MISSION STATEMENT

Al Noor, **the Boston College Undergraduate Middle Eastern Studies Journal,** aims to: ◆ Facilitate a nonpartisan, unbiased conversation within the Boston College community and beyond about the Middle East. ◆ Provide a medium for students to publish research on the Middle East and Islam. ◆ Promote diverse opinions and present a comprehensive view of the myriad of cultures, histories, and perspectives that comprise the Middle East. ◆

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

We are excited to release the Spring 2026 Edition of *Al Noor*, which centers on the theme of "Rewriting Narratives in the Middle East". The Middle East is a region of the world whose stories have often been told by outsiders, the narratives of its people and history shaped by conquerors and scholars alike. Such outside narratives often collapse the complex spread of the region's history, cultures, and peoples into simplistic caricatures that mask the indigenous voices of the region. This issue focuses on the ways in which actors in the Middle East strive to reclaim control of these narratives, resisting the attempts of others to write their stories for them.

In "Navigating the Remnants of Colonial Sexuality: Conceptualizing Queerness in Morocco," Bennett Hylen examines the way in which gay men in Morocco carve out spaces for self-identification in between Western and indigenous modes of thinking about sexuality. Hylen criticizes the tendency of Western scholars to view Arab sexuality through the criteria often applied to gay men in the West, and the resulting urge to exoticize the seemingly strange and different gay men of the Arab World. Hylen, however, also points out the flaws in "doctrinal adherence" to Orientalist critiques of Western categories of sexual identity, arguing that queer individuals in Morocco and the Arab World more broadly often utilize Western categories of identity to construct a sense of social belonging. Throughout his analysis, Hylen places a strong emphasis on the agency of queer Arabs, positioning them neither as the fetishized "other" of Western epistemology nor as the helpless victims posited by Orientalist scholarship. Through this emphasis on agency, he highlights the ability of queer Moroccans to take control of and reorient narratives surrounding their own sexuality.

In "Measuring the Immeasurable: The Anholt Nations Brand Index and the Occlusion of Soft Power in Qatar", Tiffany Fu examines the historically poor performance of Qatar on the Nations Brand Index (NBI), a tool that measures the global perception of countries' "brand image." Fu seeks to explain the seeming contradiction between Qatar's high levels of investment in infrastructure, promotion of tourism and global events, and diplomatic mediation in regional conflicts and its consistent underperformance on the NBI. Fu contends that Qatar's poor performance on the index stems largely from lingering concerns over human rights abuses in the country, as well as from deep-rooted negative perceptions of the Middle East as a region, perceptions which require sustained, long-term narrative building to overcome. In analyzing the case of Qatar, Fu makes the contention that short-term investments are insufficient in the rewriting of longstanding narratives, and that addressing such narratives requires a far more long-term approach.

Elisa Goislard Nguyen's "Necroviolence and the Work of Mourning: The Palestinian Body as a Territory for Zionist Conquest" explores the concept of necroviolence as it relates to the conduct of Israeli authorities in the Palestinian territories. Focusing primarily on the practices of withholding the bodies of Palestinians killed by Israeli forces, the imposition of stringent restrictions on Palestinian funerals, and the destruction of Muslim and Christian cemeteries, Goislard Nguyen argues that the Israeli state has utilized the processes of death and dying as a means of control and surveillance of the Palestinian population. In her analysis, Goislard Nguyen also centers Palestinians' attempts to resist these practices and reassert their worth through the "politics of *karameh* (dignity)". She posits the determination of Palestinians to maintain the dignity of their deceased and the sacredness of their spaces of remembrance as a means of rewriting narratives and asserting their dignity as a people.

We extend our deepest thanks to the readers, writers, and artists who make *Al Noor* vibrant with their curiosity and support. We hope this issue offers new perspectives on the Middle East, challenging assumptions, provoking thought, and inspiring further questions.
To explore past editions or learn more about our mission, please visit www.alnoorbc.org.

With warm regards,
Evan Hugge
Editor-in-Chief

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Navigating the Remnants of Colonial Sexuality

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Bennett Hylen

Bennett Hylen is a second-year student studying International Politics with a focus on Human Security and Religion at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.
He is especially grateful to his parents for nurturing his love for learning and faith. He would also like to thank Dr. Jonathan Brown for his mentorship and goodwill in the process of developing this work.

One of the continuing phenomena of Orientalism is its fetishization of Arab men, aiming to brutalize and exoticize sexual interactions between Arabs, both in and outside of the West. Today, Westerners continue to add to a long history of gay-Orientalist cultural production through pornography, literature, and visual art. Morocco has a rich and well-documented sexual-cultural historiography due to its geographical proximity to Europe, vibrant artistic scene, and cosmopolitan colonial status. It also has a vibrant online community, where, in a globalized world, Western gay traditions continue to be imported into the Arab world, undermining the agency of Arabs. To better understand the modern dialogues surrounding this sexual importation, I will pose sexuality as part of the contemporary moral vocabulary of Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA), portraying the moral complexities

of lived sexuality. Secondly, I will explicate the Orientalist importation of Western moral frameworks: particularly, the idea of "sexuality" in queer epistemology. Finally, I will discuss and critique Arab protest actors that work for sexual liberation and synthesize my findings to better understand Orientalist discourse.

In this paper, I define moral vocabulary as the set of concepts people use to reason about right and wrong, including values, principles, virtues, hopes, rules, and emotions. By focusing on this moral vocabulary, we can see how lived sexualities carry ethical meaning beyond simple categories of identity. Two moral frameworks in Western reasoning are central to this understanding: authenticity and legibility.

These shifting epistemologies of sexuality also reshape how our moral selfhood is conceived. Justifications of what kinds of sexual lives are moral require not only practices of discretion or visibility, but deeper legitimations of the self that embodies them. As the Western literary critic Lionel Trilling observed, authenticity has become one of the main mechanisms through which the modern self is understood and legitimated.[1] The ideal of authenticity shapes every aspect of the self, including sexuality. It assumes some kind of "real" self that is prior to all social interaction–even in the private sphere. It asks us to bring out that pre-social self, to express our most transcendent experiences publicly, even if they counter social norms.[2] Thus, for the authentic individual, expressing the pre-social self serves as a way to not conform to the institutional structures that corrupt the self.

Since Trilling wrote in the 1970s, the ideal of authenticity has been joined in the West by an ideal of legibility. The ideal of legibility values not just free self-expression, but social recognition of the expressed self. This ideal was already operative in various kinds of identity politics, in which people become legible as members of various groups. And it has only been accelerated by algorithmic social media, which selects for legibility.[3] Thus, legibility incorporates the readings of others into our understanding of morality.[4] In this way, it centers the self in the external realm, taking the social into itself. While authenticity values inner truth, legibility values social recognition. In liberal Western sexual ethics, the two come together in norms for freely expressing a real, true, sexual self that is somehow both untainted by social interactions and recognizable as a socially sanctioned identity.

