that I had not planned and that come up spontaneously during the conversation. In this type of interview, I keep in mind that the interviewee might not get “more than one chance” to be interviewed²⁶. In any case, this is a normal situation in this type of interview, as the interviewer cannot force the interviewees to strictly stick to the prepared set of questions. In fact, the interviewer will always be lead “away from the questions they really wanted to address,”²⁷ especially since the information that is being gathered is taken from narratives and stories that may be inaccurate due to the fact that a long period of time might have passed since the event or due to memory and recollection issues. The testimonies were multiple, numerous, sometimes inaccurate and changing, which is normal given that the event took place more than 30 years ago. The editing of the present research paper didn’t stop until the last minute before the submission of the final draft for publication. For this reason, and in order not to repeat the interviews to verify certain information, stories or narratives through multiple questions, or to make sure of the years and figures, I adopted focus group interviews for the second round. The main objective of focus group interviews is to filter, select, and verify the information gathered by combining semi-structured interviews with focus group interviews, which fill in the gaps left after the first round of interviews. The data presented in the research may contain some errors due to memory and recollection issues, and it is only expected that the variety of narratives aligns with the diversity of voices and identities experienced by the research participants. One of the most important features of this type of interview is that “participants are influencing and influenced by others — just as they are in life.”²⁸ The second round of interviews took place in Berlin with former prisoners from Sednaya Prison. We spent a week together, during which I reiterated some of the questions I couldn’t get answers to in the semi-structured interviews,

25- I would like to mention that the research participants wrote some paragraphs, revised the paper several times, and gave me their advice and their feedback. We discussed the written research in several virtual meetings and in the last meeting in Berlin during the summer of 2023, where we tried to go over the proofreading, the progress of the research and the conclusions. Even though I am the one who wrote the paper, it was a collaborative work, written collectively, which was sent to and corrected several times by the interviewees. Credit goes to them for taking the time to dedicate themselves to this long and difficult process.

26- RUSSELL Bernard H., *Research Methods in Cultural Methodologies*, California, Sage Publications, p. 204.

27- PARKER Ian, *Qualitative Psychology: Introducing Radical Research*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 2005.

28- KREUGER Richard A., CASEY Mary Anne, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 2000, p. 11.

re-examined and verified the collected data. In addition, I presented the paper to them again then reviewed it. Although one of the goals of this type of interview is to filter the collected data, multiple accounts of the same event contributed to the enrichment of the narrative about Sednaya, which is common in narrative rewriting²⁹.

It is worth noting that being Syrian enabled me to have skills specific to researchers from the same place, which made it easier for me to understand the linguistic and cultural codes of the interviewees' region and culture. This gave them the confidence to talk about their musical experiences during their traumatic imprisonment and provided them with a safe space to tell their stories. Most of them had never practiced singing or had a career as singers, while a few others had some musical and singing skills or were already accomplished musicians and had studied music academically and methodologically before being imprisoned. In fact, I do not hide my political leanings against the regime behind my academic methodologies and theories, for they reinforce my role as a researcher and are also part of the knowledge network that gave me an additional advantage when it comes to fieldwork. What also helped me in this research were the theoretical and practical approaches in deriving meanings and drawing conclusions.

The participants' contact information was provided to me through two main sources: The first was through my personal network of friends and friends of friends as a Syrian researcher interested in Syrian cultural affairs, and the second was through social media and through a Facebook group for former Sednaya Prison prisoners. I was unable to achieve gender balance in this research due to the fact the political prisons are segregated. Had I had more time to write the research, I would have included the sample of a future study of Duma Prison for female political prisoners who were imprisoned in political circumstances chronologically and politically similar to those of Sednaya prisoners. However, due to the amount of material and time constraints, I was unable to conduct more interviews.

The Imprisonment of the Public Space due to the Repercussions of Prison Torture in Syria

The prison knowledge network associated with it from inside and outside created a domination that not only limited the leakage of prison narratives, but also formed a similar layer for the families of free (non-detained) Syrians living in the Syrian public space. This metaphorical imprisonment, or the one that will take place, is only the performative dimension of the imprisonment that takes place in the prison itself. When imprisonment ends, its effects remain with the

29- The participation of the Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) was invaluable as they took on the issue of mental health by accompanying us in the second round of field research as well as in the first round of individual interviews. The presence of Islam Al-Aqeel guaranteed excellent psychological conditions that helped me to complete the field research.

prisoners and affect those around them. All Syrians, without exception, expect to be arrested one day, not because they oppose the regime, but because their behavior may be interpreted as complicit with or tolerant of those arrested, and at the same time, because this domination, even if we try to understand it, is ambiguous and illogical. The regime has always tried to control the space that Syrians share in a variety of methods: some are clearly violent while others rely on the repercussions of the initial violence perpetrated³⁰. This means that imprisonment is not only limited to the prisoner, but also affects the space that the prisoners interact and live in. All those who are close to the prisoners know that they are punished by the regime, and despite feeling that the released prisoners were victims of injustice, they fear the idea of experiencing this injustice if they react to it or express their thoughts. It is as if they are always waiting to be arrested in the future or questioned in case, they are found to be sympathetic. Even in general conversations, the popular phrase “Shut up, or they’ll arrest us” can be used ironically, not to mention the symbolism and effectiveness of the Secret Services’ cars, which were feared at the mere sight of them. This causes Syrians to live in a constant state of anticipation of arrest³¹. According to Kisra Kurdi (ar. 1987 to 1995), the experience of imprisonment is “respected by others but not spoken about, and people try to avoid mentioning the subject with a former prisoner.”³² This silent interaction between the released prisoner and the space they interact with can be interpreted in two ways: First, the prisoner suffers during their imprisonment, and second, the prisoner suffers in the space they interact with, as if they were imprisoned in another prison outside the first one, reaching the observer who might not have experienced imprisonment until now. The dimensions of prison from inside and outside achieve the two main purposes of the 19th century idea of torture, which is similar to the situation in Syria. As Foucault says, the effects of punishment or imprisonment must “mark the victim: it is intended, either by the scar it leaves on the body, or by the spectacle that accompanies it,” which is exactly the case with Sednaya Prison prisoners³³. This is what happens once the prisoner is released, leaving them physically and psychologically scarred. Furthermore, the silence of

30- It is difficult to understand the domination and symbolic violence practiced by the regime, but some references have framed it, and most of them intersect with each other. These references include, but are not limited to: BADER EDDIN Eylaf, ‘Indamā Hatafū ilā-al-Abad: Lughat al-Thawra al-Sūriyya, *op. cit.* ; WEDEEN Lisa, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999; COOKE Miriam, *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2007; WEDEEN Lisa, *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2019; COOKE Miriam, *Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience, and the Syrian Revolution*, New York, Routledge, 2017.

31- I refer here to Salwa Ismail’s idea of “anticipation of massacres”. She felt, during the beginning of the revolution, that Syrians were living in anticipation that something similar to the Hama massacre was going to happen. (ISMAIL Salwa, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory and Government in Syria*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 203).

32- Interview with the writer Kisra Kurdi (former Sednaya prisoner). May 2, 2022.

33- FOUCAULT Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Trans. Alan Sheridan, New York, Vintage Books, 1995, p. 34.

the public or the silence of those who witnessed this event, results in either the rejection of the released prisoners, or their marginalization due to the fear of dealing with them.

The described prison space, the practices, and the behavior of Syrians within the Syrian public space do not only dominate Syrians, but necessarily show power structures as an institutionalized network of knowledge and spaces within these structures. Furthermore, resistance technologies may involve remaining silent, or not speaking about the released. Not speaking in the previously described collective situation is itself an act of resistance to the use of silence and is meant to indicate the absence of resistance as well as a theoretical surrender. However, choosing silence and refusing to speak is a repetitive performative act that may not express anything on the surface but defines its own function based on the agreement not to communicate. This necessarily implies that there is no clear discourse in the Syrian public space (other than that of the regime) that justifies the Syrian act of imprisonment, suggesting that the prisoner or the released prisoner deserves the punishment they have received. The well-known Syrian phrases “Shut up, someone might hear us” or “Shut up, or they’ll throw us in jail” illustrate this perfectly. These phrases are not solely used in conversations criticizing the regime; any criticism of public life can be interpreted as criticism of the regime. It’s as if people have collectively agreed to condemn the repressive practices of the regime, whether it be arrest or other actions, despite the contrary manifestation expected from this silence: submission, subservience, and domination. While this has already been achieved, openly choosing to remain silent or proclaiming it is an act of resistance against this domination.

Silence, speech, performance, and music are practices that are employed in prison for similar purposes, but also for resistance, self-empowerment, and survival. They are polar opposites, as the shift from “Technologies of power” to “Technologies of the self” represents a contrasting interpretation of what imprisonment is understood to be ³⁴. The present paper focuses on the base for understanding technologies of power, because research usually tends to look at imprisonment in terms of methods and techniques of domination, supervision, and methods of torture, rather than the other way around. In this study, I concentrate on the prisoners’ technologies of the self to resist domination, authority, and supervision, which, in turn, I believe will illuminate the

34- In Michel Foucault’s works, the understanding of imprisonment and of the dominant and oppositional discourse is not only achieved through his theorization of imprisonment, control, and surveillance. In my opinion, it is achieved through the technologies of the self, and reflects the practices of those who are dominated, or those over whom power is exercised, via the set of actions that are used to improve the self and enable it to go through a certain experience. Therefore, in the present study, I unconventionally rely on the technologies of the self to explain the technologies of power. Cf. FOUCAULT Michel, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, In MARTIN Luther H., GUTMAN Huck, HUTTON Patrick H. (ed.), London, Tavistock Publications \ The University of Massachusetts, 1988, 176 p. ; FOUCAULT Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, op. cit. ; FOUCAULT Michel, « The Ethics for the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom », In *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, vol. 1, RABINOW Paul (ed.), Trans. HURLEY Robert and others, London, Penguin, 2000,

technologies of power. Music will be considered here as a form of technology of the self, and these technologies will be utilized as raw material in the interviews to understand music and the various prison practices associated with it, whether individually or collectively, in terms of performance, instruments, and songs. The soul or self is “born out of methods of punishment, supervision and constraint” that are established and imposed ³⁵. This means that according to and based on this knowledge network of power and domination in imprisonment, we as individuals develop certain methods to resist and to support ourselves as a form of resistance that aligns with the controlled space described above. Technologies of the self, as opposed to technologies of power, “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.”³⁶

Resistance of the Self in Prison

Musical practices will be approached as a technology of the self and the soul used to resist, improve psychological well-being, and overcome the psychological obstacles that the prisoner faces in the prison space. Kisra Kurdi was able to gradually absorb the shock that he would remain in imprisonment for years, because for several months, he was sure that he would be released quickly. In order to resist torture, he used to convince himself that “when one feels the oppression, injustice, irrationality and barbarity of imprisonment, and sees how people are thrown into imprisonment for long years just because they have a different opinion or oppose the views of the tyrannical authority, this is what triggers a reaction of resistance”³⁷. During the first fifteen days of his imprisonment, Ibrahim Bayraqdar (ar. 1987 to 1996) was always busy asking himself “Am I dead or alive?”. “I thought about my family and about all the songs I had sung in my life,” he says.³⁸ Assaad Shlash (the only music academic in Sednaya, ar. 1988 to 1994), always helped his fellow prisoners. The sentence “You have no one waiting for you: you neither have a wife nor children”, that one of his first cellmates used to say to him, motivated him. It became his motto, as if that was reason enough for him not to worry about what was coming next³⁹. Badr Zakariya (ar.1987 to 1994) used the technique of distraction to make fateful situations comical. In the interrogation room, where several prisoners faced the wall, an interrogator would come in and hit their heads against the wall, and different tones of groans would emerge. “The image of someone playing different melodies on the piano popped into my head, which made me laugh out

35- FOUCAULT Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, op. cit., p. 29.

36- FOUCAULT Michel, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, op. cit., p. 18.

37- Interview with the writer Kisra Kurdi.

38- Interview with the writer Ibrahim Bayraqdar (former Sednaya prisoner), April 18, 2022.

39- 4 Interview with the writer Assaad Shlash (former Sednaya prisoner), April 24, 2022.

loud, and I got beaten up when I said, ‘You’re playing the piano with our heads’,” he recalls⁴⁰. Hassan Abdulrahman (currently a musician in France, ar. 1988 to 1995) had a similar strategy. It gave him strength and patience for as long as possible, until his wife moved out of the house she was living in at the time. His strategy was eventually successful⁴¹. Malek Daghestani (ar. 1987 to 1996) reached the point where he practically contemplated committing suicide. He attempted to do so by putting his head in the door slot of his solitary cell and pressing his legs against the wall to break his neck, but his legs did not reach the wall, so the attempt was unsuccessful. However, what kept him going was his pride and his ability to keep information secret. Even his claustrophobia disappeared after the first day⁴². Keeping information secret and not leaking it was also the strategy that Haitham Alkatreb (ar. in 1982 and from 1987 to 1991 in Sednaya) used to endure torture as well.⁴³

Singing, whether in a whispering, or in a loud or suppressed cry, staying silent, or sleeping for long periods of time, are all techniques that the self develops as a kind of reaction to imprisonment. What matters is not the identification of the torturous practices inflicted on the body and soul, but how they operate through cultural practices in prison⁴⁴. Hence, the core of the present research is not the methods of surveillance and the techniques of domination and torture, but the actions or techniques to counter them. To be able to understand the techniques of power and those used to counter them in prison, one must first consider that “power (techniques of surveillance and domination) is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations⁴⁵.” This simply explains that we cannot assume that power is only exercised through the binary of the strong and the weak, or the dominant and the dominated, because it is certainly more complex than that, as there is a mutual influence, and the dominated can always resist. Imprisoning the body does not mean surrendering; it merely means that the prisoner is in a hopeless position, unable to react and respond to the techniques of surveillance and torture. They always use technologies of the self that influence the body and soul to resist and counter the experience of imprisonment. Among these technologies are the spiritual techniques related to music.

Musical Imagination and Individual Prison Practices

Musical imagination is a technology used to help both the body and the soul to resist. It is a possible technique designed for mental stabilization that resonates only with a limited number of persons and that is, most of the time, an individual

40- Interview with the writer Badr Zakariya (former Sednaya prisoner), April 22, 2022.

41- Interview with the writer Hassan Abdulrahman (former Sednaya prisoner), April 22, 2022.

42- Interview with the writer Malek Daghestani (former Sednaya prisoner), April 21, 2022.

43- Interview with the writer Haitham Alkatreb (former Sednaya prisoner), April 19, 2022.

44- FOUCAULT Michel, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1: An Introduction, Trans. Robert Hurley, New York, Pantheon Books, 1978, p. 82.

45- *Ibid.*, p. 94.

practice. It is devised to fight the main goal of imprisonment and the taking away of freedoms. These practices vary, depending on the individual or collective creative ability, and can be used to elevate the soul and achieve psychological stability. On the other hand, musical imagination is what is left of the prisoner's physical existence, as it is how he makes sure he is alive in this small space, whether in a solitary cell or in a non-solitary cell.

What happened with Badr Zakariya is an example of these individual techniques. His musical imagination is different: When he uses it, we are reminded of a movie in a moment of vulnerability and intensity of thought. It is worth noting that his passions were theater and cinema. This passion for art and theater, which he resorted to during his detention in the solitary cell to maintain his psychological stability, as well as his resilience, led him to visualize his wife. "What really made me feel stronger in my first solitary cell was that my wife visited me in my imagination. The walls of the cell grew bigger, light started coming from everywhere, and I began singing to her *Year after year, my heart longs for you, O youthful days*. All my memories came to me as if I were watching them on the wall of the cell with sad music, as if I were watching a movie ⁴⁶," he says. Similarly, in his solitary cell, Ibrahim Bayraqdar used musical imagination to break free from the restrictions that were imposed on him. In that cell, nobody could talk to him, and the only interaction the jailer could have with him was giving him food without saying a word. Therefore, to challenge the technologies of power imposed in the solitary cell, 'I would scream at the top of my lungs even though I knew they would not respond to me. Then, I started singing what made me happy and reassured me. It was also a way for me to kill time. I liked to get up and perform dabke dances in an enthusiastic manner, and dance while singing songs by Wadih El Safi or Nasri Shamseddine ⁴⁷," he recounts. Hassan Kamel (ar. 1987 to 1994) was similarly balanced in body and soul. What strengthened him psychologically was his focus on his soul. He always remembered what made him stronger: "I was inspired by a sentence Abdul-Aziz al-Khair used to say to me about imprisonment, 'Spiritual exhaustion is more dangerous than physical exhaustion.' Singing and humming was a practice that distracted me from interrogations and effectively restored my soul. In addition, I ate whatever food was offered to me, cleaned my wounds until they healed, and made friends with wandering rats and insects, such as spiders, if there were any". ⁴⁸

When thinking about the technologies of power and surveillance in prisons, the practices aimed at physically destroying prisoners, and the mechanisms used to torture prisoners, musical imagination is itself a resistance. Firstly, it disrupts the balance of power in the goals of the solitary cell to make the individual lose their mind, and secondly, it allows prisoners to achieve psychological stability through practices that make it possible for them to survive with minimal psychological

46- Interview with Badr Zakariya.