These frameworks simultaneously act as sites for agency for queer Arabs and distort and occlude indigenous moral frameworks of queerness. These frameworks are an "epistemic importation," which I define not only as the transfer of norms, but also as the knowledge frameworks that structure how sexuality is understood and regulated.

This paper argues that Western sexual imports into Morocco are not merely categories of identity, but moral-epistemic frameworks that reshape how erotic traditions are understood and lived. Arab protesters have both subverted these imports to create new forms of visibility and adopted them on their own terms to overwrite local moral vocabularies and reinscribe colonial hierarchies. Thus, Orientalism in the sexual sphere must be understood not as a monolithic discourse but as a contested moral-epistemic field, where domination and resistance operate simultaneously.

To make sense of these contested moral vocabularies, this article first revisits the dominant scholarly narratives that have framed Arab sexuality through an Orientalist lens. By tracing how key thinkers have conceptualized identity, desire, and agency, the literature review will show how existing work often collapses moral selfhood into imported categories of authenticity and visibility. This sets up the need for a framework that centers Moroccan moral vocabularies and the tension between authenticity and legibility in lived queer life.

Literature Review: Understanding Orientalism and Identity

Existing scholarship on Orientalism and sexuality provides the conceptual terrain to understand how queer Moroccans have been misinterpreted. This section examines how several key thinkers configure identity, desire, and agency, revealing how their accounts obscure and complicate moral debates in post-colonial settings.

Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism" details a discursive method through which the West came

"Seeing through lenses of desire and practice rather than identity reframes Western notions of the Arab World as exclusively repressive toward male-male relationships."

to define itself. Orientalism, he writes, is "a code by which Europe could interpret both itself and the Orient to itself."[5] Orientalism, as a hermeneutic for deciphering the West's position amongst its neighbors, also presupposes a Western dominance, just as colonialism does. Thus, in creating a Western identity, the West constructs an "Oriental" other relative to itself, justifying Western occupation and cultural dominance.

However, Said's Orientalism, when used as a tool for understanding selfhood, too often totalizes the relationship between the West and the "Orient."[6] Said discusses the West as an unchanging, omnipotent discursive creature that creates a monolithic "Orient." Although this binary is descriptive of the colonial imaginaries that Orientalism seeks to study, when taken as an interpretive canon that describes all social realities, it reifies colonialism's assumed binary, projecting colonialism's own thesis onto complex relationships in ways that can obscure decolonial work. Thus, scholarship has entered a post-Saidian world that seeks to understand a postcolonial world where binaries between "Oriental" and "Occidental" are contested.

One of the ways in which Orientalism's failures have been broadcast can be seen in a historiography of Western queer studies in SWANA. After Orientalism's conceptualization in Said's 1978 essay, scholars of politics and culture reoriented their analyses with Said's new discourse. Arno Schmitt and Jehoeda Sofer's edited volume *Sexuality and Eroticism Among Males in Muslim Societies* offers one of the first understandings of queer culture in SWANA and focuses not on identity labels but on desire and practice. Schmitt draws on anthropological testimonies to emphasize a sexuality based on desire and action over identity. [7] Seeing through lenses of desire and practice rather than identity reframes Western notions of the Arab world as exclusively repressive toward male-male relationships. Without the mechanism of Western categorization, sexual discourse moves away from arguments about whether to validate queer identities. Rather, in the eyes of Schmitt, sexuality must instead be understood through locally-grounded ways of knowing and valuing desire.

Whereas Schmitt's study presents itself as a descriptive ethnography, Joseph A. Massad's *Desiring Arabs* takes the thesis of Said and Schmitt to critique the ways in which Western constructions of sexuality have been imposed to define the identities of Arab men. He argues that the terminology of "sexuality," "orientation," "homosexual," and "heterosexual"—all created in the West in the nineteenth century—have obscured indigenous understandings of same-sex desire in which male-male eroticism was conceptualized as a fluid practice rather than a fixed identity.[8]

Massad's study reveals a complex Islamic sexual world that Western categories distort and occlude. Because Western misunderstandings of Islamic sexuality have been backed by colonial power, they are not simply academic mistakes, but have concrete impacts. Western sexual imperialism can be traced not only through modern movements and interventions for LGBTQ+ rights, as Massad argues, but also through a long history of Western desire, sex tourism, and fetishization. Massad terms this sexual imperialism through what he calls the "Gay International," a collection of Western sexual evaluations of the Arab world, ranging from pornographic film directors to LGBTQ+ activist organizations like OutRight International. These judgments have tended not just to apply Western categories of identity, but also to fetishize Arab sexual practices as exotic and Arab men as subordinate—all in the name of "liberation."[9]

Furthering the body of work that extends Said's thesis is Joseph Boone's *Homoerotics of Orientalism*, which contests Massad's analysis. Boone accepts Massad's history of sexuality in SWANA but emphasizes

colonial fluidity and transnationality, often validating Western sexual frameworks in the Arab world.[10] Massad, by contrast, sees this very translation as Orientalist, arguing that Western conceptions of sexuality are foreign impositions on the Arab-Islamic world.[11]

The core debate between these scholars is the question of what makes identity indigenous. Boone's emphasis on cultural fluidity risks overwriting local sexual traditions that resist Western sexual norms. On the other hand, Massad's framework treats sexuality as primordial, neglecting queer Arab agency. Neither of these accounts fully capture the complex, negotiated emergence of indigenous sexual identities.

Massad and Boone disagree on the extent to which Western categories should operate in transnational contexts. Both authors center their debate around the question of sexuality as identity, regardless of whether they accept or reject Western identity-based sexuality. However, in treating identity politics as axiomatic, the authors lose aspects of Arab agency that develop a fuller picture. When Orientalism is read primarily through identity labels, both critics and defenders of Western categories risk missing how Arabs themselves negotiate sexual morality. The next part of this paper therefore reframes the Massad-Boone debate in terms of moral-epistemic frameworks, opening space to think beyond authenticity as the main register of queer selfhood. To approach the queer problem, I center on the self and individual agency as a way of understanding sexual resistance, reinterpretation, and negotiation in Morocco. In this way, agency does not imply total autonomy, but negotiated action within asymmetrical power structures.

Sexual-Moral Practices in Morocco

Having traced how scholarship has framed Arab sexuality through Orientalist binaries and identity debates, the analysis now turns to the colonial archive itself. Reading erotic catalogues, novels, and early film through the lens of moral vocabularies shows how Western representations did not merely name identities, but reshaped the ethical terms in which Moroccan sexuality could be made legible.

In a Morocco greatly defined by postcolonial thought, Massad's Gay International has become the driving shadow force behind modern moral conceptions of gay men. This goes beyond importing Western identity categories. Rather, its "queering" of the Arab world has imported Western moral values and the epistemologies that justify them. This epistemic importation defines the conversation surrounding sexuality in SWANA.

The central debate over sexual morality in SWANA has been conceived through the lens of public and private. The public-private axis of morality is especially seen by the contrast between the public-facing nature of Western identity labels and the discretionary nature of desire. With the Western Gay International's drive for sexual visibility, the West has publicized its moral claim to what queerness should look like: visible, free, and expressive of a kind of desire that is universal. Here, "visibility" refers to a public legibility of sexual desire, functioning as a signifier of freedom and recognition. This call for visibility distinctly goes against the basis of many Arab societies that the sexual self is to remain in the private sphere. For instance, Sara Omar writes that early Islamic jurists conceptualized desire (*shahwa*) insofar as it produced licit or illicit behavior, rather than as a basis for identity or public recognition.[12] In this way, sexuality was governed not by visibility or affirmation of the erotic self, but rather by ethical restraint and relational context.

Within the colonial interplay between Western and Moroccan ethical systems, the result is not merely a clash of values, but a deeper transformation in how sexuality itself is conceptualized. These interactions have reconfigured both local norms of discretion and licit conduct, as well as the terms through which sexual desire becomes intelligible, legitimate, and actionable. In this way, contemporary encounters reshape not only Moroccan sexual norms, but also the epistemologies through which sexuality is known, debated, and lived.

Authenticity and Legibility in SWANA

Authenticity and legibility are distinctly Western frameworks, but they interact within the context of SWANA in a variety of ways. One site for viewing this interaction is the development of queer rights

movements in SWANA, which illustrates how authenticity and legibility were received by Arabs and the West. Early modern queer Arab movements sought recognition through authenticity—for instance, by "coming out," queer Arabs aimed to express a pre-social desire that demands to surface. However, this expression of authenticity created public outrage: expressing homoerotic desires and identity elicited hostile reactions, particularly because sexual selfhood has historically been regulated not through the individual identity, but through actions and practices interpreted by Islamic jurists.[13] Thus, authenticity communicates in a different moral language by expressing the pre-social, pre-spiritual self. In practice, Western sexual imports that utilize the framework of authenticity act as epistemic importance that risk co-opting indigenous ways of being.

Legibility, on the other hand, seems to be a more elastic ideal, capable of being stretched to emphasize distinctly Moroccan social understandings of queerness. In queer activism in Morocco, legible activists have expressed themselves through Moroccan desires, practices, and roles, rather than Western categories of identity like "the homosexual." In this way, legibility acts as a site for queer agency by taking into account local and religious frameworks for understanding male-male sexual interactions. This broader reading of the self has been utilized by queer Moroccans to protest local queer animus whilst subverting traditional Western ideas of sexuality.

Sexual Colonialism in Morocco

From precolonial Morocco through the height of European imperialism, same-sex practices persisted but were continuously reevaluated through new mediums and desires, even as they maintained the same central mythos. The colonial mythos centers around a right of the West to "Oriental" consumption. This core belief became entangled with the West's changing complexities of desire, operating within perceptions of beauty defined by class, age, and geography.

It is important to define these shifting desires and methods for consumption within their earlier erotic traditions. The traditional sexual practices of Morocco did not disappear under colonialism; rather, they became layered with colonial erotic practices and aesthetics, creating the hybrid and contested terrain that later Moroccan literature, scholarship, and activism would inherit. Before the rise of the West, a variety of sexual practices existed in Morocco and the wider SWANA region. Oftentimes, these relationships were socially structured by the participant's role as the giving or receiving partner, where partners experienced a mutual socio-sexual benefit from the relationship. Traditional scholarship utilized the terms "active" and "passive" to describe these roles.[14] However, this language produces a social inequality that cannot describe the full range of sexual practices in the Maghrib. For instance, in some Moroccan contexts, the passive partner, the *zāmel*, coming from zamīl, meaning colleague, is socially respected for his role in male-male relationships.[15] He is regarded positively, as an outlet for male sexuality—an outlet that is seen as a positive hygienic act.[16] This positive valuation directly contradicts Western stereotypes of passive partners as inherently subordinate or feminized.

However, the perception of traditional, equitable queer relationships was frequently undermined by the West, especially Europe's long history of sex tourism and ethnopornography, which intertwined sexual practices with biopolitical colonialism. One of the earliest prominent Orientalist texts describing Morocco is Fazil Bey's *Book of Beautiful Boys*, an ethnopornographic catalogue of youthful Arabs written between 1792 and 1793.[17] The genre of the erotic catalogue can be traced throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, especially as artists and cosmopolitans would travel to Tangier to rent boys for sexual encounters.[18] The genre of the catalogue illustrates how Arab men were commodified and selected in the same form in which Westerners would shop for any other household item. These examples of commodification are a distinct move to usurp Arab sexual agency by reflecting Moroccan men as Western property, marking the installation of a pre-colonial "right" to order Arab sexual practices through Western means.

Around one century later, in 1886, *Sous le Burnous* (published in English as *Musk, Hashish, and Blood*) likewise illustrates how Western thinkers subvert queer Arab epistemologies. During an erotic scene

"Ultimately, these colonial texts not only fetishize Moroccan men, framing them as objects, but also work to displace local moral vocabularies of desire with imported liberal, Western traditions."

set at a French settler camp, the text reminds us of "Sodom [and] Gomorrah [...] extinguishing their fires (*On eût dit que là-bas Sodome [et] Gomorrhe* [...] *éteignaient lentement leurs brasiers*)", referencing the age-old Abrahamic tale cited to condemn same-sex practices.[19] By utilizing Christianity's depiction of an Abrahamic story used to condemn sexuality, this marks a deeper change in how Western conceptions of sexuality were imported into SWANA. *Musk, Hashish, and Blood* takes the idea that "Occident" and "Orient" are epistemologically separate, giving the West a "right" to insert itself into other cultures. It uses that "right" to move towards a Western-Christian epistemic answer to which sexual selves can be socially acceptable. In doing so, the novel does not merely deploy religious imagery as metaphor. It also actively displaces the story of Lot into the Christian tradition, reframing the very epistemic ground upon which sexual morality in Morocco had been debated. The novel does not simply reference religion, but it critiques local epistemologies by presenting them as insufficient, sinful, or deviant when measured against Western-Christian standards. By repeatedly invoking Christian imagery, it displaces Arab-Islamic ethical frameworks, functioning as a tool of epistemic colonialism that inscribes Western authority over sexual knowledge while exoticizing and controlling Arab subjects who engage in homoerotic practices.