47- Interview with Ibrahim Bayraqdar.

48- Interview with the writer Hassan Kamel (former Sednaya prisoner), May 5, 2022.

damage, if physical damage cannot be avoided by merely treating wounds on the body.

Singing without imagining

When moving from solitary cells to non-solitary cells, musical practices change with the change of place, space, and technologies of power that drive the self to create new resistance technologies, just as they prevent certain freedoms for prisoners. In fact, pain leads to the development of practices that alleviate the brutality of prison and make it seem like a familiar place. The idea of familiarity of place here is mainly related to the knowledge of the possibilities available to the prisoner, which they can employ to develop defence mechanisms in order to humanize the soul and which foster a sense of resistance to all technologies. In a similar way to musical imagination, the limited acoustic and visual space of the prisoner in prison allows them to be aware of the neighbouring environment despite their visual limitations. All the prisoner is left with is a few senses that are enhanced due to these visual limitations. Knowing the surveillance system to understand the technologies of power is one of the most important factors that help the prisoner to develop musical practices. Hassan Kamel, for instance, knew what time it was and when shift changes occurred based on the meals and the change in food⁴⁹. As for Ibrahim Bayraqdar, he knew what time it was by the sound of the call to prayer that came from a nearby mosque and that he could hear in his cell during his imprisonment⁵⁰. The sensitivity of the ear and its exceptional perception of the dimensions and spaces of the prison enables the prisoner to better understand this knowledge network woven by the technologies of power. Thanks to these knowledge networks in prison, prisoners can identify mechanisms that might help them in the act of resistance. This act of resistance strengthens the soul's mechanisms of survival and helps it to cope with the prison situation experienced periodically.

In these circumstances, and with their knowledge of the prison surveillance system, prisoners are able to create musical spaces in and through which they can resist the technologies of power. The different mechanisms and the nature of the prisoner determine the type of musical practices in each place. The size of the place, the daily routine, the entry or smuggling of equipment in Sednaya, musical expertise and qualifications, the difference in cultural and political backgrounds, the difference in generations and time periods, and the different surveillance systems in prisons are all factors that play a key role in the existence of prison musical practices in prisons. Back to the interviews, which were conducted exclusively with prisoners who were imprisoned in the place mentioned in the present research paper, singing and music were performed collectively and individually in a variety of forms and styles.

49- Interview with Hassan Kamel.

50- Interview with Ibrahim Bayraqdar.

Cultural Practices in the Great Sednaya Prison

In Sednaya Prison, between 1987 and 1996, period during which I conducted the interviews with the participants, we can see that the difference in the time period, as well as the political circumstances and backgrounds of the participants, enriched the cultural scene in general, and the musical scene in particular, in Sednaya. According to the interviews, numerous songs, no less than a hundred, were reperformed in prison, if we consider the “*Sijniyya*” as a musical practice, whether it is through singing or through any other musical practice that took place behind bars. These songs are almost an exact copy of those that were sung outside the prison, a kind of musical repertoire that they had before their imprisonment. Hence, we find that this type of song is the most popular among prisoners, especially in the early stages before the production of original prison songs began. Based on the interviews and information given, musical practices can be divided into multiple phases characterised by the gradual evolution of musical practices in Sednaya. This division is my own attempt at chronologizing and understanding the evolution of music in Sednaya through the interviews and after returning to the participants for further research.

The first phase, according to the testimonies, extends from approximately 1987 until 1990, i.e. from the opening of Sednaya prison until a few months after the arrival of the prisoners. During this period, all musical expertise was transferred from various Syrian detention centres, such as the Palestine Branch and the Military Interrogation Branch, to Sednaya⁵¹. The second phase lasted from late 1988 to 1990 and included adaptation to prison through music. Musical practices reached their peak in 1990 and began to decline from late 1990 to 1992⁵². When we say musical decline, we don’t mean that musical practices disappeared altogether, but rather that they became less frequent and started being performed individually. Of course, these time periods are not historically accurate and are based on the estimates of the participants, who were unable to provide exact dates for various reasons, including memory and recollection issues.

The first phase commenced with the opening of Sednaya in 1987. The arrival of prisoners to Sednaya provided them with a certain stability after they had been through various stages of detention in security branches, during which they were subjected to severe physical and psychological torture⁵³. Obviously, this stability does not in any way minimize the suffering of Sednaya Prison prisoners, but I

51- Many instrument crafting processes started in the Palestine Branch. Had I had the opportunity and time, I would have included the Palestine Branch as the birthplace of Syrian prison music and followed the developments in Sednaya and other prisons. However, in the given timeframe, I chose to focus on Sednaya in order to make sure of the existence of prison music there.

52- Faraj Bayraqdar was transferred from Tadmor to Sednaya in 1992. He witnessed multiple musical practices and believes from his time in Sednaya that the music did not stop until at least 1998, contrary to other accounts from participants who claim that the period of musical decline began in 1992.

53- Sijn Sednaya... “Maslakh Bashariyy” Fi Sūryā, In Aljazeera.net [online], April 24, 2022, [Accessed May 2022]. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3CclsKG>.

can confirm that the stability and the reduction of torture are what made this prison more bearable than others. In the early stages of their detention, most of the research participants familiarized themselves with the environment and with their fellow inmates. Some of these inmates came from different backgrounds, while others came from the same background and had the same political affiliations. Shlash believes that “the only thing a prisoner can think about is the last moments before their arrest. What came to my mind was the concert during which I was playing. At the end of this concert, I was arrested, and my oud was taken away from me”⁵⁴ The musical dream began when Assaad Shlash thought that his aspiration to pursue a career in music would never come true because he was a political prisoner and was sure that he wouldn’t be released anytime soon. For Shlash, this phase began before his transfer to Sednaya. It started in the Palestine Branch and extended until he arrived in Sednaya. Therefore, the very first thing he did was the following: “I brought a piece of wood that resembled the neck of an oud just to be able to train my fingers and keep them flexible. I drew musical notes and symbols on this piece of wood, and I would run my hand over it as if I were playing the instrument. I kept doing that for three months of my detention”⁵⁵.

The second phase was the phase of settling down, during which prisoners began to devise ways to make music. The interviews revealed that Sednaya Prison was one of the first prisons where musical instruments were made from scratch. Thus, this period can be summarized as the maturation of the prisoners’ musical and cultural repertoire, which was formed in different security branches, such as the Palestine Branch. The growth and development of these musical practices took shape in various artistic spaces, eventually leading to the spread of theater and different musical styles. One of these spaces was Fshayfesh Café, which was probably the first real public space in Syria, and all the artistic spaces were more akin to literary salons, but in prison. “This café was a place where ideas and cultural performances were exchanged, through music, discussions, theatrical and musical performances, and nights of celebration. We made our own chairs and platforms out of egg cartons and raw materials⁵⁶.” It is important to note that “other cultural and artistic activities” were held in this space, including “cultural, sports and social activities. It also served as a public library, a barbershop, a workshop and a space for meditation and solitude. Hence, it was an (oppositional section) that represented the real vital area of public life⁵⁷.” This classification most likely dates back to 1988, when Hassan Abdulrahman arrived in Sednaya Prison and found the first oud that was made using a plastic water container as well as military blankets for the strings⁵⁸.

54- Interview with Assaad Shlash. April 17, 2022.

55- *Ibid*.

56- Interview with Hassan Abdulrahman.

57- Interview with Badr Zakariya.

58- Interview with Hassan Abdulrahman.

The final phase is the decline of these numerous cultural practices, to the point where they largely, but not completely, ceased in the early 1990s. Several factors contributed to this decline, including the release of some founding figures of Sednaya's musical practices, news spreading about the prisoners' release, and the transfer of some inmates to non-solitary cells. This situation left the prisoners in a state of anticipation and preparation for their release. In addition, the musical instruments that were crafted were often destroyed or confiscated by the jailers. This meant that the prisoners had to craft the instruments again and go through periods of frustration, but the resistance of the self always won, and after gaining significant experience, the prisoners were able to recraft the instruments. The day that Badr Zakariya remembers the most from the beginning of the end of the musical practices was "February 4, 1992, as the prisoners were separated from their personal belongings and therefore from their musical instruments in anticipation and preparation for their expected release⁵⁹." For this reason, the prisoners started anticipating the possibility of their imminent release and were moved to different non-solitary cells. I cannot assert that musical practices had come to a halt during this period, but rather that they were less frequent and were not performed collectively; they might have continued individually or semi-collectively, but it was not a distinctive cultural phenomenon.

Musical Structure of Sednaya Prison

Despite having tried to collect data on music and musical attempts in Sednaya, I found this task to be almost impossible for many reasons, not only due to memory and recollection issues, but also due to the difficulty of communicating with some of the former prisoners for health reasons, and due to the fact that they are located in Syria, or because some of them unfortunately passed away. Based on this information, I have drawn a picture that is certainly incomplete but helps in understanding the musical structure of Sednaya Prison, which is, in any case, limited to the leftist prisoners in the present paper. The research focuses on specific places in Sednaya Prison, namely the ground floor of Non-Solitary Cell No. 2 Left B, where Haitham Alkatreb was held, as well as the third floor of all ten Left A non-solitary cells. All the musical practices, despite passing through the "black door", ended up on the third floor of the "oppositional section", which became a platform for these practices. I tried to identify the places where music was played, but this was not possible, as the musicians were transferred from one non-solitary cell to another and from one section to another. Some participants moved, at different points in time, to the first and second floors of Sednaya Prison until the end of 1991 and the beginning of 1992. That year, prisoners reunited once again in the left and right sections of the second floor.

59- Group interview. Badr Zakariya.

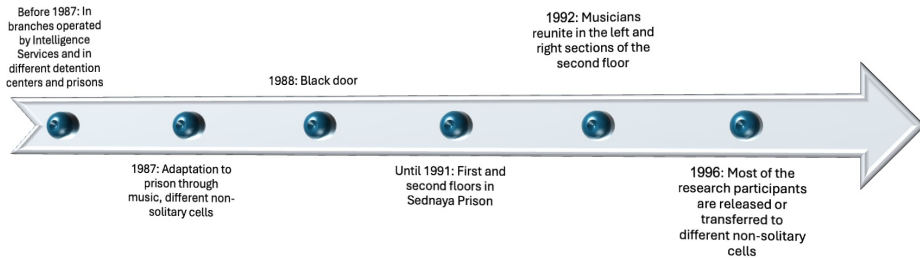


Figure 1: Timeline of the Musicians' Transfers in Sednaya Prison

There were several music groups in prison, some of which only played music and others that sang and played. There was also a group for dance and theater. Naturally, these groups interfered with each other, as in the case of theater. The main link to the formation of these groups was the type of musical instruments that the musicians could play, in addition to the musical product. What mainly determined the composition of these groups was the type of instruments that the musicians could play, as well as the musical product. For example, a guitarist in Sednaya “was in a group on his own because he crafted and played the only guitar in Sednaya⁶⁰.” As for Haitham Alkatreb, he collaborated with others and formed duets with musicians who were not part of Shlash and “Abu Al-Nada”’s group. He collaborated with Ghassan Jbaai on the song *Al-Ḥiṣān* [The Horse], which was part of Jbaai’s play. It is also worth noting that Hassan played and sang with Abu Al-Nada and played in Khader Jabr’s forty-day death tribute. Haitham Alkatreb’s was placed in a section that was isolated from all the sections where the different groups of musicians participating in the research were held, despite being imprisoned in the same period as them. The prisoners in Alkatreb’s section were accused of being members of the Arab Democratic Socialist Ba’ath Party or the Muslim Brotherhood, or of being Nasserists⁶¹. All the research participants, except Haitham Alkatreb, were located in the “black door⁶²”, in the Left A section. A few months before the end of 1988, “all the [research] participants were scattered in different non-solitary cells⁶³.” In addition, Alkatreb worked with Mohammed Ali (a buzuq player) on interpretation and musical composition

60- *Ibid*.

61- One of the limits of the present study is that there were certainly different musical practices in the different non-solitary cells and places of detention in Sednaya. It did not cover all the non-solitary cells, nor did it include all the prisoners or the prisoners who belonged to different political orientations than the interviewees. The music scene in Sednaya might change depending on the participants, such as those detained on charges of belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, for example.

62- The “Black Door” is a section on the third floor of Sednaya Prison. Normally, a section comprises ten non-solitary cells, but the Black Door has only four non-solitary cells. It is called the Black Door because of the section’s black iron door. Unlike the other sections, there is no mesh door separating the jailers from the prisoners. The only door that separated them was a black door which was used to isolate the punished prisoners, further separating them from their friends and fellow prisoners. In the Black Door, the prisoner cannot tell time.

63- Group interview. Badr Zakariya.

and put Saqr Alishi's poem *Sanaktubu She'ran* [We Compose Poetry] into music. In this scene, the musicians of Sednaya Prison were all working together, sometimes in separate groups and other times jointly, producing songs and delivering musical performances.

Regarding the academic aspect of music teaching, Assaad Shlash, "Abu Al-Nada" (Samir Abdo) and Haitham Alkatreb were music teachers and knew how to play and read music. Assaad Shlash founded the first Institute of Music in Sednaya in 1988⁶⁴. Dozens of prisoners were interested in learning how to play the oud, so Shlash announced that he would hold training courses by writing "an advertisement on a cigarette packet⁶⁵." Many students graduated from these courses, such as Ibrahim Bayraqdar, who largely contributed to the "*Sijniyya*" in Sednaya. The courses included solfège and singing lessons, as well as lessons about the different maqāmāt⁶⁶. Through the lessons he provided, Assaad Shlash raised the level of musical awareness and musical knowledge in Sednaya Prison. As for "Abu Al-Nada" (Samir Abdo), he was the master, and Shlash admitted this to prevent strife after a musical demonstration took place, according to Daghestani⁶⁷. Sheikh Al-Kar (another nickname for "Abu Al-Nada") played a very important role in teaching the prisoners muwashahāt and quḍūd. He also disagreed a lot with his musical rivals. The testing of knowledge between Shlash and "Abu Al-Nada" was in itself a way of accumulating knowledge⁶⁸. Whenever they disagreed on the details of a certain song, the radio always determined who between the two of them or between any of the musicians was right⁶⁹. As for Haitham Alkatreb, who is also one of the musicians of Sednaya Prison, he had duets in his musical work and shared his musical experience with the rest of the prisoners. He left his mark in Sednaya when he organized music seminars entitled "Enjoying Music". In these seminars, he explained the process of feeling and enjoying music in certain songs, such as *Ayazun* [Does he think?]⁷⁰, by delving into the meanings of the lyrics of these songs and analyzing their connection to the music.

The Birth of Musical Instruments in the Darkness of Prison

The possibility of having musical instruments in the prison space is not unique to Sednaya, as this experience was transferred from other prisons before it was introduced there. However, what distinguished Sednaya Prison was the ability to craft high-quality musical instruments at an advanced stage after accumulating experience in crafting, as well as the large number of musical instruments, the variety of these instruments and their different forms. The idea of crafting

64- Interview with Assaad Shlash

65- *Ibid.*

66- *Ibid.*

67- DAGHESTANI Malek, « 'Alā Maqām "Al-Ṣabā", Mūsīqā Sijīn Sednaya », *op. cit.*

68- *Ibid.*

69- Interview with Hassan Abdulrahman

70- Interview with Haitham Alkatreb

musical instruments in prison was perhaps first recorded in the Palestine Branch, as Daghestani recounts in his article, when one of the prisoners was able to take a metal cooking pot, modified it and transformed it into an oud that could be played. In addition to the cooking pot, he was able to craft this oud using simple tools, such as orange sticks to tune the instrument, and sock and blanket threads to make the strings⁷¹.



1. The cooking pot oud consists of a small iron cooking pot to which a piece of a wooden box is attached with screws. The strings are made from available materials. This is a replica of the Sednaya instrument, crafted by Assaad Shlash. Photo caption by Assaad Shlash and photo credit to Eylaf Bader Eddin.



2. The rectangular oud consists of pieces of wooden boxes assembled with glue to form a box of 10x45x30 cm. The soundboard is made of light wood and the neck is not different from that of a real oud. This is a replica of the Sednaya instrument, crafted by Assaad Shlash. Photo caption by Assaad Shlash and photo credit to Eylaf Bader Eddin.

71- DAGHESTANI Malek, « 'Alā Maqām "Al-Ṣabā", Mūsīqā Sijīn Sednaya », op. cit.



3. The carboard oud is played using a bunch of plectra that resemble those of a real oud but are made of cardboard. The soundboard is made of light wood and the neck is not different from that of a real oud. Note: The strings were made using available materials, but after allowing visits, the strings became ordinary. This is a replica of the Sednaya instrument, crafted by Hassan Abdulrahman. Photo caption by Assaad Shlash and photo credit to Eylaf Bader Eddin.

This oud was made by Assaad Shlash⁷². He crafted it by “spinning five blanket threads and braiding them together in varying degrees to make strings suitable for the oud. The strings were attached by piercing holes in the wooden part and they were held using fruits sticks. We had an instrument that was not an oud, but perhaps a prehistoric oud, and the plectrum was made of plastic that had been cut from a bottle of dishwashing liquid⁷³.” Inspired by this instrument, Shlash took the idea with him to Sednaya. Similarly, in the Military Interrogation Branch in 1983, Haitham Alkatreb witnessed a striking phenomenon that he later benefitted from in Sednaya. Next to Non-Solitary Cell No. 11 for men was Non-Solitary Cell No. 12 for women, and the presence of women served as a catalyst for musical and lyrical meaning.