The motifs of commodification and immorality found in these literary examples would define the future ethnopornographic genre with the rise of film. *Mektoub Fantasie Arabe* (ca. 1920) is the first documented ethnopornographic film in the region. In *Mektoub*, meaning "destined," a film photographer makes his way into an Arab palace to take pictures of naked men. Slides of text describe the men "dancing the dance reserved for the bridegroom (*Comme en un rêve, devant lui, Azaya dansa la danse réservée à l'époux*)".[20] In return, they are compared to dogs ("*Chien!*") and disciplined sexually by their employer.[21] Orientalist portrayals perceived the Maghrib as innately animalistic, without law or ethics, undermining existing ways of thinking about sexuality without turning to othering gay people. The film also misappropriates and sexualizes the indigenous (although global) ethical syllogism "an eye for an eye" to "[an] inside for [an] inside (*Œil pour œil ..... Dedans pour dedans .....*)."[22] This portrays Arab ethics as illogical and justifying of "wrongful" or deviant sexual selves, thus characterizing the Arab world as compromising their own culture's ethical understanding of marriage and sex. These colonial framings set the stage for later activism and literary politics. Through these portrayals, the West wrote its own aesthetics, assumptions, and ethics onto Arab sexualities, all the while creating the West-East binary lens through which sexuality was read.

Ultimately, these colonial texts not only fetishize Moroccan men, framing them as objects, but also work to displace local moral vocabularies of desire with imported liberal, Western traditions. In doing so, the West effectively dictates which sexual selves can appear legible and which must remain unintelligible, foreshadowing the dilemmas contemporary queer Moroccans inherit.

Lived Moral Realities: Abdellah Taïa

Against this backdrop of epistemic and sexual colonization, lived Moroccan experiences reveal how queer subjects navigate and rework these layered moral vocabularies. This section shifts from the colonial gaze to Moroccan actors themselves, tracing how figures such as Abdellah Taïa (1973–) wrestle with authenticity, legibility, and belonging within a national and postcolonial moral landscape.

Taïa's body of work portrays the tensions produced when a Western ideal of an authentic, confessed self encounters Moroccan moral expectations of discretion and national loyalty. His literary persona provides a key example of how striving for authenticity can both claim dignity and undermine legibility within local moral vocabularies.

Orientalist cultural importations have long excluded Arabs from the West and demonized same-sex practices. This has set the scene for the modern protest against the West's right to Orientalist consumption. The most well-known and pioneering Moroccan literary activist to push back against Western sexual imperialism was Abdellah Taïa, whose works have been contested by both Moroccan society and Western academics. In his work, Taïa characterizes sexuality as something that must be confessed and made visible, portraying sexual liberation as a process of narrating one's desires openly and claiming a recognized identity. Taïa's body of work is largely published in French. He speaks to two audiences, advocating for both of his marginalized sexual identities: one in France, and one in Morocco. Taïa is trying to make space for himself in two places where he experiences sexual exclusion, attempting to justify himself to both the West and Morocco. In doing so, his words are strung across transnational norms of authenticity that ultimately fail to justify his arguments for sexual liberation to Arabs gay and straight alike.

Taïa utilizes anti-transnational rhetoric, marginalizing Moroccan identities in the postcolonial period. Transnationalism has no fixed definition, but it can be seen through relevant frameworks. In this context, I have selected Colin McFarlane's analysis of transnationalism as the processes and connections that unite "epistemologies," "spatialities," and moral interaction with politics.[23] In these locations, post-colonial dialogues seek to construct cultures that do not exist in isolation, but outside of imperial systems.[24] Thus, it is a deeply salient method of advocacy for the Moroccan people who navigate postcolonial ambivalences, strung between local communities and the experience of Western colonialism. Taïa neglects this method of advocacy. Throughout his work, he describes his "fascination with Western culture" outright.[25] He puts Morocco's name in quotation marks, and describes his home country as a "bordello"—in other words, a brothel.[26] Taïa's claims here do not just lack a reflection of nationalistic postcolonial pride that is meaningful in Moroccan culture today, but they also contest the nation's very being. Thus, Taïa positions himself outside the shared moral vocabulary of postcolonial–or national–belonging, failing to make himself appear authentic or legible within contemporary Moroccan culture.

Putting Morocco's name in quotations suggests more than an arguability to the question of homosexuality, but an illegitimacy to the nation's borders, society, and culture. This retraces Western hermeneutics that emerged in the colonial homoerotic tradition. Taïa's words mimic how the West sought to portray the Arab world as one without freedom, agency, and ethics. Pushed away by society, Taïa's stance precludes seeing nationalism and queer liberation as reconcilable, rendering him legible only as a Western proxy.[27]

Taïa's reliance on Western epistemologies of the self undermines his argument. First, Taïa presents himself as expressing his own deepest identity as a gay man, adopting a depiction of selfhood much like Trilling's authenticity. In the popular culture, Taïa adopts Western nomenclature to describe his sexual self, wanting to be referred to as "*mithli* (gay)," moving away from traditional Moroccan terminology such as "*shath jinsian* (a sexual anomaly)."[28] While this choice affirms Taïa's dignity in the West, in Moroccan contexts, this reads as a way to further marginalize the ways sexuality has historically been conceived and governed. Taïa makes himself legible within Western contexts, acting as a representative of the queer community; however, to Moroccans, he is only made legible as an instrument of the West's modern-day sexual colonization.

A Modernizing Movement

Taïa's trajectory is not the only way queer Moroccans navigate these pressures. Other forms of everyday negotiation suggest alternative paths that decenter authenticity as the primary measure of moral selfhood and experiment instead with subtler modes of legibility.

The ambivalences visible in these individual lives have pushed a new generation of activists to rethink how queer existence can be made morally intelligible. The next section examines how contemporary Moroccan activism experiments with forms of legibility that remain accountable to local moral vocabularies rather than to Western scripts of public authenticity.

Contemporary queer activism in Morocco operates in a field already saturated with colonial representations and national moral anxieties, yet it refuses to choose simply between Western-style visibility and silent erasure. By turning to practices such as coded graffiti, localized festivals, and platforms like *My Kali*, this section shows how activists craft legibility that is grounded in Moroccan moral vocabularies rather than in imported ideals of the authentic self.

Graffiti is one important instance of these new media in Morocco for queer visibility. Shifting away from the literary period of Taïa and activists like him, artistic activism today distinctly protects and cultivates the queer community. On the streets of many Moroccan cities, one can find graffiti reading "489," the number of the penal code in Morocco that prohibits same-sex sexual activity.[29] Graffiti as an art form takes on a public nature. Uncritical evaluations of graffiti might argue that graffiti publicizes queerness, producing Western-style expressions of sexuality. However, graffiti still threads a needle between public and private. 489-style graffiti has grown to be a genre of art that operates as a code, known most by those who are affected. Graffiti's power lies precisely in this ambiguity: it renders queer existence visible enough to signal solidarity, while remaining opaque enough to evade the publicity demanded by Western models of visibility. This marks a new cognizance of artist-activists who are searching for ways to make their sexual selves legible as visible and understood, yet private. In this way, graffiti allows queer Moroccans to claim social recognition without performing a Western-style authentic self, balancing legibility with a culturally grounded discretion. It is in this ambiguous opacity that activists reflect a traditional Islamic epistemic understanding that lays claim to sexual rights through privacy, which works within a decolonial national consciousness to create discreet but meaningful spaces of queer belonging.