“I started singing a song that I had heard in the women’s non-solitary cell. One woman sang back. I headed to the wall and played some musical rhythms on it, such as “wahda”, “maqsum”, and “waltz”. One woman played the same rhythms back, and we continued doing that for a long time. This is how “Abu Ali” and I got the idea to craft the first musical instruments made from plastic canisters. The strings were made from the threads of socks and the plectra from the plastic collars of undershirts. When the jailer heard the music, he thought there was a radio in the non-solitary cell and started insulting the prisoners, so we had to break the instrument to avoid punishment⁷⁴.”

72- Interview with Assaad Shlash.

73- Ibid.

74- Interview with Haitham Alkatreb, continuation of the study. March 13, 2023

“Wherever there’s a musician, there’s bound to be an instrument⁷⁵,” says Shlash. Thus, if we probe further, we can notice that the crafting of prison musical instruments is a very rich but undocumented field. As it was mentioned hereinabove, an oud was crafted by Alkatreb in the Military Interrogation Branch. In addition, Fateh Jamous, thanks to his close relationship with the director of Tadmor Prison, was reportedly granted the permission to craft a reed oud. It was also documented that in the early 1980s, “a prisoner from As-Suwayda was able to make a ney out of a plastic hose, and this ney only reached two notes to play dabke music⁷⁶.”

Adaptation to Prison Through Music: *Al-Istiḥbās*

Adaptation to prison through music [*Al-Istiḥbās mūsīqīyyan*] is one of the phenomena I observed in my interviews with the research participants. It is the stage of getting closer to the musical dream. I call it adaptation to prison through music because in this stage, the prisoners try to adapt to the living conditions in the prison. It is based on Al-Haj Saleh’s idea of “adaptation to prison” *al-Istiḥbās*, which is when the prisoners begin to internalize the obstacles they are experiencing and transform them into goals in order to overcome them⁷⁷. They think about the practical ways and conditions available to achieve their goals, improve their lifestyle, and change their repetitive routine through cultural and musical practices. In Arabic, adding the prefix “*ist-*” to a verb, like in the case of the verb “*Istaḥbasa*”, means to seek to make the action happen. As Faraj Bayraqdar explains it, it is a phenomenon where “the person seeks to accept imprisonment, i.e. to adapt to imprisonment⁷⁸.” Hassan Abdulrahman adds, “Yes, this is true. In fact, we realized this when we saw that some former prisoners were used to walking 10 kilometers a day inside the prison, for example, which surprised us. The fact that they were able to establish their daily routine and divide their day into activities that can be done during the day and the night was considered a kind of success⁷⁹.” One of the signs of adaptation to prison is when prisoners are able to separate the outside world from the inside. They believe and are convinced that this is a new reality that they must live in. Ibrahim Bayraqdar confirmed this when he had his first dream in Sednaya and the dream was about Sednaya. He knew that since this dream, he had adapted to life in Sednaya⁸⁰.

What Shlash crafted in the Palestine Branch and at the beginning of his imprisonment in Sednaya evolved into a rectangular oud, mainly made from the wood of the tomato, vegetable, and fruit crates that were brought to the inmates to eat from and give them back lacking one piece because fruit and

75- Group interview. Assaad Shlash.

76- Group interview. Assaad Shlash.

77- SALEH Yassin al-Haj, *Bil Khalāṣ Yā Shabāb: 16 ‘Āman Fil Sujūn Al-Sūriyya*. Op. cit., p. 202-210.

78- Group interview. Faraj Bayraqdar.

79- Group interview. Hassan Abdulrahman.

80- Group interview. Ibrahim Bayraqdar.

vegetables were served in those crates. The idea of crafting a rectangular oud came to Shlash when he saw al-‘Āsheqin Band playing with a rectangular oud, which motivated him to think that he might be able to craft a similar oud⁸¹. They picked the right pieces and stashed them away. Later, after gathering the necessary pieces, it was possible to make an oud that was different from the original one made of a plastic canister or metal cooking pot. The most difficult part of the rectangular oud “was the neck” to which the strings were attached. This is how it became a modified version of the original oud. The technique for making the strings, by using threads from socks and blankets, remained the same. According to Shlash, other types of musical instruments were made from both bread and dough in the early stage of oud making. The crafting of rectangular ouds in Sednaya was a revolution, especially since it was done using simple means.

Therefore, we can say that “adaptation to prison through music” varies individually and collectively and is related to individual initiatives that later become collective, as we see in the definition of the technologies of the self, which start individually and may become collective. This phase extends from 1987 to 1990 and includes Assaad Shlash’s individual initiatives to think of ways to use the prison and prison context and adapt it to music. It begins with the crafting of various musical instruments, followed by music courses. For instance, we can say that Shlash’s period of adaptation to prison began before he arrived in Sednaya and ended after he had spent months there. For Ibrahim Bayraqdar, the adaptation began when he started learning the oud in 1990. In any case, this does not mean that the participants had not adapted to prison from the beginning, but the focus here is on adaptation to prison, both individually and collectively, through music. The research participants adapted to prison between late 1988 and early 1990, which implies that it is during this period that the preparation and development of musical practices in Sednaya Prison historically took place.

The Musical Dream

After or during the phase of adaptation to prison through music, and thanks to the accumulation of past experiences in different prisons, we can see that the musical dream and the musical reality represented in the musical, singing and performative practices became more evident due to the variety of performances and events. This dream is closely linked to the development of musical instrument crafting in Sednaya. I found that the oud as a basic musical instrument went through several stages. At this point, the prisoners’ ambitions were to invent or craft any instrument that could be played. During this stage, the ouds were made using plastic canisters or metal cooking pots, which constituted the main part of the instrument, with strings made from the threads of socks and blankets.

81- Group interview. Assaad Shlash.

They were enough to keep the prisoners entertained or, as Abdulrahman says jokingly, “it looked like everything except an oud, but it could be played and could produce a melody⁸².” One of Shlash’s experiments was to craft a small oud using the same abovementioned items, as well as a plastic bottle of dishwashing liquid. Once the bottle was empty, “I punctured it, inserted a piece of wood inside it, attached two strings to the piece of wood, and it became a musical instrument that I played⁸³.” The oud that preceded the one mentioned was the dough oud. Its body consisted of “bread, newspaper and some glue, its weight was quite heavy, approximately 3 kg, and it had a foul odor⁸⁴.” This paper and dough oud “was not a success, but it had the shape of an oud. The lifespan of such ouds was not very long because they cracked with time⁸⁵.” This phase lasted for several months, but time and creative ideas would later lead to a more efficient oud than this one. This phase is a major part of the adaptation to prison process and blends with it, but it is shorter and extends over the length of the imprisonment period, because the crafting phase is a continuous and uninterrupted phase that may have continued for longer periods of time after 2000.

Real Music

After all these experiments, the accumulation of experience and the possibility of smuggling some real strings from outside the prison by bribing the jailers or obtaining strings through visits, Assaad Shlash was able to make an oud with real strings. The only flaw was the small size of the instrument due to the quality of the wood found in prison, which was taken from vegetable and fruit crates. At that stage, “in the late 1990s, our families were allowed to come to visit us, so they gave us the real strings that I used in the oud. This oud was made with the help of some young craftsmen who were specialized in crafting ouds before being imprisoned. Three of the ouds I crafted were broken in prison⁸⁶.” One of the prisoners, Jamil Adnali, was an architect, and thanks to his experience in architecture, he was able to design, in 1990, an oud that was comparable to those on the market⁸⁷. Perhaps we can determine that the purest kind of musical practices in Sednaya, with musical instruments of the best quality, took place in 1990. Therefore, we can consider that the golden age of musical performance, the realization of the musical dream, and the multiplicity and richness of musical practices lasted from late 1989 to late 1991, which was when the musical wave reached its peak in Sednaya⁸⁸.

The same techniques that were used to craft the oud were used to craft the buzuq. The first person to craft a buzuq in Sednaya was Mohammed Ali. He

82- Interview with Hassan Abdulrahman.

83- Interview with Assaad Shlash.

84- Interview with Assaad Shlash.

85- Interview with Hassan Kamel.

86- Interview with Assaad Shlash.

87- *Ibid*.

88- Group interview. All the interviewees agreed on this date.

“took pieces of wood from fruit crates and soaked them in water until they could fold, bend, and take the desired shape. There was a jailer who sympathized with us and brought us strings.”⁸⁹ Alkatreb recounts that in 1988, he molded “newspaper paste and dough, and then we molded the shape of the oud after leaving it for several days to dry. When it hardened, it meant that it was ready. This oud was very heavy. We made the strings from sock threads at first and spun them together to turn them into strings⁹⁰.” A few months later, musical instrument crafting evolved in Alkatreb’s non-solitary cell by following a method similar to Shlash’s: they took some pieces of wood from the fruit and vegetable crates provided to them, soaked the pieces of wood in water until they softened, and attached them with a rubber band and some glue to keep the wood curved and allow it to stay glued. When the pieces of wood dried, they stayed curved⁹¹. In 1989, Alkatrebs’ section witnessed a major transformation due to the presence of craftsmen and their ability to create carpentry tools that helped them craft these instruments. A single oud in Alkatreb’s section would take about a month to be completed, excluding the stage of finding the wooden pieces, which can delay the start of the fabrication of the oud.

Assaad Shlash confirms that a transfer of musical instrument crafting skills from security branches and prisons to Sednaya occurred in the sections and non-solitary cells he moved into. Upon his arrival, Shlash “heard that in previous branches and prisons, they used to make ouds using dough or plastic containers⁹².” When Assaad arrived in Sednaya Prison, he found four dough ouds, a plastic oud, and a cooking pot oud. In 1988, two months after his arrival in Sednaya, “he recrafted a wooden oud and one of the jailers grabbed it and broke it”.⁹³ As a result, Shlash was locked in a solitary cell for a month. During this month, he crafted the metal cooking pot oud. After spending one month in the solitary cell, Assaad Shlash was transferred to the “black door”, where he crafted another oud. After that, when he was transferred to another non-solitary cell, he made a third oud there. All of these ouds were crafted in 1988 and two of them were destroyed.

After the “black door” phase, Assaad and his fellow inmates went through a period of stability, after which they were able to craft many rectangular ouds. This stability gave them the ability to invent tools for crafting ouds, such as a saw made from jam cans, for example.⁹⁴ They even attached a piece of metal to a piece of wood and tried to use it as a wood file. Furthermore, “the glass in light bulbs, as well as the ceramics in the walls, were used as saws and sharp tools to cut wood and craft ouds.”⁹⁵

The timeline of the evolution of the oud begins with the metal cooking pot and plastic canister ouds, an idea that came from prisoners who were transferred to

89- Interview with Hassan Kamel.

90- Group interview. Haitham Alkatreb.

91- *Ibid*.

92- Group interview. Assaad Shlash.

93- Group interview. Assaad Shlash.

94- Group interview. Assaad Shlash.

95- Group interview. Ibrahim Bayraqdar and Assaad Shlash.

Sednaya, and it was in Sednaya that the dough oud was developed. After that, they began crafting rectangular ouds made from wood. The rectangular oud evolved into a cardboard oud made from the maté boxes that were brought to the prisoners. The cardboard oud, the last form of oud that was developed, was made by “taking a piece of wood, reinforcing it with cardboard, adding sugar and lemon salt to make the cardboard stick to the wood from the inside, and greasing it with a baking sheet which was used to make leavened bread (as an additional adhesive)”⁹⁶. This is regarding the semi-circular shape of the oud. The neck was “removable, so that if we were searched, we could hide it and hang the semi-circular part of the oud on the wall and cover it with clothes so that it would not be discovered.”⁹⁷ The neck was the most difficult part of the oud to craft, which is why it was made removable.

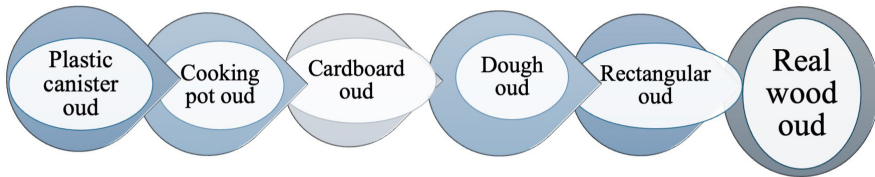


Figure 2: Development of Musical Instruments in Sednaya

To give an idea of the number and types of ouds that existed in Sednaya Prison during the period of this research, “there were no real wood ouds, only plastic canister ouds, metal cooking pot ouds, and dough ouds⁹⁸.” The real wood oud, made using good quality wood and real strings, as it was made outside prison, was crafted in collaboration between Assaad Shlash and Jamal Kurdi and was the only oud of that period. There were six types of ouds in Sednaya: The plastic canister oud, the cooking pot oud, the dough oud, the cardboard oud, the rectangular oud, and the real wood oud, in chronological order of their evolution and fabrication. As for the number of musical instruments, in the time period covered by the research, there were about 25 rectangular ouds because they were easy to make, as well as 3 cardboard ouds. These are approximate numbers and vary depending on each individual’s recollection of the period. Shlash estimates that “there were at least 10 ouds, 3 buzuqs, a guitar, a violin and a few neys” in his section. “Plastic and metal containers were used as percussion instruments from 1987 to 1992.”⁹⁹ In this way, Sednaya had many possibilities to transform from a silent prison to a vibrant prison with various musical instruments, distinctive musical rituals, and diverse prison songs.

96- Group interview. Hassan Abudlrahman.

97- Group interview. Assaad Shlash.

98- Group interview. Assaad Shlash and others. This confirms that there was a musical life, but further investigations and interviews with participants other than those who were chosen to take part in this research are needed to find out how these instruments were crafted before the arrival of this musical group in Sednaya.

99- Group interview. Assaad Shlash.

Musical Sijniyya Rituals

As musicians, Shlash, Alkatreb, and Abu al-Nada took it upon themselves to transform Sednaya from a place where musical instruments were crafted to a place where they could be used, for prisoners with musical experience were few in number, and most of them only knew how to play music by ear. This responsibility was later carried by new assistants who became musicians, such as Hassan Abdulrahman and Ibrahim Bayraqdar. Therefore, what made Sednaya Prison a place for music, in my opinion, was a series of rituals that eventually led to the creation of a musical prison space that helped shape and form other arts, such as theater, poetry reading, storytelling, and dance, among others. Music interfered with these arts and was the other side of them. In this part, I will discuss the most important musical rituals before moving on to the “Sijniyya” in Sednaya Prison. In order to date the period in terms of music, Badr Zakariya recalls, that “In late 1988, music started in Sednaya.” Zakariya had presented a play in prison “and the only music in this play was Abu al-Nada’s voice acappella. Instruments were introduced after August 1988.”¹⁰⁰ The musical rituals thus began around this date. I would like to mention that the names of these practices were suggested by myself for the purpose of structuring, constructing and re-ordering and were approved by the research participants.

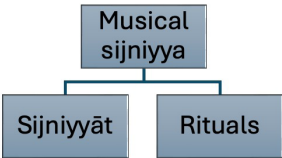


Figure 3: Depicting a Proposed Categorization of Musical Practices

Beginning Ritual

With such a shortage of musicians, Shlash had to build everything from scratch. One day, due to the limited number of experienced musicians, he decided, after having succeeded in crafting a good quality oud, that he was determined to raise awareness about music . In 1990, he wrote the following invitation: “A course to learn how to play the oud will be held, and those who wish to register should give their names to the head of each non-solitary cell, who in turn will give them to the head of the section, then hand them over to fellow inmate Assaad Shlash.”¹⁰¹

With this invitation, Shlash announced the beginning of a new era in Sednaya. It was the cornerstone of the formation of a unique prison cultural field, the effects of which may still be felt today. As soon as he finished distributing this invitation, he received a list of more than forty names who wanted to learn how to play the oud. This music course lasted “for about a year, in which I was taught the basics of playing music. Then, the follow-ups became individualized

100- Group interview. Badr Zakariya.

101- Interview with Assaad Shlash.

in order for each musician to develop specific skills¹⁰².” But after a short period of time, the number of students decreased to ten. Eventually, about five musicians graduated from these courses, including Kisra Kurdi, Ibrahim Bayraqdar, Maurice, Anis and Hassan Abdulrahman, some of whom had previous musical knowledge before starting and others who were complete beginners¹⁰³”. This course was not the only one. Sednaya was full of other musicians. For example, there was “Turki Mokdad, a blind accordionist who played in Hadi Bakdounes’ band before entering Sednaya¹⁰⁴.” Mokdad’s presence provided yet another source of music. He provided prisoners with a six-month course focusing on maqāmāt and solfège, making it “rare to find a prisoner without a basic knowledge of music.”¹⁰⁵ The beginning ritual would not have been possible without the “black door” phase, section in which most of the research participants were isolated. Their isolation from the rest of their fellow inmates resulted in a unique musical phenomenon in particular and a diverse cultural phenomenon in general. It was from this place in Sednaya that the efforts to innovate and explore what could be the beginning of a variety of musical rituals were concentrated. Prisoners were able to socialize with each other and form groups and ensembles that enabled them to establish other rituals in Sednaya.

Umm Kulthum Songs Ritual at the Beginning of the Cultural Café

Over time, it became possible to have a radio in Sednaya. Every day at 6 or 7 p.m., Israel Radio would play songs by Umm Kulthum¹⁰⁶. It became customary for all the prisoners to head to one of the non-solitary cells without making any noise, listen to the song, smoke a few cigarettes and leave. Shortly thereafter, “Ali al-Hakim had the idea of establishing the Fshayfesh Café in the blind spot between the non-solitary cells.”¹⁰⁷ This space became a meeting place for prisoners, where they drank tea and other beverages, talked, and discussed many life matters. They paid for the tea by exchanging cigarettes or tea and sugar. The café was furnished with chairs made out of egg cartons, and the tables were also made out of the same material. What was perhaps the most striking aspect of this experience was the performance of “one of the prisoners at Fshayfesh. He was able to play the role of a ‘Hakawati’ (folk storyteller), and surprisingly, he was able to perform more than fifteen times, telling historical stories that entertained all those who attended. In addition, Badr Zakariya was able to use this café to perform some dances. The customers of the café could enjoy music, stories, and sometimes dancing.”¹⁰⁸

102- Interview with Assaad Shlash.

103- Interview with Assaad Shlash.

104- *Ibid.*

Hadi Bakdounes is a famous Syrian violinist. He is known for forming several bands such as “An-Nujūm” and “Al-Khumāsiyy Li Al-Mūsīqā Al-‘Arabiyya”.

105- Interview with Malek Daghestani

106- Interview with Hassan Abdulrahman.

107- *Ibid.*

108- Interview with Badr Zakariya.

***Morning Ritual and Mourning the Outside and the Inside*¹⁰⁹**

The morning ritual consisted of musical improvisations and pieces performed by Shlash upon waking up in the morning when he was imprisoned in the Palestine Branch. An annual unannounced performance also used to take place the morning after New Year's Eve. Shlash would get up early, stand in the corridor in the middle of the non-solitary cells in a place where his voice could be heard by everyone, then play an improvisation or some Fairuz songs. Those who were awake would come to listen to him until breakfast time, "and after breakfast, interrogations would begin until the day ended with stress and torture¹¹⁰." In Sednaya Prison, the morning ritual was not possible because the circumstances were different; the schedules of the prisoners changed, there were ten non-solitary cells, and it was impossible to open the doors in the morning and meet. Regarding this ritual, Shlash says:

"After crafting my first oud in the Palestine Branch, I would play it at night in the designated place, along with two prisoners, in front of the bathroom. I would strum softly with my finger so as not to disturb the sleepers, and in the morning, when the prisoners of the non-solitary cell woke up, I would sit in the corner facing the bathroom." In the morning, the prisoners often woke up to the sound of Shlash's music. Of course, this ritual would last "about two hours, because there were approximately 60 prisoners waiting for their turn to enter the bathroom." He and a friend would sit in the corner facing the bathroom, and at around 6 a.m., he would start playing morning music on the oud in order to awaken the senses to something pleasant and refreshing. He always played Fairuz and Najah Salam songs, various improvisations and "whatever came to my mind. I would play the oud and my friend (Mohammed) would sing in a beautiful and soft voice until the prisoners were done with the bathroom and breakfast was served. After breakfast, we would go to sleep. This happened almost every day."¹¹¹

The main goal of this ritual was to introduce a new musical style. Shlash played tarab music and used oriental maqāmāt but occasionally drifted away from them in the hope of introducing something new to the ears of the listeners. The prisoners had different reactions, "some of them liked this variety and new of way playing, others found it unpalatable." Regardless of how his musical style was received, the morning ritual allowed Shlash to try out his musical ideas, and having an audience was the best way for him to receive feedback on what he was composing in prison.

Shlash insisted that the lives of all those who were in Sednaya were not tied to the prison spaces they were in, but to what was going in these spaces and outside them. It was thus necessary to "remind ourselves that we are not isolated from

109- This section was written in consultation with Assaad Shlash, who rewrote some sentences and corrected some information.

110- Interview with Ibrahim Bayraqdar.

111- Interview with Assaad Shlash.

the outside. I constantly wanted to prove that we were not alone in this prison.”¹¹² he adds. Besides the morning rituals in Sednaya, certain personalities who had passed away and who had influenced Shlash’s life musically were mourned. Among these personalities was Mohammed Abdul Karim (1905-1989), one of the most famous buzuq players in Syria and the Arab world, known as the “buzuq prince”.¹¹³ When he heard the news of Abdul Karim’s death, Shlash remembered details from his childhood and how the musician’s interpretations had helped him develop his musical ear as well as his blind brother’s in Saraqib. The next day, he took his oud alone and played Abdul Karim’s compositions in a corridor in front of the non-solitary cells, “such as the introduction to Radio Damascus’ morning show and Najah Salam’s *Riqqet Husnik* [Your Soft Beauty].”¹¹⁴ Everyone knew something had happened, so he told them that Mohammed Abdul Karim had passed away. Shlash planned a mourning ceremony in Sednaya Prison on the second day and formed an ensemble with several prisoners who agreed to perform the song *Riqqet Husnik* for all the non-solitary cells. The ensemble, comprising one musician, Hassan Abdulrahman, and several singers, visited all the non-solitary cells, and before playing, one of the young men would read a biography of Abdul Karim. Then, on Shlash’s signal, the music and choral singing would begin. Therefore, Shlash’s role was to form the ensembles, coordinate and manage the event.¹¹⁵

A similar mourning ceremony in Sednaya Prison was held for Colonel Khader Jabr, who was diagnosed with cancer and released a few days before passing away. Forty days after Jabr’s death, Shlash mourned him musically, composing the song *Ta’bān Jayī Al-Masā* (Weary) from Saraqibi folklore. Badr Zakariya recalls another mourning ceremony held for a guitarist in Sednaya. “The most important person to him was his mother, and he learned of her passing while he was in Sednaya. When he heard the news, he isolated himself and didn’t eat for three nights.” Zakariya recounts:

“On New Year’s Eve, “we planned to celebrate to make him feel better. The custom on New Year’s Eve is to turn off the lights until the new year comes and then shake hands and wish each other a happy New Year. When the lights were off, we saw him approaching with a guitar in his hand. He came out of his solitude and started playing Zorba. After he finished playing, we turned on the lights and were shocked to find that blood had oozed out of his fingers and onto the floor, and a few drops had fallen on us without us realizing it. Then, he stood up calmly, like an angel. He took the guitar and returned to his solitude after everyone had broken down from the horror of the situation. Regarding this ritual, I can conclude by saying that when the lights came on, we found the guitar floating in a pool of blood. This spontaneous ritual is further evidence of

112- *Ibid.*

113- AL-SHARĪF Ṣamīm, *Al-Mūsiqā Fī Sūryā: A’lām Wa Tārīkh*. Damascus, Ministry of Culture, Syrian General Organization of Books, 2011, p. 171-178.

114- Interview with Assaad Shlash.

115- Interview with Assaad Shlash.

the connection of the inside to the outside, even if the outside does not hear or know about these rituals.”

The Howling Ritual and its Symphony

In order to reverse the jailer-prisoner binary, the voice, as a form of resistance and music at the same time, was used on many occasions in Sednaya. It was used on many occasions not only to increase the prisoners’ connection to the outside world, as seen in the rituals mentioned above, but also to prove their presence and strengthen their sense of resistance to the conditions of imprisonment. In fact, prisoners are able to make a difference and instill fear among the jailers, even though they are isolated and can only fight with their voices. Badr Zakariya particularly remembers a dark night in 1989:

“At about 11:30 p.m., from my place near the non-solitary cell door, in a moment of heavy silence, I put my mouth in the gap between the door and the floor, and began to howl softly only once, for a long time, then I stopped. This howl was followed by a greater silence from the silent prisoners and a more pronounced stillness, as if everyone was listening. At that moment, I was feeling suffocated and stressed and I didn’t know why. I sensed that everyone else was feeling the same way. A few moments later, I did it again. My voice echoed, as everyone in the non-solitary cells listened or remained silent. The next time, three prisoners participated in my musical piece. Then the number of participants increased to ten. After some more time, more than fifty people had joined in. There were different types of howls, loud and soft, attacking and defending, and prisoners from every section of the prison took part in this symphony, except for a few people. The howls were more like cries, or rather, the cries were more like howls. It was a symphony that everyone participated in for about five minutes. The howling frightened the jailers, and they enquired, from behind the doors, about the cause of the noise and ordered the prisoners to shut up, but “what more can they do, we are already imprisoned.””¹¹⁶

The performances are the same, but the interpretations differ. This howling may have resulted from anger, anguish, sadness, or resistance to the conditions of imprisonment and detention. Its peculiarity is that it provided a safer space than the music that was played in the open prison space in front of others. The howling symphony was anonymous and dark, a technology of the self that affected the group. It could not be seen, no one knew who participated and who did not because it was completely dark, there was no shame in joining the symphony, no one could be recognized, and the prisoners could not see each other. The fact that it was dark may have encouraged people to participate by howling in different ways. Knowing the location of the prisoner and the jailer constitutes in itself a form of resistance that allows the prisoner to learn how to resist, how to irritate the jailer, and how to defend themselves at the same time.

¹¹⁶- Interview with Badr Zakariya.

Even though the performers and their numbers are unknown, this symphony is an example of the strategies that prisoners would employ to vent and resist the conditions in the prison and the non-solitary cells they inhabited.

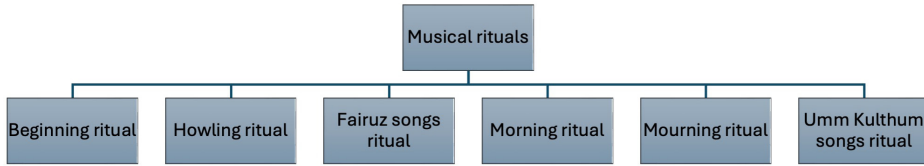


Figure 4: Depicting a Proposed Categorization of Musical Rituals in Prison

The Sijniyya

With these possibilities, which started and appeared to be very modest but were certainly not, the creative process of crafting musical instruments and the multiple rituals, an important question arises about this experience: Were there really “Sijniyyāt” or prison songs in Sednaya? The answer to this question is both yes and no. Most of the interviewees agree that there were no prison songs in Sednaya such as the Tunisian or Egyptian prison songs, which are well-known and recognized in the cultural field. Rather, there were attempts at writing prison songs. Do these attempts deserve to be considered Syrian prison songs? “We leave it to critics and audiences to decide and judge this experience in case there are prison songs in other prisons,”¹¹⁷ says Assaad Shlash. These attempts, their documentation or lack thereof, and their existence or absence will be discussed in the conclusion. As a kind of recognition of the modesty of the experience in Sednaya, the research participants preferred to wait before calling the songs “Sijniyyāt”, for we as researchers and Syrians are unaware of other musical practices in the country’s prisons. However, after counting the songs and trying to remember them, I found that the songs that were sung in prison were certainly in the hundreds. For me, these songs belong to the first level, because they were songs that were heard outside prison and performed inside; they were covers of the original performance. The second level consists of the songs that were performed and composed in prison, whether partially or completely; they may have been based on a well-known musical arrangement or used the form of an old song and were altered to be sung in prison. The second level of Sijniyyāt is comprised of thirty-four songs.¹¹⁸ I believe that there are many more than that, because when I finished all the interviews, the initial number of songs was fifteen, but not long after, I was provided with other song titles that the former prisoners from Sednaya remembered. I am certain that there are many more songs from different periods and different non-solitary cells.

¹¹⁷ Interview with Assaad Shlash.

¹¹⁸ Refer to the sijniyyāt appendix at the end of the paper.

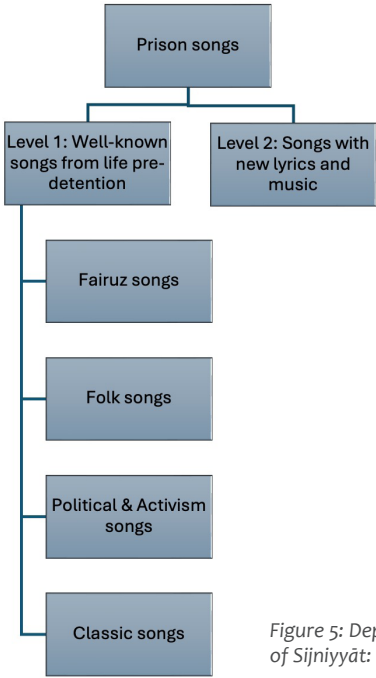


Figure 5: Depicting a Proposed Categorization of Sijniyyât: Prison Songs

First Level of Prison Songs

These prison songs are those that the prisoners had heard outside prison and that they performed when imprisoned. The sources of these songs are divided into several categories, such as folk songs from different Syrian regions, classic songs (by Umm Kulthum, Abdel Wahab, etc.), prison songs from other Arab countries, political and activism songs (by Marcel Khalife, Samih Choukeir, Sheikh Imam, etc.), and Levantine songs (by Wadih El Safi, Azar Habib, Fairuz, etc.). This list includes hundreds of songs that certainly cannot be counted, but through the interviews, I tried to identify the most important ones, not in order to count them, as this is not possible, but to shed light on them and on the musical performances that took place in prison.

Fairuz Songs

Some of these songs became anthems that the prisoners liked to sing often, not only because they were not performed as they usually were outside prison, but also because they consolidated the connection between what was familiar outside Sednaya and what was unfamiliar inside. They were the link between prison, a closed space where there is no physical freedom, and the freedom of which the prisoners dreamed. These songs reflected the real prison conditions, and at the same time, they freed the prisoners musically. The prison walls became metaphorically and symbolically present, but the prisoners were free

to wander in the colorful world of music and break the chains that restricted them, even though they were confined within real walls and were held in harsh conditions. This implies that these songs were the link between the real and the imaginary, a tool to demolish the prison walls, given the significance of each of these songs to the prisoners, both individually and collectively. This is why, I think Shlash's attempts during the morning and mourning rituals, for example, intersected with the outside world and built symbolic connections that show that he was influenced and affected by what happens outside the prison. Therefore, in my opinion, the rendition of Najah Salam's song was not only a tribute, but a confirmation that Shlash and his fellow prisoners in Sednaya were seeking communication with the outside, which inevitably proves the resistance of the self to the technologies of power. Even when the prisoners seemed helpless, they showed that they were not, and the methods of resistance evolved.

The most frequently performed songs in Sednaya were by Fairuz in general, especially *'Al Hadā* [Slowly], *Yā Subeḥ Rawwij* [O Morning, Come Quickly] and *Ghāba Nahārun Ākhar* [Another Day Has Passed].¹¹⁹ They were performed so much that "after we were allowed to receive visitors, it became a tradition on New Year's Eve to listen to *'Al Hadā* at the same time as our families to remember each other on this occasion."¹²⁰ In this case, the fact that the prisoners and their loved ones outside prison were connected to each other through an agreed-upon time confirms that the moments were shared remotely and telepathically. The attempts to connect with the outside could be the reason why the nature of these songs changed. Did the prisoners' loved ones outside prison sing these songs in the same style and in the same way? Could the definition of a prison song be broadened to include those that are sung or heard on an occasion related to the presence of a detained person in prison?

Looking at the content of these songs, we notice that what is common between them is the theme of time and loneliness, if we associate them with imprisonment. The phrase "*'Al hadā*", meaning slowly or in a thoughtful and careful way, is the main focus of the song, which is fundamentally linked to time. *'Al Hadā* seems to deny the slow passage of time in prison and challenges it to become slower. As for the song *Yā Subeḥ Rawwij*, its official title is *Gulnār* but the prisoners changed its name and called it *Yā Subeḥ Rawwij* among each other. *Yā Subeḥ Rawwij*, as I understand it, calls the morning to come and complains about the endless night by saying "*Ṭawwalit laylak*" [The night was long]. The lyrics describe a foggy valley, where loud echoing cries are heard. The song is filled with memories and metaphors of nature, and it mentions a shepherd who entertains the singer until the long night comes to an end. There is more than one context in this song. Fairuz's context describes the shepherd waiting to see his lover, while the prisoners' context consists of waiting for their freedom. I believe that the main themes of this song are directly related to the loneliness of prison, the long nights, and the endless longing for those on the outside. Similarly, *Ghāba*

119- Interviews with Daghestani and others.

120- *Ibid.*

Nahārun Ākhar also reflects the sense of anticipation and the counting of the days that pass, even if the main meaning of the poem or song is the same as the theme from Fairuz's album *Al-Qods Fī Al-Bāl* (Thinking about Jerusalem)¹²¹.

Folk Songs

In addition to the songs of Fairuz, there was a special place for folk songs in Sednaya due to the different cultural and regional backgrounds of the prisoners. When I asked about their favorite folk songs, I received a lot of answers. Prisoners from Damascus were very fond of the Syrian coast folklore and particularly liked the song *Shiftik Yā Jafleh* (I saw you, O Jafleh). Those who come from the coastal region loved the folk songs of the Euphrates region, such as *'Al Māyā* (Beautiful Woman). Some prisoners did not even know that such songs existed. "I really liked the song *Shiftik Yā Jafleh* from the Syrian coast folklore. I did not know it before Sednaya. The Sednaya experience allowed me to discover songs that I would never have listened to¹²²," says Kisra Kurdi.