Graffiti is not the only queer cultural medium that operates between public and private spaces. *My Kali*, an online queer magazine, expands the moral contestation between public and private into conversations of language, aesthetics, and community-building. Together, they reveal a shift from demanding recognition as authentic Western-style subjects toward cultivating spaces where queer Moroccans can redefine what counts as morally legible on their own terms.

While Moroccan graffiti and cultural collectives anchor activism in the material world, much new-age queer Moroccan activism lives online. One of the main cultural sources that works to channel online activism into lived communities is the pan-Arabist magazine *My Kali*. It frequently acknowledges the colonial history of sexual importation in its articles and activism, provoking authors who focus on the Maghrib to express their queerness in *dārija*.[30] For instance, it promotes "decolonial fests" like *Hardzazat*, which move away from the European-organized queer and anti-fascist underground spaces that often felt counterfeit to Moroccans.[31] Instead, it creates spaces for local cultural intimacy and development, whilst extending its borders towards a "'post-national' identity."[32] This does more than resist colonial residue; it generates new vocabularies and forms of selfhood, creating legible articulations of Moroccan sexuality in registers rooted in their own histories rather than imposed ones.

Almost every article in *My Kali* is directly addressed to the queer artistic community with the goal of revising the layered perception of sexuality in the Arab world. It depicts spaces and language as simultaneously Arab and queer, embodying a continual decolonial motif. In one article, "New Colors: The Kiss as a Transitional Station Between the Countries of the South and the Countries of the West (*alwān jadīda: al-qubla ka-mahatta intaqālīa bayna duwal al-janūb wa duwal al-gharb*)", an Arab artist recounts how his attempt to fulfill homoerotic desire through Western models of intimacy left him alienated, incomplete, and excluded from Western queer contexts.[33] Yet on returning to the Arab world, he discovers renewal: he describes how he and his partner "had [their] own

"Within these new forms of activism, this agency can be seen as Moroccans create indigenous sexual selves that navigate a complex sexual world on their own accord."

language (*kānat [lahum] lughatan khāsatan*)" that depicted the whole of the sexual self.[34] In this full depiction, we move away from the Western understanding that sexuality must be expressed publicly as an identity. Furthermore, the article critiques the perceived dominance of Western queer spaces, highlighting their inadequacy in authentically addressing the desires and experiences of Arabs, portraying how relationships must be fostered in organic spaces to make our sexual characters whole.

My Kali also presses transnational understandings of queerness, including for a Western audience. *My Kali*, with some works available in English, writes on the first queer-Arab glossary that publishes culturally-based understandings.[35] The glossary's explanations of its work and words are written in English, whilst the pan-Arab terms that describe the modern state of queer Arabs take Arabic definitions. This allows Western activist groups, international organizations, and scholars to understand better how queer Arabs make their own selves legible in authentic spaces, rewriting the colonial undercurrents and epistemologies found in traditional internationalist namings.

By reinterpreting activism through the lens of legibility and authenticity, one can understand which forms of activism create agency for marginalized Arabs, and which ones reinscribe Orientalist dynamics. The moral self in the postcolonial context threads together traditional Islamic and shifting Western moral epistemologies through centuries of layers of colonialism, demanding a negotiation that centers the agency of Moroccans. Within these new forms of activism, this agency can be seen as Moroccans create indigenous sexual selves that navigate a complex sexual world on their own accord.

These practices do not simply resist Western categories or nostalgically revive precolonial norms. Instead, they assemble new moral vocabularies in which queer life becomes legible through discretion, opacity, and locally meaningful forms of recognition, challenging the binary opposition between Western authenticity and Arab repression.

Reconstructing Orientalism and the Gay International

Seen through the lens of moral vocabularies, the history of queerness in Morocco questions the assumption that Orientalism is a one-way imposition of Western categories onto passive Arab subjects. Rather, Orientalism operates as a contested moral-epistemic field in which authenticity, legibility, and discretion are continually renegotiated.

Orientalism continues to define SWANA today. Over time, Orientalism has taken shape through new political discourses and cultural mediums, ebbing and flowing with conformity and resistance. This is the lived Orientalist reality. To understand the remnants of colonial sexuality, one must see Orientalism through the lived realities of the people who experience it.

As a shifting field, sexuality and Orientalism cannot be understood as a starkly binary discourse where West meets East. Arabs, in their lived realities, have negotiated the moral-epistemic frameworks that contour homoeroticism, both uprooting and embracing sexual-moral importations. Thus, we must see Orientalism not as a static discourse imposed from above, but as a contested and dynamic moral field where domination and resistance are entangled.

Returning to the Massad–Boone debate, these practices portray that neither the wholesale rejection nor the uncritical adoption of Western categories captures the complexity of lived queer realities. What is at stake is not only which identities are named, but which moral vocabularies govern how those identities—and refusals of identity—become thinkable.

Previously, scholars have framed Orientalism as a

binary interpretation of identity: straight or homosexual. Joseph Massad correctly identifies how these labels have become institutionalized in international organizations, thus internationalizing Western sexual norms. However, Massad's doctrinal reading of Said risks erasing Arab queer agency altogether. Joseph Boone, as an intervention to Massad, recognizes transnational identities, but he does so through Western categories of identity, undoing Massad's analysis of modern sexual colonialism. However, grounding our approach not in Western institutions but rather in localized expressions of selfhood leads us to new conclusions that reveal the limits of Said's Orientalism when uncritically applied to sexuality. Massad and Boone both reinscribe the colonial binary between "East" and "West" whilst positioning Orientalism as a lived discourse that continues to center the West.

In Morocco, Orientalism as a discourse lives through erotic catalogues, colonial literature, and ethnopornographic filmography. This Orientalist genre has not only represented Moroccan men but commodified and moralized them, writing Western aesthetics and ethics into local erotic life. Early activists like Abdellah Taïa mark how these frameworks create an ambivalent reality, forcing Arabs to navigate the imagined sexual haven of the West, postcolonial nationalism, and local alienation.

However, in a digitized age that has popularized histories of sexual colonialism, activism has synthesized the ambiguous realities that the postcolonial state embodies. Graffiti, art collectives, and festivals represent how Moroccans have sought to live out and develop homoeroticism using their own moral languages. These practices do not adopt Western terms, nor do they attempt to retreat to pre-colonial sexualities; rather, they thread public and private sexual worlds, prioritizing Arab agency throughout.

Thus, Morocco as a case study prompts a reframing of how scholars have interpreted sexuality and Orientalism. By framing sexuality through the moral self, we can best understand how erotic traditions are lived out. This poses moral-epistemic vocabularies as the site through which desire, recognition, and discretion are lived. The remnants of colonial sexuality persist, but they do not define queer Moroccans. In their negotiations, refusals, and reimaginings, we see a profound act of agency: the continual remaking of erotic life, where new moral vocabularies and queer futures are determined neither by Western categories nor imagined static traditions, but through Morocco's own layered histories and living traditions.