I believe that these songs captured the meaning of the life that a simple person on the outside is familiar to. For instance, *Shiftik Yā Jafleh*, as Mamdouh Adwan explains, is a song about a father describing his daughter bringing him food and carrying firewood to the house. The father sang this *Mijāna* to make his daughter happy, and it then became a popular song in Deir Mama and spread to other Syrian regions."¹²³ From the Euphrates folklore, there is the song entitled *Yā Bū Rdayyin* [The Man with Wide Sleeves], by Dhiab Mashhour, which is performed on more than one occasion. "Rdayyin" refers to a man who wears wide sleeves and is used as a compliment. This song was sung in the prison depicted in the Ghawwar series. From the folklore of As-Suwayda, we have the song *Maḥbūb Qalbak* [Your Beloved], as well as different types of *Mijāna* and *'Atāba*. What is striking is that most of these folk songs are simple and revolve around ordinary stories that reflect the simple life of people in their regions and the professions they practiced. Thus, one of the most common ideas in folk songs is to shed light on ordinary daily life outside prison, on simple love stories, and on the richness of representative images in these songs. Through this exchange of folklore and heritage among prisoners, Sednaya Prison became a place where prisoners could showcase their artistic, cultural, and heritage diversity, including many types of Kurdish songs and performances such as *Ez Kevokim*, Kurdish *'Atābāt*, and *Seeraliya*¹²⁴.

Classics and Political Songs

The last category of prison songs is comprised of the songs that were considered classics at the time, or struggle songs that reflect the era to which the prisoners of Sednaya Prison belonged. Songs such as those by Umm Kulthum, Mohammed

121- The song was originally performed by Siham Shammas, but it has been attributed to Fairuz.

122- Interview with Kisra Kurdi.

123- ADWAN Mamdouh, *Junūn Ākhar*, Damascus, Mamdouh Adwan, p. 95-98.

124- Interview with Kisra Kurdi and Hussein Kamel.

Abdel Wahab, Nagat al-Saghira, Najah Salam, and others show not only the diverse artistic tastes of the prisoners, but also the musical diversity when combined with the previous categories. These songs were not only performed in prison for the sake of performance, but the choice of songs was often well thought out. For example, the classic songs were performed by Alkatreb in his music appreciation class over the course of three sessions. The idea of this class came “from the fact that we usually listen to a particular song without paying attention to the details of the song, in terms of the meaning and musical performance, and without delving into the multiple meanings of the lyrics¹²⁵,” he notes. In his explanation of the song *Ayaḏun*, Alkatreb tries not to analyze the literary meaning of the song, but to add other meanings. This song was not the only one that was studied. There were lessons about other songs, such as *Qāri’at Al-Finjān* [The Tea Leaf Reader]¹²⁶. These lessons were drafts that Alkatreb had, in which he wrote down each verse of these songs and tried to analyze the music notes and the way they moved according to the verses. He attempted to explain these songs to the prisoners who were not specialized in music.

As for the last category of songs, it includes the struggle songs of Marcel Khalife, Samih Choukeir, and Sheikh Imam. The most frequently sung songs were *Riji’ Al-Khayy* [The Brother is Back] and *Yā Sajjānī* [O My Jailer] by Samih Choukeir, *Wu’ud Min Al-‘Āssifa* [Promises from the Storm], *Muntaṣiba Al-Qāmati Amshī* [Walking with Pride], and *Rita* by Marcel Khalife, as well as *Baqrit Hāhā* [Haha’s Cow] and *Izā Ash-Shams Ghir’it* [If the Sun Sinks] by Sheikh Imam. These songs reflect the political background of the Sednaya prisoners, their political upbringing before imprisonment, and at the same time, they helped them resist the conditions of imprisonment. What is interesting about these songs is that some of them have been musically rearranged and differ from their original versions. The new arrangement of the songs creates a new meaning and context that distinguishes them from what they were in their usual space and from when they were performed in front of an audience outside prison. Perhaps these songs are meant to be sung in prisons. In fact, it is one of the main goals of their original authors, since they are political songs that deal with the theme of politics in general and the theme of prison in particular.

The Sijniyya with New Lyrics or Music

The music and songs produced in prison as a result of incarceration, which constitutes the second level of *Sijniyyāt*, are diverse, ranging from musical compositions to songs written or composed for the first time in prison, and songs using existing melodies with new lyrics or vice versa. None of these songs were performed outside prison, but they were played and performed in Sednaya for reasons I explained in the previous sections regarding the prison space confiscation. The list of *Sijniyyāt* is incomplete, and I believe that broadening the

125- Interview with Haitham Alkatreb.

126- *Ibid.*

scope of the research to include a larger population, a longer period, more non-solitary cells, and prisoners from other backgrounds might increase the number of songs in the list. There are thirty-four prison songs, corresponding to the research sample, and the list is only comprised of songs known by the prisoners who were interviewed. To make them easier to work with, I have classified them according to the gathered information.

The first category consists of full *Sijniyyât* with entirely new lyrics and music, the second category consists of *Sijniyyât* that were adapted from songs performed outside prison before the prisoners' imprisonment, and the third category consists of instrumental *Sijniyyât* with no lyrics.

The poet Faraj Bayraqdar participated in the writing of eight *Sijniyyât*, some of which he wrote by himself and others that he co-wrote with fellow prisoners. The songs he wrote by himself were 'Atab [Blame], 'Atâba, Qaṣîd Ilâ Ummî [To my Mother] and Qaṣîd Min Ummî [From my Mother]. He also wrote two stanzas on Abû Ez-Ziluf, and co-wrote other songs such as Shiftik Yâ Jafleh [modified], Yammâ Mwâwil Al-Hawâ [Folklore Song] (modified).¹²⁷

Assaad Shlash rearranged several songs that became characteristic of Sednaya, such as Marmar Zamânî [My Day is Bitter], Bayn Ad-Dawâlî [Between the Grapevines], Yâ Bayya' Al-Ward [O Flower Seller] (inspired by Munir Bashir), and Yâ Sajjânî, to be performed by a choir. As for the song Ta 'bân, whose lyrics are from a poem by Salam Halloum, Shlash composed it based on folklore and it was meant to be performed by a choir with the Abi Sakhr quartet. The aim of the choir is to use voices and polyphony in order to serve the theme of the song. Later, this song was performed by Ibrahim Bayraqdar alone.

Moreover, Ibrahim Bayraqdar reperformed and modified some folk songs, including Nakh Al-Jamal, Ûmî Rkabi Yâ Nâyfi [The Camel Bent Down, Hop on its Back, O Nayfi] and Sîrû 'Alâ Mâ Qaddar Allah [Trust God's Plan for You]. As for Haitham Alkatreb, he put the poem Al-Qal'a [The Fortress] by Nazih Abu Afash into music in Sednaya and wrote Al-Amar 'A-Jabal Al-'Ayn Mittiki [The Moon is Leaning on Jabal Al-Ayn] in Mezzeh Military Prison. He also composed 'Ātabât such as Yâ Rabbî Rajjî' Kil Ghayib 'A Baytû [Dear God, Let All Those Who Are Absent Return Home], Bass Walla'ûna w Mishû [When they Lit us on Fire and Left], and Hbâbi Shilô Shâmâl, as well as the songs Şawt Al-Ĥurriyya [The Voice of Freedom] and Sanaktubu She'ran. Alkatreb also composed the music for the play Al-'Anbar Raqm 6 [Ward N°6] by Ghassan Jbaai, and the instrumental piece Al-Ĥiṣân. Hassan Abdulrahman was also able to compose a number of instrumental pieces such as Hîjâz Kâr and Nahawand. The last category of songs is made up of the Kurdish songs Hval Haqîqar [Comrade Haqîqar], He Chokho, Layleh Bagiyeh, and Heps U Zindan Kur U Tari.¹²⁸

127- Faraj Bayraqdar says that some of the additions he made to the modified songs were done collectively, but he was the one who made the additions to Jafleh and Yammâ Mwel Al-Hawâ.

128- Unfortunately, due to the fact that I couldn't remember the lyrics of the Kurdish songs, as well as my lack of knowledge of the Kurdish language, I could only include the titles of the Kurdish songs without their lyrics.

The only thing that is lacking is the existence of recorded *Sijniyyāt*, except for 'Atab and *Ta 'bān*. The latter was recorded by Ibrahim Bayraqdar on the *Yā Ḥurriya* program.¹²⁹ It may be difficult to analyze these *Sijniyyāt* without the existence of a recorded performance, at the very least.¹³⁰ Due to the absence of recordings, I can only present an interpretation of the lyrics of some of these songs according to the contexts provided to me by those who wrote or composed them. The first category of *Sijniyyāt* is the modified folk songs, and I think that the modifications or additions were made in a way that gives new meanings to prison itself. For instance, the lyrics of the song *Shiftik Yā Jafleh* were changed by Faraj Bayraqdar and those who were with him. It then became a love song that delves more into rural life and the hard work done by women. In one of the added verses, Bayraqdar wrote:

Your morning is jasmine dewed with my tears
I hope the traitor goes away and disappears
Do not cry, O my soul, there is no point in crying.¹³¹

In this case, we find that the lyrics of the *Sijniyya* brought more imagination and gave more importance to this song about Jafleh the country girl, which was modified in Sednaya. They reflect the spirit of the prisoner before and during imprisonment through painful images expressing the idea that the morning is dewed with tears and hopes that the traitor never returns. Perhaps having more freedom to imagine spaces constitutes a counter-resistance to the confined space of prison. This is reflected in the continuation or modification of *Shiftik Yā Jafleh*, which is aimed at representing a larger imagined space by writing about the forest, the roof and the pigeon in the last verses of the song. All these keywords refer to an open space, as opposed to a narrow, closed prison. Therefore, Jafleh's personal space in the song intersects with the prison space, and in one of the added parts, Bayraqdar wrote: "O God of the universe, change our situation."¹³² Another example of song modification is Faraj Bayraqdar's work on *Yammā Mwel Al-Hawā*. He added the following verse to the original song:

Mother dearest, the space is so narrow, we can no longer breathe
It would have been easier to endure hot coal
But freedom is our fate, even though there are bad intentions.¹³³

In the same manner as the previous song, the addition here also comes from the darkness of prison. It starts with the night and expresses the torture and pain of the prisoners, painting a representative picture of the prison, the prisoners, and the jailers. Bayraqdar describes the space as narrow, which reflects reality, but

129- *Yā Ḥurriya* program with Ibrahim Bayraqdar, Syria TV [online], June 2018, [Accessed November 2023]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACKwAameXoQ>.

130- I am working on a project related to this one. It consists of re-recording *Sijniyyāt*, especially those that were sung in Sednaya. Perhaps these *Sijniyyāt* might see the light of day in the future and be available to all listeners, as well as to researchers and to those who study this topic.

131- Interview with Faraj Bayraqdar.

132- Refer to the appendix to read the lyrics of the whole song.

133- Interview with Faraj Bayraqdar.

the prison space is narrow anyway. Bayraqdar's *Sijniyya*, titled *Ilā Ummī* is a poem written in the style of a folk song. He wrote it in Tadmor Prison and performed it in Sednaya. The poem only reached his mother six years after it was written, when he was transferred to Sednaya. At the beginning of the poem, he wrote: There is no point in crying and sighing, mother dearest
Your eyes, may God protect them, are shores for my yearnings
Prison and death get easier to accept, and giving up is not an option
How is the sky called sky if there are no flags?¹³⁴
After Bayraqdar's mother received the poem, she answered him with another one. It begins as follows:

I stay up at night remembering those in need
Crying and wetting the pillow with my tears
I jump out of bed in the morning, confused
My soul is thirsty, but mirages are all I see
O bus that is coming, take me to Damascus
Hurry, take me to see my children
Go to Sednaya and call the road your neighbor¹³⁵

It took about six years for this poem to reach Bayraqdar's mother. In turn, Bayraqdar's mother wrote the words above, who were sent to her imprisoned son. Poetry and words were able to cross the walls of prison, and the son and mother managed to exchange messages. This is yet another confirmation of the ability of music to penetrate the walls of the prison and link the prisoners to the outside through the letters they sent and received and through the mourning ritual and the Fairuz songs ritual, which consisted of agreeing with friends outside prison on a specific time to listen to certain songs by Fairuz.

As for Haitham Alkatreb, his contribution to the *sijniyyāt* was significant. In addition to his music appreciation classes, he wrote several prison songs in Sednaya, both with and without lyrics. The song *Ṣawt Al-Hurriyya* was written by Ali Alkhateeb and composed by Alkatreb in Sednaya. This *Sijniyya* is about two birds, one male and one female, that lived freely until the hunters came and kidnapped them. This later leads to a metaphorical revolution that drives the hunters out of the forest. I believe that the context and meaning of the song are related to the context of political struggle before imprisonment. In the same spirit of tiredness from imprisonment and pain, Assaad Shlash composed the *Sijniyya* titled *Ta 'bān*, written by Salam Halloum, to the tune of *Al-Mawliya*, a folk song from the Saraqib region. The *Sijniyya* begins as follows:

Weary he comes in the evening, to fall asleep on your braids
Wrap him as a bundle of firewood—wood as sacred as wheat

134- Interview with Faraj Bayraqdar. Refer to the appendix to read the lyrics of the whole poem.

135- Interview with Faraj Bayraqdar.

We can notice that these songs, on the two levels mentioned, rely on folklore in their melodies or even their lyrics. In *The Rustle of Language*, Roland Barthes argues that “the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture... his (the writer’s) sole power is to mingle writings, to counter some by others,” leading to the emergence of new texts.¹³⁶ Ngugi Wa Thiong’o has a similar view: “Over the years I have come to realise more and more that work, any work, even literary creative work, is not the result of an individual genius but the result of a collective effort. There are so many inputs in the actual formation of an image, an idea, a line of argument and even sometimes the formal arrangement. The very words we use are a product of a collective history”.¹³⁷ Despite being similar to music outside prison and to musical production inside prison, this collective work, as well as the ideas exchanged through singing and musical practices outside and inside prison, is one of the ways in which prison songs and other musical practices are produced. By categorizing prison music on two levels, I am attempting to highlight the musical diversity in Sednaya Prison. The new categories of prison songs are exactly the same as in the present section: Fairuz songs, classic songs, folk songs or political and activism songs, which proves that Sednaya Prison has a space that is as important as the space outside prison, and the diversity in Sednaya builds on the diversity outside and adds to it through different *Sijniyyāt*. Moreover, Sednaya has a richer and more diverse prison space. The *Sijniyyāt* are not only like the songs that people listen to outside prison, but they are a tool of resistance and recreation. Prison songs also offer more freedom than songs on the outside. For example, listening to leftist music in the early 1980s was frowned upon in the Syrian space outside prison, and possessing a cassette tape of Marcel Khalife or Samih Choukeir could cause a lot of trouble. I believe that this censorship disappeared in Sednaya through the repetition of these prison songs and various other rituals. On the two levels mentioned, these songs drew a new imagined parallel world through their lyrics and their performance inside Sednaya. This imagined world represents repression or prison in the hearts of musicians, singers, and instrumentalists, and in the hearts of those who long to experience it again, albeit in words.

The Sijniyya Musical Genre

According to preliminary data gathered from fieldwork and interviews, the prison cultural field is vast, with a wide variety of cultural practices in general, and musical practices in particular, which is not new in the literature on prisons. Syrian prison songs, however, have not been documented musically in general. When we talk exclusively about the prison literature genre, we see that the term is generally not agreed upon, even though it has been used in English and Arabic in many research papers and newspaper articles. For instance, Yassin

136- BARTHES Roland, *The Rustle of Language*, Trans. Richard Howard, Berkeley, University of California, 1989, p. 53.

137- THIONG’O Ngugi Wa, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London, Heinemann, 1986.

al-Haj Saleh is concerned when we try to classify his works as prison literature because, despite them referring to prisons or being about prisons, for he aims “to transform prison into a cultural topic... to demystify it and contribute to the destruction of the myths associated with it, the myth of the political prisoner in particular, which were popularized by stories, novels and films, and by people’s passion for myths and heroes.”¹³⁸ We sense that Al-Haj Saleh’s concern here is to prevent prison from being romanticized and mythologized. I believe that the status of the mythical hero or the mythical prison that Al-Haj Saleh refers to is a sufficient and convincing reason not to read these writings with this structuring and classifications. On the other hand, Khateeb Badleh shares the same view of expanding prison literature and not imprisoning it in its own prison. He calls for the term to be changed to despotism literature, because Syrian literature includes only the writings of political prisoners and not criminal civilian prisoners.¹³⁹ In addition, the despotism literature is, for Badleh, an expansion of the umbrella of prison literature so that it extends from the solitary cell to a larger and wider world¹⁴⁰. But are all those who wrote about prison only political prisoners, or are there other authors who wrote about detention and imprisonment without having gone through this experience, such as Rosa Yassin in her novel *Negative*? Conversely, while recognizing the controversy surrounding the term prison literature in the Syrian cultural milieu, Shareah Taleghani suggests that prison literature in its broader definition, which includes texts about, relating to and regarding prison as well as books written inside or outside the prison, may generate truth effects in these writings. Taleghani argues that “If works of *adab al-sujūn*, in all of their variation of form and content, generate truth effects, then the acknowledgement of a particular text as prison literature also shapes how these truth effects are grasped and interpreted by readers and critics.”¹⁴¹ The *Sijniyya* genre that I propose is similar in terms of form and performative dimension to Taleghani’s genre, which consists of documenting justice and framing the reception of the texts mentioned above, but in terms of unknown content, it fails to fit the definition of prison literature.