By centering the moral self rather than identity labels alone, this article reframes Orientalism as a lived struggle over the ethical terms of erotic life. Queer Moroccans' negotiations of authenticity and legibility reveal colonial residues that persist, but they also disclose sites of agency where new moral vocabularies and queer futures are being crafted from within Morocco's own layered histories.

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Measuring the Immeasurable

The Anholt Nation Brands Index and the Occlusion of Soft Power in Qatar

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In 2004, Simon Anholt published the inaugural issue of Place Branding and Public Diplomacy, a journal he founded to establish scholarly research on nation branding. In his "Editor's foreword" for the inaugural issue, Anholt introduced his theory of place branding and established the conceptual foundations of what would become the Nation Brands Index (NBI). Anholt argued that countries, like corporations and products, possess brand identities that fundamentally shape how others perceive them internationally and that these perceptions – far from being superficial concerns – directly influence economic outcomes and international relations.[1] This concept built directly upon political scientist Joseph Nye's theory of "soft power," proposed in 1990, which defined a country's ability to influence others states and foreign publics through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. However, Nye's

framework pointed out a critical challenge: soft power is difficult to quantify, as it operates through subjective and changing factors like cultural influence, foreign policies, and global perceptions.[2] To address this challenge, Anholt launched the NBI in 2005, the first systematic study that aims to measure national images through rigorous data collection.[3] Since then, the NBI has offered governments a systematic way to understand how they are perceived globally, and its results have come to influence public diplomacy strategies.

In the past decade, many resource-rich Middle Eastern nations have made massive investments in nation branding initiatives. Yet, a notable puzzle has emerged: these nations continue to rank relatively low on the NBI. In 2023, Turkey ranked 37th, Morocco 40th, the UAE 45th, and Qatar 50th among a total of 60 countries.[4] Over the past three decades, Qatar alone invested hundreds of billions of dollars in labor power, infrastructure development, international events, cultural institutions, and tourism promotion – all designed to improve its global image and project soft power. Qatar established the *Al Jazeera* media network in 1996, created Education City with international university campuses, and hosted major sport events such as the 2022 Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup.[5] Given the scale of these efforts, its low 50th ranking is striking.

This paper examines how Middle Eastern nations face a substantial input-output gap in nation branding, with Qatar exemplifying this troubling trend. In fact, this input-output gap confirms Nye's argument: soft power is a "two-way street that involves listening as well as talking," meaning that image is ultimately shaped by how audiences receive and interpret a country's actions, not simply by how much a country invests in projecting it.[6] This paper argues that Middle Eastern countries like Qatar will not be able to achieve effective nation branding merely through quick inputs of cash, impressive architecture, or the hosting of mega-sporting events. Instead, successful nation branding will require sustained narrative building to overcome deeply rooted biases in global perception. It is also essential to note, and Nye acknowledged, that the very tools we use to measure nation brand success may not adequately capture the effects of soft power.[7]

In short, this paper examines Qatar as a case study of this nation branding paradox and addresses two central questions: Why does Qatar's NBI ranking remain low despite the nation's substantial investments in soft power initiatives? What might it truly take for a nation like Qatar to "succeed" in nation branding, and how should we measure that success?

This research relies extensively on the NBI itself as a primary source, using data that goes until 2023, the most recent year for which comprehensive data is available, reflecting the fact that Anholt & Co. acquired and privatized the NBI in 2024. Few scholars have closely analyzed the NBI itself. This study aims to contribute to the pool of scholarship examining the methodology, assumptions, and limitations of nation branding and soft power measurement tools. As an alternative measurement approach, this paper also considers the Good Country Index (GCI), which Anholt launched in 2014 to assess countries not on perceptions but on objective contributions to global welfare.[8] Finally, it draws on an interdisciplinary body of scholarship on place branding and soft power in Middle Eastern contexts, especially those relating to Qatar's investments and measured perception outcomes.

In the following sections, I will first examine the NBI methodology and critical limitations of measuring soft power success. Second, I will analyze Qatar as a case study, detailing its significant nation branding investments and aiming to find out why, despite being one of the world's wealthiest nations, it still ranks near the bottom of 60 countries measured. Third, I will explore the attempts of scholars to explain this performance by positing theories including "soft-disempowerment nexus" and "ambush counter-marketing." It also takes into account Anholt's own recent, ambivalent, and in some ways contradictory statements about whether nations can successfully brand themselves – that is, whether changing a brand for the better is truly feasible. In the end, I will conclude by acknowledging the fundamental ambiguities in measuring and achieving soft power success and what we can learn from the Nation Brands Index.

"Qatar has carried out one of the most extensive and ambitious national branding initiatives in recent history."

The Anholt Nation Brands Index

In the mid-1990s, scholars began to recognize nation branding as a field of research. Since then, it has extensively changed how nations understand and manage their international images. Anholt first used the phrase "nation brand" in 1996 and defines it as the "sum of people's perceptions of a country across six areas of national competence."[9] He established nation branding as a coordination between international relations, public diplomacy, and marketing. More importantly, Anholt's contributions to the field go beyond conceptual development to institutional establishment. In 2004, he founded the academic journal Place Branding and Public Diplomacy for research on national reputation management. A year later, Anholt introduced the NBI – a quantitative measurement tool of nation images. The NBI has transformed the field by providing empirical survey data on global perceptions and transitioning from theoretical arguments to evidence-based analysis.[10]

The NBI utilizes a rigorous methodology to measure how nations are perceived internationally. As of 2023, each year, the index polls more than 60,000 adults aged 18 and above across 20 core panel countries that represent diverse geographical regions and levels of economic development. The sample represents more than 70% of the world's population and over 80% of its economy. Respondents in each panel country are randomly assigned 10 of the 60 measured nations to evaluate. This results in approximately 500 ratings per nation per panel country. The NBI selects the measured nations based on their political and economic importance in geopolitics, international trade, business, and tourism. The index assesses nations across six dimensions that collectively make up the Nation Brand Hexagon: exports, governance, culture and heritage, people, tourism, and investment and immigration. Finally, the index calculates the final NBI score as the average across all six dimensions.[11]

Although governments have widely accepted and adopted the NBI, the index has several methodological and conceptual limitations. Anholt himself acknowledged the ambiguity in nation brand measurement: short-term variations may reflect noise rather than meaningful change, and changes in nation images are extremely slow.[12] Moreover, the index measures perception rather than reality. This may lead to discrepancies between how a nation is perceived and how it is portrayed. This perception-reality gap makes it possible for nations to be penalized for negative stereotypes despite positive developments. This is especially problematic for nations that are rapidly changing or have a history of negative connections. In addition, in practice, the NBI sometimes blurs the line between analytical measurement and promotional propaganda, which could be appropriated to serve government public policy goals.