What I mean is that although there is no disagreement regarding the umbrella that unites prison literature and the artistic and musical *Sijniyya* that I propose, there is a disagreement regarding prison literature despite the existence of written and documented texts, including diaries, testimonies, novels, and short stories, whose main theme is prison and imprisonment. Intellectuals might agree and disagree on how to categorize and classify these texts, which is common in the cultural field, but what about the structuring and classification of a practice that exists but whose nature makes it difficult to record, document and remember, such as musical practices in prison? Is it possible to do so

138-SALEH Yassin al-Haj, *Bil Khalāṣ Yā Shabāb*: 16 ‘*Āman Fil Sujūn Al-Sūriyya*. Op. cit., p. 9.

139-BADLEH Khateeb, *Adab Al-Istibdād*, In *Rowaq Maysaloon*, Issues No. 7 and 8, November 2022, [online], [Accessed November 2023]. Available at: <https://rowaq.maysaloon.fr/archives/7524>.

140- *Ibid*.

141- TALEGHANI R. Shareah, *Readings in Syrian Prison Literature: The Poetics of Human Rights*. New York, Syracuse University Press, 2021, p. 31-32.

with practices that are not recorded and are only mentioned in a handful of articles? These difficulties lead me to coin the term “musical *Sijniyya*”, that I had previously introduced without explanation in order to see if the recipient would approve of it to describe musical practices in Sednaya. With all the debate surrounding prison literature, what can the *Sijniyya* bring to this field, given that the songs had not been made public until now, and how can the term “literary genre” be useful in this context?

The theory of literary genres went through many stages that helped critics and theorists to think about literary productions in a new light. They classified them based on systems and structures that define form and content, starting with the works of Plato and Aristotle, and ending with works from the present day, which resulted in approaches to the classification and framing of literary works that are different from the traditional ones. At the same time, this has opened up different perspectives that have led to the inclusion of new genres and styles which would not have been classified otherwise. These were important questions that set the theoretical frameworks for the classification and sorting of works into specific categories to determine what is literary and what is studied, and to understand existing material. However, the idea of literature soon expanded to include different genres under the general meaning of literature, encompassing different types of art, such as music.¹⁴²

Starting from the controversy surrounding the term prison literature, and with the openness of the meaning of the literary genre, which includes not only literature but different types of sciences and texts, whether written or performed, this change is no longer limited to what is literary, but covers many areas outside the scope of literature and art.¹⁴³ What I focus on in this section is not the literary genre associated with texts relating or referring to prison, but rather the musical practices that took place inside and within the prison. More broadly, this section also focuses on the musical practices that took place outside prison and tackles the prison from the outside.

Delving deeper into the idea of genre, can we apply genre to musical practices that are not yet documented except for those mentioned in the present research paper? I aim to define genre based on form rather than content, in contrast to the established literary genres found in prison literature. Therefore, based on the simple information about prison songs that I have gathered here and that others may gather in the future, the new form and new frameworks of genre focus on different aspects than the traditional ones. They aim to understand the functional

142- On traditional literary genre theory, Cf. WHETTER Kevin Sean, *Understanding Genre and Medieval Romance*, London, Routledge, 2008; DOWD Garin, STRONG Jeremy, STEVENSON Lesley, *Genre Matters: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, Bristol, Intellect, 2006; ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, Trans. Anthony Kenny, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013; PLATO, *The Republic*, Trans. Desmond Lee, 2nd ed., London, Penguin Classics, 2007.

143- Genre theory has expanded to include fields outside of literature. Therefore, we see that writing genres, cultural and social performances, movies, and cinema now have specific classifications based on the first basic theory. Some disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and history have become more effective in utilizing theoretical frameworks for genres.

form and performative dimension of classifications in their social, economic and political contexts, and their influence and impact on their social surroundings, within rhetorical action as well as discourse. To understand discourse and rhetorical action, I believe it is necessary to identify the genres.

Due to this diversity and to the intensity of artistic production in prison, including writing and theater, and due to the absence of a dedicated category for prison musical practices, unless we want to consider musical practices as part of prison literature, and in order to serve the prison cause, I suggest calling all cultural practices “*Sijniyya*” as a way of classifying, organizing, and re-ordering them. The lack of prison songs and music in Syria may be attributed to the fact that the public space was dominated by the regime, but much of the responsibility also falls on critics, workers in the field of Syrian art and culture, archiving and documentation, as well as researchers in social and cultural sciences, especially in the countries where Syrian refugees have sought asylum after 2011. Although “prison literature” has made a remarkable appearance in the Syrian cultural literary field, despite the aforementioned reservations formulated by some critics on the use of this term, prison music and its classifications have yet to emerge, and only one prison song, ‘*Atab*, was recorded and documented. Hence, the first step towards preserving and documenting prison songs is to draw the initial frameworks for this musical genre, or at least agree on the existence of this genre, which includes so-called prison musical practices such as music playing, musical performances, musical resistance using the voice, and singing. The importance of creating a certain classification is perhaps an extension of Al-Haj Saleh’s idea that prison is a cultural topic, even though he is more or less against this idea. In my opinion, however, the only way to make it an open cultural topic to write about is to develop new structures that include initiatives and activities aimed at recording and documenting the musical *Sijniyya*, and to expand the idea of the cultural topic to include not only texts but also non-textual practices. By non-textual practices, I mean practices in which written texts are not used, unlike films (scripts), literature (stories, novels, etc.) or theater (written play script). One of the objectives of this framing is to shape one of the basic forms of knowledge, and the act of shaping and classifying reveals the simultaneous exercise of power and resistance in the cultural field’s public discourse. In the same way, the absence of classification indicates the presence of a force or power that prevents this shaping as well as its counteracting act by framing this classification. This process is an act of resistance to authority that not only rejects the existence of the so-called prison song or *Sijniyya* category but also confirms the absence of prison in the Syrian public space¹⁴⁴. The formation of what I call the prison song or musical *Sijniyya*, which already exists through

144- In an interview, Assad says that “there are no political prisoners in Syria.” There is no proof that Assad is directly fighting musical practices, but in the conclusion, I will present a hypothesis that might explain why these musical practices have not emerged. (Interview with Remi Maalouf, « President Bashar Al-Assad’s interview with RT Arabic », In Syrian Presidency [YouTube channel], June 2022, [Accessed August 2022]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oV4yjYVRk8>).

prison performances and practices, is not meant to shape, but to explain the complex relationship between the dominant discourse (responsible for prison operations) and the oppositional discourse that contributes or will contribute to clarifying the meanings of musical practices, shaping the basic framework of the *Sijniyya*, recognizing its existence, identifying the broader issue of imprisonment, and drawing the knowledge network resulting from these frameworks.

In all the interviews that were conducted, my first question was the following: Is there a prison song? In fact, I was skeptical about the existence of such practices, and I was even more skeptical when Ettijahat's project selection committee asked me to confirm the existence of such practices before approving the research. Of course, my response was based on the few articles on the subject and my belief that music plays a major role in the lives of political prisoners in Syria, as it does in other carceral experiences around the world. Without hesitation, my research participants' answer to this question was a resounding "no". However, after completing the interview, I would redefine the prison song and musical *Sijniyya* according to the data I gathered from the interviews, and the research participants would change their answer to "Yes, there is a prison song". "The reason for my refusal to consider them prison songs is that there really is no prison song like those of Sheikh Imam in Egypt, who was known before he was imprisoned. His songs were widely popular and were sung and known on a large scale. In this context, there is no prison song, but regarding the musical practices covered in this study, perhaps we can say that yes, there is a prison song at least in Sednaya, as documented in this study¹⁴⁵," explains Assaad Shlash. This hesitation to decide whether or not the prison song exists reveals the limited number of studies on this musical genre in Syria due to the sensitivity of the topic and the fact that living under authoritarian regimes affects everyone, including prisoners, researchers, and citizens without any distinction whatsoever. Had there been theoretical grounds for such practices to be recognized as musical *Sijniyyât*, the interviewees' answers might have been different, and I would not have been so confused before starting this research. Had the basic frameworks of the prison song existed in the cultural field for me as a researcher, for critics, for those interested in Syrian culture, and for the participants in this research, the answers might have been different. In any case, the individuals are certainly not to blame, and one of the most important aspects of the *Sijniyya* classification lies in the fact that the producer of the song is believed to have produced it not for the sake of performing music, but for entertainment and killing time during the period of imprisonment.

The musical genre that I referred to as "musical *Sijniyya*" is a singing practice, with or without musical instruments, that took place during the imprisonment phase for recreation and resistance purposes, to kill time, and for any purpose whatsoever. It can be performed individually or collectively, can be new in terms of content or can be based on a song performed before imprisonment.

145- Interview with Assaad Shlash.

Its specificity is that it took place inside prison and was later spread to a cultural field outside prison. This is why it is considered a *Sijniyya*. This genre was confined inside the prison walls and remained there. It may emerge in the near future through the documentation and scrutiny of the Syrian prison cultural field.

Although attempting to establish basic frameworks is almost impossible now, and even though it is too early to survey musical practices in a wider segment than the one presented in this research, classifying these practices not only helps to identify the material musically, technically, artistically and structurally but also plays a prominent role in clarifying the political issue that extends beyond the prison¹⁴⁶. In the case of Syria and the Great Prison, determining the musical genre is not only meant to frame the practice and the song, but to grasp the dynamics of genres, how they influence and are influenced by their surroundings, and how they contribute to the formation of a knowledge network that helps us to better understand the prison, the prisoner, and the practices that took place and are currently taking place inside prison. In this sense, I believe that a textual or non-textual literary genre is measured not by the textual or non-textual elements it contains, but by the impact it has when it is produced, if we develop our understanding of the term “genre”. Here, genre refers to “rhetorical actions” based on recurrent situations, such as the prison songs compiled herein¹⁴⁷. I try to highlight the performative dimension that the presence of this musical genre in the Syrian prison cultural field might have, not only artistically, but also in terms of politics and activism, in favor of the Syrian prisoner’s cause.

The purpose of this new classification of genres is an attempt to break out of the theoretical systems and frameworks of the musical *Sijniyya*. Thanks to this classification, the *Sijniyya* becomes a large space encompassing all kinds of cultural practices in prison¹⁴⁸. I am not trying to come up with a specific formula to classify the prison song, but rather to give a broad definition of it, which is essentially one of the characteristics of the genre as a social act, and I do not want to impose a law of “do or do not” on literary genres, as Jacques Derrida

146- One of the criticisms of categorization and genre establishment, especially those centered around prisons and detention centers, is that instead of their intended fear-mongering purpose, they could be serving the tools of power, creating a mythical, fictionalized image of prison, with prisoners being superheroes who have spent time in this place and survived it.

147- MILLER Carolyn R., « Genre as Social Action », *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 1984, vol. 70, issue 2, p. 163

148- Many theorists have done extensive work to expand the definition of genre. Through this definition, I am trying to break away from the traditional notion of genre as a fixed and structured concept, with rules that apply to all types of texts. We can define a genre by knowing the rules. My approach, however, tries to go more towards the functional characteristic of genres rather than considering them a tangible thing that is based on rules and frameworks. Cf. DERRIDA Jacques, RONELL Avital, « The Law of Genre », In *Critical Inquiry* [online], 1980, vol. 7, no. 1, p. 55-81. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343176> ; BAKHTIN Michael, *The Problem of Speech Genres*, In EMERSON Caryl, HOLQUIST Michael (ed.), *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Trans. Vern W. McGee, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1986; COLIE Rosalie, « Genre-Systems and Functions of Literature », In DUFF David (ed.), *Modern Genre Theory*, London, Routledge, 2014; GENETTE Gérard, *The Architext: An Introduction*, Trans. Jane E. Lewin, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992; FOWLER Alastair, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982; BENNETT Tony, *Outside Literature*, London, Routledge, 1990.

says in his essay on the law of literary genres¹⁴⁹. The *Sijniyya* musical genre connects “a recognition of regularities in discourse types with a broader social and cultural understanding of language in use¹⁵⁰.” In this case, genre, and its connection to less stringent criteria and regulations on the structural form of the *Sijniyya* based on rhetorical positions in terms of ideas, makes it possible to group various texts under the umbrella of the cultural *Sijniyya* (musical, textual in the literal sense, visual art, theater, etc.).

The existence of a body of texts falling under this umbrella allows for the use of the *Sijniyya* as a genre that encompasses prison cultural practices, shifting the focus from the form (prison musical practice) and content of the text to the rhetoric actions that frame the social aspect of the *Sijniyya* and serve the political cause of prisoners and imprisonment. Genre here is not employed as a social purpose, but for a social purpose through which it is mobilized to influence change at all levels. This conclusion is based on the fact that:

“Genres reflect, shape, and reinforce worlds through the social actions they define and perform. Genres carry with them values and norms that, like other ideologies, typically remain largely invisible or unnoticed, and sometimes overlooked. (...) Those values, norms, and actions shape readers and writers of genres – that is, all of us in all our interactions. Whether intentional or unintentional, knowing or unknowing, readers and writers [the creators of these genres] then attempt to shape others through their choice and use of genres and the values they perform¹⁵¹.”

If we assume that genre has a performative dimension that affects the place where it is located, and if we assume that it shapes and redraws the knowledge network in order to understand certain issues related to politics and society by redefining and creating new knowledge templates on topics that were not previously viewed from these angles, I associate the formation of genres with the formation of new boundaries to learn about the prisoner from existing but unframed eyes and perspectives, such as those relating to the *Sijniyya*, for example. Hence the importance of having coined the word “*Sijniyya*” which, in turn, constitutes a genre for the social and political actions relating to the case of the prisoners, at the very least.

This classification was not done for the sake of classifying and laying foundations, but for the sake of preparing and defining the issue of political imprisonment and the experience of political imprisonment. In my opinion, defining the *Sijniyya* does not conflict with the establishment of the rules and controls for the prison music genre in Syria, but it conflicts with the lack of information and data on prison cultural practices, on resisting prison through technologies of the self,

149- DERRIDA Jacques, RONELL Avital, « The Law of Genre », *op. cit.*

150- FREEDMAN Aviva, MEDWAY Peter (ed.), *Genre in the New Rhetoric*, London, Taylor & Francis, 1994, p. 1.

151- DEVIT Amy J., « Genre for Social Action: Transforming Worlds Through Genre Awareness and Action », In AUKEN Sune, SUNESEN Christel (ed.), *Genre in the Climate Debate*, Warsaw, De Gruyter, 2021, p. 21-22.

and on archival practices. In any case, my call for the establishment of a general *Sijniyya* category with seemingly vague controls does not exclude the need for music experts and music critics to work on the *Sijniyya* artistically, which is by no means my specialty.

To begin with, and as a complement to the journalistic articles and investigative research that has been conducted on this topic and pending more extensive fieldwork to survey and document other materials, the *Sijniyya* musical genre remains out of reach due to the lack of interest in the genre and the lack of research experience in this field. Therefore, I hope that this study will be the starting point for other studies that build on the prison music genre as a social act, and also as a genre in the traditional sense, which frames and structures these musical practices, even though the definition of genre in the traditional sense would be the same for musicologists and social scientists, if they joined forces. The more genre moves in the direction of/for social action, the less the theoretical foundations and frameworks are based on the principle of musical form and content, and the more it becomes oriented towards the functional role and the impact of genre.

The Absence and Presence of the Musical Sijniyya

Apart from the sources of inspiration for any prison practices which, as I described earlier, are limited, the only source that has spread widely is prison literature, for it aims to document these practices. Although these are documentary literary works or testimonies about prisons, prison music has remained trapped in the same place and time in Syrian prisons, due to a lack of interest in this practice despite its existence, or due to the belief that it is not worth mentioning compared to the atrocities committed there, or because mentioning these practices might romanticize prison. In any case, the purpose of the present research is certainly not to romanticize prison, but to show incarceration from a new angle, focusing not on the methods of torture and the number of victims, but on the resistance methods used by the inmates while in prison. This emphasizes the individuality and subjectivity of the prison experience and humanizes former prisoners. I think that studying prison on the artistic level and, most particularly, on the musical level, proves that all prison experiences have a human side and allows us to avoid painting a general and beautiful picture of prison, especially when inmates overcome the carceral experience and create their own methods to escape prison while still being imprisoned.

Although the present research paper does not focus on the current political imprisonment situation in Syria and looks at a different period, it is closely related to what is happening today in Syrian prisons. It humanizes the state of imprisonment and does not strip it of its individuality and its unique artistic forms, as it documents practices of survival, endurance, and adaptation. Sednaya Prison in 1987 is not the same as Sednaya Prison in 2024, which is known for its salt chambers. These horrors are part of a long and seemingly endless list of violations and atrocities committed by the regime on a daily basis. As of

this writing, 14,504 inmates died due to torture, and hundreds of thousands of prisoners are still under arrest or forcibly disappeared, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR).¹⁵² Writing about the music practices in Sednaya is not only a critique of the songs but also a tribute to those who survived the massacre and those who did not. At the same time, we cannot separate Syria in 1987 from Syria in 2023, as the numbers of prisoners and forcibly disappeared are still huge. The least that can be done to do justice to those who survived is to document their artistic lives and the lives of those who died in their time. If it weren't documented in the present paper, this era in the history of Syria would have been forgotten or would have disappeared. This research will certainly not bring justice directly to these prisoners, but it moves alongside the pursuit of justice in the future by documenting the history of these prisons and providing some specificity to this harsh experience.

If we try to examine the landscape of the cultural field of prison musical practices, and after defining the *Sijniyya* and trying to frame it, we find that there were musical practices in Sednaya. However, these practices are non-existent if we compare them to those in neighboring countries such as Egypt and Tunisia. In order to pinpoint the cause of the song's presence and absence at the same time, I suggest five factors that contributed to the absence of prison musical practices in Syria, based on the specific case of Sednaya, and perhaps other information and studies will refute this hypothesis in the future. These factors are (1) the political factor related to the ruling political system, (2) the legal factor relating to the rights of prisoners, (3) the social and gender factor, (4) the impossibility of fieldwork, and (5) archival practices.

First of all, compared to other Arab countries where prison songs were popularized, the change of political regimes played a major role in creating spaces for prison literature and writing about prisons. In Syria, the Ba'ath era began in 1963 and has continued since Hafez al-Assad's coup in 1970.¹⁵³ The official number of political prisoners, estimated to be in the thousands, decreased between 1990 and 2010.¹⁵⁴ Assad's ongoing eternal political rule has prevented the creation of any space for the released prisoners to document the horrors they have witnessed, experienced, or spoken about.¹⁵⁵ The main reason is the fact that one political regime remained in power for a long period of time, as the release

152- ABDUL GHANY Fadel, Unlimited Brutality – Almost 15,000 Died Due to Torture in Syria, In Syrian Network for Human Rights, August 2021, [online], [Accessed November 2023]. Available at: <https://snhr.org/arabic/2021/08/14/14018/>.

153- SEALE Patrick, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, Berkeley, University of California, 1990, pp. 86 - 505.

154- BADER EDDIN Eylaf, 'Indamā Hatafū ilā-al-Abad: Lughat al-Thawra al-Sūriyya'. *Op. cit.*, p. 41.

155- "Assad's eternal political rule" is a socio-political term referring to political continuity. Contrary to its apparent meaning, it is not infinite and endless. It continues in the present time, but is going to disappear in the future, (BADER EDDIN Eylaf, «Al-Abad: On the Ongoing», *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 2022, vol. 15, no. 4, p. 367-376. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1163/18739865-01504004>).

of prisoners is considered a gift granted by the president.¹⁵⁶ In addition, the Assad regime has always been keen to claim, as a form of propaganda since its establishment, that there is no political detention or political prisons. Whenever the spokespersons of the regime have the opportunity to do so, they make this claim. The most recent occasion was Bashar al-Assad's interview in June 2022, during which he confirms that there are no so-called political prisoners in Syria.¹⁵⁷ Secondly, legally, customarily, and practically, imprisonment does not end with the expiration of the imprisonment period, if it has one, but continues to have legal consequences after release. Prisoners are deprived of their civil rights in general, which in turn limits their freedom, or traps them in another, larger detention center with fewer rights and freedoms after release. Political crimes, as defined by Aboud Al Sarraj, are those that violate the political regime of the state, "such as constitutional crimes, usurpation of political power, political assemblies and demonstrations, as well as articles and publications directed against the political regime."¹⁵⁸ Therefore, the punishment for a political crime is "life imprisonment, temporary detention, house arrest, and civil deprivation"¹⁵⁹. Hence, prisoners are stripped of their civil rights three years after their release. Civil deprivation can be applied to prisoners who were sentenced for a period of three to six years¹⁶⁰. Civil rights may include working for state entities such as the army, hospitals and schools. Former prisoners can also be denied a passport. If released prisoners wish to travel, they can do so, but after much suffering, interrogation and investigation. Then, they can obtain a travel document and a specific time limit to leave the country.¹⁶¹ This legal procedure limited the possibility for released prisoners to document their imprisonment. The only way for them to do so was by publishing from outside the country, making writing the most popular prison practice in the field of Syrian prison practices. With civil deprivation, the released prisoner is subject to social pressure. As most of the testimonies show, what happened in prison must remain in prison by order of the authorities, and the released prisoner knows that they are being

156- The release of political prisoners in Syria is often considered a gift from "Mr. President" because he grants amnesty to citizens whenever he can. In any case, it linked to the view that the "leader of the nation" is a god who can give and take life when required. Read the article "Al-Abad: On the Ongoing" for more information about the idea of eternity as a political system. Here are a few articles about the release of political prisoners published in regime-affiliated news agencies at different points in time: « Al-Şulutât Al-Sûriyya Tutliq Şarâh 480 Mu'taqalan Siyâsiyyan », In France 24 [online], May 6, 2014, [Accessed March 2022]. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3vAoXDS>; « Itlâq Şarâh 'Asharât Al-Mu'taqalin Amâm Kâmerât Al-Taswîr 'Al-Makrûma' », In Zaman Al Wasl [online], October 24, 2012, [Accessed March 2022]. Available at: <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/31797>.

157- President Bashar Al-Assad's interview with RT Arabic, YouTube video from the Syrian Presidency channel [online], June 9, 2022, [Accessed January 2023]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oV4yj7YVRk8&ab_channel=SyrianPresidency; BADER EDDIN Eylaf, « Al-Abad: On the Ongoing », *op. cit.*

158- AL SARRAJ Aboud, *Criminal Law 1*. Damascus, Syrian Virtual University, 2018, p. 123.

159- *Ibid.*, p. 109.

160- *Ibid.*, p. 109-110.

161- « Ishkâliyyat Manî' Al-Safar Fî Sûryâ », Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression [online], 2009, [Accessed March 20, 2022]. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3KN1U28>.

watched in one way or another. Sometimes this surveillance is self-initiated, as the prisoner suspects that everyone around them may be an informant for the regime. Thus, they start managing and controlling themselves without the regime having to make an effort to keep an eye on them. The released prisoner is invited to regular routine visits after their release, often for no other reason than to symbolically confirm that they are being monitored by the intelligence services. As for released female prisoners, if they are not stripped of their civil rights due to the fact that they were detained for a short period of time, they become hostage to the patriarchal society in which they live. The carceral experience is usually enough to make the released prisoner a pariah, not only because they may be monitored, but because communicating with former prisoners may put those who are in contact with them at risk of being arrested. A released female prisoner is always subject to the “inferiority complex”, first for having been arrested,¹⁶² and second for being a woman. Male prisoners are men, and as it is said in popular culture, “prison is for men”. As I’ve already explained, this characterization of prison as being for men is also evident in “Abu Antar”’s mawwāl. The honor of the released male prisoner has not been besmirched, but the released female prisoner is judged by moral standards associated with societal honor and symbols that have nothing to do with her psychological state. Instead of trying to help them by providing them with psychological counseling to improve their rehabilitation after imprisonment, “women are left to face the rejection of their families and communities, the denial of job opportunities and the physical and psychological scars brought on by their experiences in imprisonment, with no access to either legal nor physical and psychological rehabilitation or redress.”¹⁶³ All these pressures are based on the fact that “because of the presumption that female prisoners have been raped, many are ostracized by friends and family once they get out.”¹⁶⁴ This rejection by society cuts off any bridges of empathy or new structures for listening to what was happening in prison, and more or less destroys the provision of any knowledge infrastructures about prisons with female and male prisoners and about their carceral experience. In these circumstances, how can they establish knowledge frameworks for prison practices?

The penultimate factor is the impossibility of researchers and scholars to gain access to the field of scientific research, which is prison. If a researcher meets with male or female prisoners, the prisoners remain doubtful and fearful throughout the interview. They might sometimes refuse to be interviewed. Also, if the interview takes place, it is difficult for former prisoners to trust the

162- « Hikāyāt Najiyāt Min Al-Itiqāl Fī Sūryā », In TRTArabi [online], August 2019, [Accessed March 2022]. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3EUFCtd>.

163- NASSAR Sema, Detention of Women in Syria: A weapon of war and terror, The Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) [online], May 2015, [Accessed March 20, 2022], p. 27. Available at: https://euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/EMHRN_Womenindetention_EN.pdf.

164- PORTER Lizzie, « Shamed and Abandoned: The Fate of Syria’s Female Ex-Inmates », In Deeply [online], December 2016, [Accessed March 20, 2022]. Available at: <https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/syria/articles/2016/12/22/shamed-and-abandoned-the-fate-of-syrias-female-ex-inmates>.

researcher because of the abovementioned factors that threaten them, or to trust anyone who may have the desire to participate in such research. However, perhaps most importantly, Syrian prisons are inaccessible by any means, unlike in other countries where researchers have either been able to access prisons or have actually provided a space for released prisoners to document some of the prison practices.

One of the most characteristic features of the Syrian cultural field in general and the prison cultural field in particular is the lack of archiving and documentation. If archives exist, they are either kept in the regime's institutions and not available to the public or interested parties, or they are neglected, overlooked, and unsupported. Although it appears that archival practices under the Assad regime were incomprehensible and unclear, and despite the fact that the prison field and practices have not been archived, documenting Assad's violations outside of prisons gives hope, albeit faintly, that some of these prison practices might be archived. I believe that the leaked video of the Tadamon massacre is a document that was recorded and that documented the regime's practices without any known reason for such documentation. This means that perhaps in the coming years, there may be additional visual, written, or audio documents that contain information about the prison cultural field. Besides, these challenges have forced many activists to rely on themselves to document and create new archives, given the lack of trust in regimes and governments to deal with archives based on oral history and memory¹⁶⁵.

In the course of this research, I noticed that the obstacles and challenges to documenting, restoring, and writing about prison memories and practices have partially subsided, especially after 2011. The main reason for this breakthrough is not a change in the political system in Syria, but the collapse of the aforementioned factors as Syrians escaped from the large prison, which is their country, to seek refuge in foreign countries or in Europe. This sudden change shattered the factors of the regime's control over Syrian prisons and over Syria as a large prison.¹⁶⁶ Assad's political regime is largely dominant only inside Syria, and the legal oath to strip civil rights and close spaces for the released prisoners has become impossible abroad, because most of those who went to Europe and foreign countries have at least secured protection, as well as a travel document that allows them to move in a limited space, which is larger than before, while regaining the civil rights that they were stripped of by the Assad regime.

165- On the idea of archives, Cf. ASSMANN Aleida, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011; HAUGBOLLE Sune, « Archival Activists and the Hybrid Archives of the Arab Left », In DELLA RATA Donatella et al. (ed.), *The Arab Archive Mediated Memories and Digital Flows*, Amsterdam, Institute of Network Cultures, 2020; HEGASY Sonja, « Archive Partisans: Forbidden Histories and the Promise of the Future », *Memory Studies* [online], vol. 12, no. 3, 2019, p. 249. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1750698019836187>

166- Although the metaphor of Syria being a big and a small prison is not new, I have read it in many newspaper articles and heard it in conversations between academics and Syrians in exile. I have seen it in Yassin al-Haj Saleh's book *Bil Khalāṣ Yā Shabāb*. It is worth noting that the last time this term was mentioned was by Jaber Bakr in his project on Syria as a prison, as if it were a human being, in a discussion with Anne-Marie McManus during a workshop on prison literature.

Regarding the social factor, male and female political prisoners now live in a different social environment than in Syria, which has largely freed them from the social stigmas associated with the carceral experience. The increase in the number of Syrian men and women who fled to Europe after 2011 opened new horizons for cultural work, as well as political activism abroad. This formed new community groups in Syrian exile, and communities that care for and concern themselves with released prisoners, thus shattering the five factors mentioned above. The relocation of prisoners not only led to the regime losing control over them, but also to the establishment a field of militant and prison practices. This new transformation of the cultural field in exile has resulted in a change in the factors of domination, which have become factors of empowerment. This can be observed through political and militant initiatives and movements for Syria, the most prominent example being the trials in Koblenz and Frankfurt in Germany, which are, of course, only a prelude to a series of trials to come, mainly relating to prison justice.¹⁶⁷

Before and after 2011, the prison field changed exclusively on the outside, and the outside only partially affects the prison's location (Syria). Although the existence of exile is a privilege, as I mentioned, it prevents us from destroying these factors internally in the large prison that is Syria. The regime is still in control of political imprisonment, and these factors are still present and based on the current or former prisoners inside Syria. Moreover, it opens new horizons for the search for prisons that are similar to Assad's original prisons and that might be located in regions outside of Assad's domination in the geographical area of Syria.

Prison Songs and Syrian Drama

Before concluding this paper, it is worth noting the abundance of Syrian prison songs in civil and criminal prisons in drama and television. Although perhaps not a primary factor in the formation of prison music culture, professional cameras and production teams have presented Syrians with depictions of prison (not political prison), singing in prison, and the different ways of singing in prison. The songs depicted in drama may or may not have had an impact on the extension of drama to prison, but when I asked interviewees who were imprisoned in Sednaya, most of them confirmed that some of Ghawwar El Toshe's songs were

167- Many of the institutions, organizations, and initiatives that were established after 2011 are mostly aimed at supporting, empowering, and healing political prisoners released from Syrian prisons. Some examples of these organizations are listed below:

1. Women Now in Berlin established in 2012, <https://women-now.org/>.
2. No Photo Zone, in Beirut 2015. <https://nophotozone.org/en/home/>.
3. The Day After: Supporting Democratic Transition in Syria, in Istanbul established in 2012. <https://tda-sy.org/?lang=ar>.
4. Kesh Malek: Ta'afi in Gaziantep, established in 2018. <https://www.keshmalek.org>.
5. Dawlaty in Beirut, established in 2012.
6. Sednaya Prisoners Community in Istanbul established in 2017. <https://www.admsp.org/>.
7. Syrian Campaign in London, established in 2014. <https://thesyriacampaign.org/>.
8. Caesar Families Association in Berlin established in 2018 <https://caesarfamilies.org/>

performed in Sednaya. Moreover, I believe that the technologies of the self affect and are affected collectively or individually, and that they are tools and methods that enable prisoners to survive imprisonment, cope with psychological trauma, and resist the conditions of imprisonment. Technologies of the self are mainly based on the musical repertoire of individuals. Certainly, the songs in drama and television may be components of this musical repertoire.

Interestingly, for the first time in the history of Syrian art, these dramas documented thirteen songs that were recorded and performed inside prisons represented on screen and in artistic settings¹⁶⁸. All of them are based on certain themes such as nostalgia, alienation, longing for freedom, regret, missing loved ones outside prison, nationalism, and patriotism. The predominant characteristic of these songs is that they are taken from the regional folklore of Syria, reflecting the geographical diversity of the prisoners and the diversity of folklore. For instance, the songs ‘*Al Māyā* and *Yā Bū Rdayyin* are from the Euphrates folklore and some *mawāwīl* are from the Damascus folklore. There are also songs by Wadih El Safi and Issam Rajji, as well as songs by Nazem Al-Ghazali, from the Iraqi folklore. Finally, four songs, *Yāmū*, *Faṭūm*, *Allah Miḥayyi Shawārī’kī* [May God Protect your Streets], and *Lik Wīnū* [Where Is He?] were performed for the first time in prison in front of a camera.

In addition to these songs, performance is also very important because one tries to imagine how inmates can produce music and perform in prison. In one of the songs (‘*Al Māyā*), we see prisoners playing prison instruments, such as spoons, bottles, and pots. When they are done, one of the prisoners asks the others to hide these instruments so that the jailers don’t confiscate them¹⁶⁹. We also see “Abu Antar” dancing and showing his muscles, which is a masculine gesture, during the performance, reflecting not only his character, but also the masculinity of the idea of prison in Syrian society, especially in the series *Maqālib Ghawwār* [Ghawwar’s Pranks], where he sings a *mawwāl* in which he says: “Prison is for me a status and the chain is for me an anklet”. This shows how proud he was to have been imprisoned¹⁷⁰. Most of these songs are taken from Syrian folklore, and most of them from specific regions, such as the Euphrates, Idlib, Hama, Damascus, etc. It is worth noting, however, that even though these songs are traditional, they were attributed to those who popularized them. ‘*Al Māyā* is a folk song that is well-known in the region it comes from, the Euphrates region, but because of the song’s popularity in the prison of the *Ghawwār* series, it is always attributed to Dhiab Mashhour, who was the first to record the song in a way that was acceptable by the audience. As for the songs that were sung for the first time in the series, such as *Yāmū*, *Allah Miḥayyi Shawārī’kī*, and *Lik Wīnū*, they were written and composed by Abdel Fattah Sukkar, Shaker Brekhan, and

168- Refer to the appendix at the end of the present paper for the prison songs used in Syrian drama.