In an effort to address these constraints, Anholt developed the Good Country Index in 2014. It evaluates nations based on their contributions to global welfare instead of their perceived attractiveness. The GCI uses hard data from the United Nations and other international organizations across seven categories: science and technology, culture, international peace and security, world order, planet and climate, prosperity and equality, and health and well-being.[13] This alternative index specifically asks "which nation contributes most to the globe?" instead of "which nation seems to be the best?" In this way, the GCI complements the NBI to give a more comprehensive evaluation of nation images. These indices nevertheless remain valuable diagnostic tools for understanding current perceptions.

Qatar: Massive Investments, Modest Returns

Qatar has carried out one of the most extensive and ambitious nation branding initiatives in recent history. Early NBI editions did not include Qatar, mainly due to its limited international visibility beyond its energy market.[14] Yet, Qatar has exceptional wealth, frequently

ranking among the richest nations in the world in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita.[15] In the mid-1990s, the nation began its ambitious modernization program to transform Qatar from a regional oil and gas producer to a world-renowned center. Establishing the *Al Jazeera* news agency in 1996, hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup, and creating Education City with campuses of prestigious international universities are all examples of its calculated soft power strategy. Qatar had already invested hundreds of billions in nation branding efforts by the time it appeared on the NBI in the 2010s.[16] However, it consistently ranks in the lower ends of all 50-60 measured nations. In 2023, Qatar placed 50th out of 60 nations, which is a quite disappointing outcome.[17] This gap between resource expenditure and perception returns raises the major question: Why does Qatar's NBI ranking remain low despite its significant investments, and what might it take for Qatar to "succeed" in nation branding?

Qatar's Nation Branding Initiatives

To investigate this subject, it is crucial to consider how Qatar has operationalized its national image transformation. Qatar National Vision 2030 lays out its long-term branding initiatives to become an advanced society characterized by sustainable development. This vision has translated into large-scale investments in sectors including but not limited to education, media, sports, tourism, and infrastructure. Building on these efforts, Qatar's nation branding strategy centers on three transformative pillars designed to present the nation as a dynamic world hub.[18]

Qatar's first and most ambitious educational diplomacy project is the Education City. The project started in 1995 with the goal of transforming Qatar into a regional knowledge hub. Education City brought branch campuses of prestigious Western universities to Doha, including Georgetown, Carnegie Mellon, Northwestern, Texas A&M, and Virginia Commonwealth. The strategic intention serves multiple purposes: developing future elites who have experienced Qatari culture and have favorable attitudes toward Qatar, attracting international talent through generous scholarship programs, and branding Qatar as compatible with both Arab values and world-class education. This program also provides Middle Eastern students with a respectable alternative to studying in Western nations due to various limitations and concerns. The initiative has been successful in attracting a diverse international body: a survey of Qatar universities' international students found 48.7% came from Arab countries, 23% from Africa, and 15% from Europe, Canada, and the US. Education City thereby has strengthened Qatar's reputation as a forward-thinking educational leader in the region and beyond. Nevertheless, some research indicates that Education City's soft power returns are still modest. According to survey results, international students reported little social interaction with Qataris and a weak sense of belonging to Qatari society. Most importantly, students are unwilling to return to their home country mainly because of perceived lack of opportunities at home, rather than because of an attraction to Qatar. They become part of Qatar's local labor market rather than ambassadors overseas.[19] Overall, these dynamics reveal both Education City's benefits and limitations as a soft power tool.

Qatar's second major soft power initiative and by far its most consequential is the establishment of *Al Jazeera* in 1996. The news network transformed Arabic media by providing editorial autonomy never seen before in the region. The abolition of the Ministry of Information and lifting of censorship regulations allowed for this independence. With 120 former BBC professionals and a $140 million initial investment, *Al Jazeera* soon became the most powerful media outlet in the Middle East.[20] Today, the network reaches 430 million households across 150 countries.[21] The network aims to portray Qatar as a symbol of free speech and journalistic integrity, an image that sets Qatar apart from regional neighbors and challenges common stereotypes about Arab states. *Al Jazeera* has reported on significant events, including international conflicts and the Arab Spring. This coverage provided the Middle East an external voice in regional and global politics and helped establish Qatar as a thought leader.[22] However, these benefits also brought constraints. The network's editorial choices frequently caused diplomatic friction with neighboring nations.

Critics also argued that it functioned as an extension of Qatar's foreign policy.[23] *Al Jazeera*'s impact is double-edged: it strengthens Qatar's image as a champion of independent journalism while simultaneously raising political concerns about state control.

This tension is further exemplified by Qatar's most visible and ambitious nation branding effort to date: the 2022 FIFA World Cup. As the first World Cup held in an Arab nation, it provided an unprecedented platform to showcase Arab hospitality and challenge negative preconceptions about Middle Eastern nations. Qatar spent over $220 billion on infrastructure, including stadiums, metro system, airport facilities, and numerous hotels.[24] The event demonstrated the nation's ability to stage world-class events. Through the World Cup, Qatar aimed to expand its regional appeal, increase its influence within the Middle East and the wider world, and present its culture and hospitality to a worldwide audience.[25] The tournament has successfully attracted over one million visitors. It is particularly effective in reaching new audiences: a survey of tourists discovered that 77% were first-time visitors to Qatar, primarily from North Africa and the broader MENA region. Post-event surveys revealed significant perception changes: 94% of visitors viewed Qatar as "a safe place to visit," 91% considered it a competent host, and 82% expressed intentions to return.[26] However, the run-up to the World Cup also generated a lot of unfavorable media scrutiny. Major international media and human rights organizations brought attention to migrant worker abuses. This wave of naming and shaming successfully ambushed Qatar's branding strategy by redefining the event as one of labor exploitation rather than modernity. In this sense, the reputational risks associated with mega-sport events threatened the very image the country sought to project.[27]

As a whole, these initiatives reflect Qatar's comprehensive approach to nation branding, which uses media influence, educational prestige, and sporting spectacle to change international perceptions. Economically, Qatar wants to diversify its sources of income and lessen its reliance on limited oil resources. Diplomatically, the nation aims to project soft power and its image as an engaged international player and reliable mediator. Culturally, Qatar aims to portray itself as a modern and culturally authentic state. The ultimate objective is to transform Qatar from a little-known nation into a well-known global hub for business, culture, education, sports, and diplomacy.[28]