169- KALAI Nihad, « Al-Sahra Al-Munawwa’a Milh Wa Sekkar – Ghawwār, Husnī Wa Abū ‘Antar | Duraid Lahham Wa Nihad Kalai », YouTube video, The Official Channel of Duraid Lahham [online], February 2018, [Accessed March 2022]. Available at: <https://bit.ly/34QUFXd>.

170- AL-MALEH Khaldoun, « Maqālib Ghawwār: Al-Halqa 16 », YouTube video, Shoof Drama Zaman channel [online], December 2019, [Accessed March 20, 2022]. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3InDtq2>.

Hossam Tahseen Bey, as it appears in the series' opening credits. The issue with these songs is that they were written and performed by a professional crew of singers and musicians, were produced by production companies and were filmed using professional cameras. The whole team worked hard to deliver this performance. As for Sednaya prison songs, they were produced from nothing but a real experience of imprisonment and suffering. They were also prevented from being leaked except within the narratives of the former prisoners.

Although these songs were filmed in fictional prisons and might not be recognized as prison songs, their importance probably lies in the fact that they established a new song genre and documented a prison practice that was not real, but performed, filmed, and imagined, since it was not allowed to film in a real prison then, nor is it now. The importance of these practices may lie in the fact that they were adopted again in Sednaya Prison from 1986 to 1996 and in 2014, through the re-performance of some of the songs performed in the aforementioned series. Therefore, this aspect regarding the sources of inspiration and the influence of prisoners on artistic production may provide a new avenue for future research to focus on.

Where is the *Sijniyya* Headed?

In my opinion, the *Sijniyyāt* of my research participants in Sednaya converge in many points and are similar to each other. We might also notice similarities with the *Sijniyyāt* in other Syrian prisons if fieldwork and new studies had been conducted in other prisons during different time periods. The general impression I got from prisoners I met with at different points in time is that singing, music, and all kinds of prison musical practices play a major role in shaping the Syrian prisons and detention centers, whether old, new or contemporary, if we consider that Syria is, first and foremost, a prison state.

I hope this study contributes to enriching the gaps in the knowledge network and the intellectual frameworks related to incarceration by defining this musical genre. If in the coming years we are not able to archive these performances and practices, re-perform them in all Syrian prisons, and develop theoretical frameworks for their classification and re-ordering, future generations will be unaware that in every prison in Syria, there was a Syrian *Sijniyya*, which had different forms and was used for different purposes within the Syrian prison. Therefore, I aim that this research serves as a simple introduction to further studies or the establishment of future research teams capable of archiving these prison experiences, reinterpreting and recording *Sijniyya* anew, and preserving them from forgetfulness and historical decay as time passes. As a first step, in the coming months, a collection of recorded *Sijniyyāt* will be released, along with a review of who wrote and composed them, until we reach a version that is close to their original performance in the past. This will serve as an important document about the technologies of the self and also as a first step towards the establishment of the Syrian *Sijniyya*.

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Appendices

Appendix No.1
Prison Songs in Syrian Drama

Name of the Series/Show and Episode Number	Song	Link	Position of the Song in the Series
Maqālib Ghawwār series, 1967			
Episode 16	Mawwāl praising prison	https://bit.ly/3lnDtq2	6:50 to 7:43
Ḥammam Al-Hana, 1968			
Episode 6	Walla‘ūna w Mishū mawwāl	https://bit.ly/34QqpVE	11:45 to 11:55
Saḥ Al-Noom			
Episode 2	Ṭūlī Yā Līla, Dhiab Mashhour	https://bit.ly/3ifo14T	7:16 to 9:45
Episode 4	Ḥayyāk Bāba Ḥayyāk mawwāl, Nazem Al-Ghazali Fog Al-Khel Shidd Al-‘Azm w Shidd Al-Ḥel, originally sung by Issam Rajji	https://bit.ly/366m3RL	47:50 to
Episode 13	Aqūlū Wa Qad Nāḥat Bīqurbī Ḥamāmatun mawwāl	https://bit.ly/3u7ZeoJ	1:15 to 4:05
	Ṭallū Ḥbābna Ṭallū		4:10 to 6:40
	Faṭūme		1:45:00 to 1:47:00
Milḥ Wa Sekkar series (Saḥ Al-Noom sequel), 1973			
	‘Al Māyā, Dhiab Mashhour	https://bit.ly/34QUFXd	19:00 to 22:30
	Nadmān (Lūlū Allah Miḥayyi Shawāri‘ki)		30:00 to 34:11
	Ummī Yā Nūr Hayātī		1:07:00 to 1:07:35
	Yā Bū Rdayyin		1:10:17 to 1:14:00
	Yāmū		1:14:35 to 1:17:45
	Lik Wīnū		1:51:45 to 1: 54: 12

Appendix No.2

New Sednaya Prison Songs¹⁷¹

	Song	Interview	Performer	Lyrics	Prison
1	'Atab	Faraj Bayraqdar	Khater Dawa	Faraj Bayraqdar	Sednaya
2	'Atāba	Faraj Bayraqdar	One of the prisoners	Faraj Bayraqdar	Tadmor Sednaya
3	<i>Qamūs Ar-Raml</i> (performed poem), written with the intention of making it impossible to understand	Faraj Bayraqdar	Faraj Bayraqdar	Faraj Bayraqdar	Palestine Branch
4	<i>Qaṣīd Ilā Ummī</i>	Faraj Bayraqdar	Faraj Bayraqdar	Faraj Bayraqdar	Sednaya
5	<i>Qaṣīd Min Ummi</i>	Faraj Bayraqdar	Faraj Bayraqdar	Faraj Bayraqdar	Sednaya
6	<i>Jafleh</i> (modified)	Faraj Bayraqdar and others	One of the prisoners	Faraj Bayraqdar and others	Sednaya
7	<i>Yammā Mwel Al-Hawā</i> (modified)	Faraj Bayraqdar	Faraj Bayraqdar	---	Sednaya
8	<i>Ta 'bān Jayī Al-Masā</i>	Assaad Shlash / Ibrahim Bayraqdar	Assaad Shlash	Salam Halloum	Sednaya
9	<i>Kharbashāt Ṭufuliyya</i>	Haitham Alkatreb	Haitham Alkatreb	Nizar Qabbani	Sednaya
10	<i>Hval Haqiqar</i> (Comrade Haqiqar) (Kurdish song)	Kisra Kurdi	---	---	Sednaya
11	<i>Yek Mumik</i> (Kurdish song)	Kisra Kurdi	Ali Hakim	---	Sednaya
12	<i>He Chokho</i> (Kurdish song)	Kisra Kurdi	---	---	Sednaya
13	<i>Layleh Bagiyeh</i> (Kurdish song)	Kisra Kurdi	---	---	Sednaya
14	<i>Heps u zindan kur u tari</i> (Kurdish song)	Kisra Kurdi	---	---	Sednaya

171- Translating those lyrics is an ongoing book co-authored with Ghada al-Atrash.

15-	<i>Yā Sajjānī</i> (arranged by Assaad Shlash – performed by a choir)	Assaad Shlash	Samih Choukeir	Samih Choukeir	
16-	<i>Marmar Zamānī</i> , new arrangement (folk song)	Assaad Shlash	---	---	Sednaya
17-	<i>Bayn Ad-Dawālī</i> (in the style of Munir Bashir)	Assaad Shlash			Sednaya
18-	<i>Yā Bayya' Al-Ward</i> (in the style of Munir Bashir)	Assaad Shlash			Sednaya
19-	<i>Sīrū 'Alā Mā Qaddar Allah and Nakh Al-Jamal, Ūmī Rkabi Yā Nāyfi</i> (folk songs)	Ibrahim Bayraqdar	Ibrahim Bayraqdar	---	Sednaya
20-	<i>Ḥijāz Kār</i> (instrumental)	Hassan Abdulrahman	Hassan Abdulrahman	---	Sednaya
21-	<i>Nahawand</i> (instrumental)	Hassan Abdulrahman	Hassan Abdulrahman	---	Sednaya
22-	<i>Law Kint Ghinniyyi</i>	Haitham Alkatreb	Jamal Saeed	---	Sednaya
23-	<i>Ḥbābi Shilō Shāmāl</i>	Haitham Alkatreb	Haitham Alkatreb	Badr Alkatreb	Sednaya
24-	<i>Bass Walla'ūna w Mishū</i> (folk song)	Haitham Alkatreb	Haitham Alkatreb	---	Sednaya
25-	<i>Al-Qal'a</i> poem	Haitham Alkatreb	Haitham Alkatreb	Nazih Abu Afash	Sednaya
26-	<i>Al-Amar 'A-Jabal Al-'Ayn Mittikī</i>	Haitham Alkatreb	Haitham Alkatreb		Mezzeh
27-	<i>Ilā Ummī</i> , the composition was not finalized nor completed	Hassan Abdulrahman and Faraj Bayraqdar		George Sabra	Sednaya
28-	<i>Al-Ḥiṣān</i> (instrumental)	Haitham Alkatreb	Haitham Alkatreb		Sednaya
29-	<i>Ṣawt Al-Ḥurriya</i>	Haitham Alkatreb	Haitham Alkatreb	Ali Alkhateeb	Sednaya
30-	<i>Ezkaoben</i>	Hassan Kamel	---	---	Sednaya
31-	Kurdish 'Atābāt	Hassan Kamel	---	---	Sednaya

32-	<i>Seeraliya</i>	Hassan Kamel	---	---	Sednaya
33-	<i>Sanaktubu She'ran</i>	Haitham Alkatreb	Saqr Alishi		Sednaya
34-	<i>Abū Ez-Ziluf</i>	Faraj Bayraqdar	One of the prisoners	One of the prisoners	Sednaya

Appendix No. 3

Lyrics of the mentioned *Sijniyyāt*:

1. (*Qaṣīda Ilā Ummī*) At the beginning of my detention in 1987, I wrote a poem to my mother from my cell:

There is no point in crying and sighing, mother dearest
 Your eyes, may God protect them, are shores for my yearnings
 Prison and death get easier to accept, and giving up is not an option
 How is the sky called sky if there are no flags?

* * *

The eagle in captivity remained a strong eagle
 For eagles must overcome catastrophes
 Their wings fly freely... Their eyes are scales
 And their shadows are echoes of flowers and salutations

* * *

Shout as loudly as possible, let the valleys echo your voice
 The night of injustice is defeated, no matter how vicious it seems
 No thrones nor crowns will stay the same tomorrow
 Rest, O sword of flame, the clouds will go away

* * *

My sorrow is a willow tree on the riverbank, mother dearest
 The wind blows and the reeds tremble with suspicions and farewells
 Never has the river deviated, neither has it hesitated nor had any fears
 And we, like the river, bleed and yearn.

* * *

If Sumer ever jumps out of your dreams
 Asks where her mother and father are and starts choking with her tears
 Close the door on her and hush her sadness
 Our morning star is getting closer

* * *

2. (*Qaṣīda Min Ummī*) My mother received the poem I wrote for her six years later, after I was transferred from Tadmor Prison to Sednaya. She answered with the following poem:

I stay up at night remembering those in need
Crying and wetting the pillow with my tears
I jump out of bed in the morning, confused
My soul is thirsty, but mirages are all I see
O bus that is coming, take me to Damascus
Hurry, take me to see my children
Go to Sednaya and call the road your neighbor
I visited so much that we became friends and family
I looked left and right on the way
Counting the trees and the mountains, hiding my pain
When the warden opened the prison door
I called out the name Faraj Bayraqdar with determination
He answered “a hundred welcomes to my mom and my siblings”
For the love of the Lord of Creation and the Prophet Muhammad
Look at your daughter, my son, and other young girls
Spin your yarns finely and the traders will flock to you
My yarns were too thick, they couldn’t attract the girls

* * *

In my heart a river roars and a fire burns beside it
O how I wish that river could overflow to extinguish this fire
Patience is not easy, there are embers and fire
In the bottom of my heart and next to my kidneys
For so long, I hid my worries for the sake of the family
During the holidays and when receiving visitors
But when Hassan returned home
My worries slightly subsided, and my embers have cooled down

3- I am going to write letters

I am going to write letters and send to you
To you who’s left your beloved
I am going to write letters and send to you
To you who’s left your beloved
Your land is distant and deserted
Your land is distant and deserted
My land is better for you
My land is better for you

* * *

In my land, you will rest
In my land, you will rest
O you with the beautiful eyes

O you with the beautiful eyes
My mind has deserted me
ever since I last saw you
My mind has deserted me
ever since I last saw you

* * *

Ever since I last saw you at your home
you've ignited my heart with your fire
Ever since I last saw you at your home
you've ignited my heart with your fire
My gazelle, I'm too far from you
My gazelle, I'm too far from you
would you stay with me
would you stay with me

4- Our beloved ones have gone far away

O distant mountain, behind which our beloved live
You come and go like the Eid, and your worry tires us
We long for the rendezvous, we cry in agony
O distant mountain, tell this to our beloved ones

* * *

Our beloved ones have gone far away; they've gone far away
Our beloved ones have gone far away
to a high mountain they've gone
and our hearts have melted
Our beloved ones have gone far far far away

* * *

I've asked the door of our home
whereabouts are the people and families of our homes
It told me, "Abandonment is betrayal;
that they've left their homes and their fires stopped burning."
"Look at how their fireplaces turned to ashes
They've turned to ashes; they've turned to ashes."

* * *

The flowers have withered
and in-between these trees, two bird are perched
asking, "Where have those friends gone, where have they gone?"
and they sighed at the memory of the sweet nights
they sighed; they sighed

* * *

I said, “O you who’s asking me about the beautiful ones
perhaps they’ve forgotten. Perhaps they’ve become traitors
and perhaps they will find happiness elsewhere,
find happiness elsewhere, find happiness elsewhere.

5- *Jafleh* (Faraj Bayraqdar and others)

I saw you, O Jafleh, on your way to the field
Your cheeks, O Jafleh, shine bright like the sun
I asked you, “daughter dearest, where is your headscarf?”
You said that you were sweating and wanted to breathe
Sing, sing, sing the mijānā
Teach the pigeons the “burjāmā”
* * *

I carried the bunch of wood, but she said “give it back to me”
The wood is green, why are you carrying such a heavy weight?
Damn the firewood and damn the hatchet
Damn the hot stairs in our country
Sing, sing, sing the mijānā
Teach the pigeons the “burjāmā”
* * *

I carried the bunch of wood and put it on her head
Who else has kissed these beautiful cheeks?
She drank from my glass, so I’ll drink from hers
O God of the universe, have mercy on us
Sing, sing, sing the mijānā
Teach the pigeons the “burjāmā”
* * *

She carried the bunch of wood and walked up the hill
And ahead of her walked her herd of goats
Let me drink, O Jafleh, a bit of your saliva
So that the ney can play a mijānā
Sing, sing, sing the mijānā
Teach the pigeons the “burjāmā”
She placed the bunch of wood on the roof
My heart broke when I saw her
Never go to the distant forest again
O God of the universe, change our situation
Sing, sing, sing the mijānā
Teach the pigeons the “burjāmā”
* * *

Your night, O Jafleh, is a wilted lilac
Your morning is jasmine dewed with my tears
I hope the traitor goes away and disappears
Do not cry, O my soul, there is no point in crying.

6- Yammā Mwel Al-Hawā (Faraj Bayraqdar and others)

Mother dearest, listen to the songs of love, listen to my love songs
I'd rather be stabbed in the heart than be ruled by a scoundrel

* * *

Mother dearest, the space is so narrow, we can no longer breathe
It would have been easier to endure hot coal
But freedom is our fate, even though there are bad intentions

* * *

We never expected to see our brothers become our enemies
Worries should be overcome with adequate determination
We are the same as other nations, roar O freedom

* * *

Every day, the sun rises again, and the journey is renewed
Sadness will go away, even if it takes time
We will endure hot coals for you, O Syria

ملخص | يحاول بحث السجنية السورية: موسيقيا ما بعد السجن» أن يدرس ويحلل الممارسات الموسيقية من جانب ممارسات النفس وليس ممارسات السلطة والهيمنة بشكل معاكس للأبحاث التي تدرس المعتقلات السورية. السبب في هذا هو اعتقادي بأن التركيز على هذه الممارسات سيشرح بشكل غير مباشر ممارسات السلطة في المعتقلات السورية وخاصة صيدنايا. بشكل غير متوقع ولصدفة حدثت عن طريق دردشة مع أحد الأصدقاء الصديقات أنه من الممكن أن المسالخ التعذيب السورية قد تحتوي على ممارسات موسيقية. وللإجابة على هذا السؤال، يتناول البحث المعتقلين السياسيين المنتمين ل الحزب العمل الشيوعي والذين كانوا نشطين سياسياً في أواخر ١٩٧٠ وأوائل ١٩٨٠ حتى اعتقالهم من فترة ١٩٨٧ إلى ١٩٩٦ المقيمين في المنفى الاوربي الآن . هل يوجد أغنية سجنية سورية في صيدنايا؟ هل يمكن تسميتها سجنية؟ كيف للمقاومة أن تترجم كطقس أو أداء موسيقي فني في صيدنايا؟ كيف يمكن للسجن الأصغر أن يؤثر على السجن الأكبر ويحدد الحقل الثقافي السجني السوري؟

الكلمات المفتاحية | ممارسات سجنية موسيقية، الأرشفة والتوثيق، ممارسات النفس، المقاومة الموسيقية، صيدنايا

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