Qatar's NBI Performance: The Surprising Reality

Despite these massive investments and persistent efforts spanning over two decades, Qatar's ranking on the NBI reveals a surprising mismatch between input and output. Historical NBI data shows Qatar often ranking near 50th among 60 nations in the past few years.[29] When compared to the amount of expenditure, the stagnant NBI results over time have proven Qatar's branding outcomes to be neither significant nor sustained. Even more concerning is the pattern of stagnation in dimensions where Qatar has specifically targeted and heavily invested.[30] Comparative analysis shows that Qatar's NBI performance not only lags behind Western nations but also regional competitors. When Qatar does appear in regional analysis, its ranking is relatively lower than competitors like the United Arab Emirates. This gap implies that, at least according to the NBI framework, massive capital investment by itself does not successfully translate into improved international perception.[31]

It is essential to take into account the structural constraints and external pressures that continue to limit how Qatar is perceived internationally despite initiatives addressing multiple dimensions of the Nation Brand Index Hexagon. On the "Exports" dimension, Qatar's economy is still largely reliant on hydrocarbon exports, making up 95% of all exports and approximately 60% of its GDP.[32] As a result, Qatar is perceived as relatively less capable of innovative and diverse products outside of traditional energy commodities.[33] In terms of "Governance," the image is more complex. As stated in its National Vision 2030, Qatar has undergone substantial modernization and attained remarkable economic prosperity. However, the worldwide media has criticized the nation's monarchical political system and treatment of migrant workers (especially on the World Cup construction).[34] The "Culture and Heritage" dimension is more varied: the establishment of *Al Jazeera* in 1996 created large regional

media influence, while Education City's campuses and Islamic art museums have strengthened its cultural identity. Though genuine and authentic, Qatar's emphasis on mostly regional cultural identity generates less immediate global recognition among larger international audiences.[35] The "People" dimension is particularly interesting. Qatar aims to portray itself as an important destination for foreigners. This has instead resulted in an extreme demographic imbalance, with over 1.8 million foreign workers and only about 12% of the total population being Qatari citizens, leading to minimal international personal connections with citizens.[36] For "Tourism," Qatar is successful in pitching to high-end business events and sports tourism, even though this appeal has restricted mass-market visitors and broad-based awareness. Nevertheless, considering its modest size, this niche strategy aligns with Qatar's national capacity and preferences. Lastly, the "Investment and Immigration" dimension has conflicting results. Qatar successfully draws foreign investments and personnel as a regional business center. However, its long-term attractiveness is limited by controversies surrounding its migrant worker policies.[37] Ultimately, Qatar's uneven performance across the NBI dimensions demonstrates how ambitious branding campaigns in short time periods cannot fully overcome underlying economic and governance realities that continue to impact global perceptions.

The Good Country Index, which measures nations' contributions to global welfare rather than perceptions, further supports this troubling pattern. Among 174 nations, Qatar ranks about 100th across most dimensions. Its ranking is particularly low in "International Peace and Security" (134th) and "Culture" (118th), dimensions where Qatar made significant investments through mediation efforts and cultural infrastructure.[38] Given Qatar's active involvement in conflict mediation and humanitarian aid, this ranking is particularly surprising. This may indicate that observable contributions to global welfare do not translate into meaningful international assessments. The GCI thus confirms the NBI findings: Qatar's massive inputs are not leading to proportional recognition of either its contributions or its attractiveness.

Qatar: The Input-Output Gap

The substantial input-output gap is the most puzzling aspect of Qatar's nation branding case. This paradox validates Nye's warning that soft power is a "two-way street" that is equally likely to fail as to succeed.[39] Several factors may explain this gap.

First, there appears to be a significant difference between the perceptions of distinctive audience segments. According to research on foreign investor perceptions, associations are overwhelmingly positive among those who have firsthand experience with Qatar. Executives, diplomats, and tourists describe Qatar as prosperous and strategically located, praising its infrastructure and business environment. However, these positive views have not resulted in significantly higher NBI rankings across broader worldwide publics who do not have such direct exposure. Therefore, research demonstrates that actual experience dramatically enhances perception. This implies that Qatar's branding may be successful in attracting "visitors" in general but may not change the opinions of the general population who have never engaged with the nation.[40] Therefore, for Qatar to improve its nation brand, it must focus on bringing more people to experience the country, driving lasting perception change.

Second, certain NBI dimensions show improvement while others have not. In the "Investment and Immigration" dimension, Qatar has made notable progress that demonstrates the success of its focused strategies to improve the business climate and attract foreign investment and talent. The "Governance" dimension has also seen gains, as Qatar's role in international mediation has gained recognition. However, the "People" and "Tourism" dimensions remain weak, indicating that Qatar struggles to present a convincing image to mass international audiences.[41]

Third, in particular, the tourism dimension poses a challenge. When research participants, consisting of foreign investors, were asked how they view Qatar's nation brand in connection to the six dimensions of NBI, they hardly ever cite the nation's tourism appeal, despite hosting the World Cup and other major events like Formula One. This may reflect the fact that Qatar's tourism strategy prioritizes high-end, specialized segments rather than mass tourism. The country's

"....massive expenditure on media, infrastructue, and events does not translate into proportional improvements in broad-based perception metrics."

positioning as a business center and event destination, while adding economic value, may not translate into the type of aspirational tourist destination that generates higher NBI rankings.[42]

Fourth, ongoing controversies have also significantly damaged its international image. Qatar has specifically been accused of violating labor rights for migrant construction workers. Even though Qatar has made changes and worked with organizations like the International Labor Organization to address these problems, the negative media coverage likely offset gains from positive branding initiatives.[43]

Is Qatar's Nation Branding "Successful"?

This analysis raises a crucial question: is Qatar's nation branding "successful"? The answer depends on how we define success and whose perceptions we value. If the metric is its position in the NBI rankings, then Qatar's return on investment seems modest at best. If success means attracting foreign investment and talent, hosting prestigious mega-events, and establishing educational and diplomatic influence, then Qatar has made significant progress, though the NBI measurement might not adequately reflect this "success."

Taken together, Qatar's experience clarifies the complex relationship between nation branding inputs and quantifiable outputs. The case shows that massive expenditure on media, infrastructure, and events does not translate into proportional improvements in broad-based perception metrics. Although Qatar's approach has raised awareness and drawn visitors, it may not have fundamentally changed the underlying narrative that international audiences use to view Qatar. The input-output gap indicates that persistent, patient engagement in narrative building is necessary to overcome deeply rooted biases and stereotypes about the Middle East. In practice, this could mean prioritizing people-to-people diplomacy. Given firsthand experiences positively shifts perceptions in ways that media campaigns and infrastructure investments alone cannot, Qatar can focus on expanding programs that bring foreign publics into more direct contact with the country.

Theoretical Perspectives and Measurement Limitations

To understand the paradoxical outcomes observed in Qatar's nation branding efforts, several theoretical frameworks are instructive. Although the goal of Qatar's 2022 FIFA World Cup was to strengthen its soft power and global image, the tournament eventually turned into a platform for criticism rather than celebration. This phenomenon challenges conventional assumptions about the relationship between mega-sporting events and national image enhancement. Antoine Duval's notion of "ambush counter-marketing" offers a critical lens to analyze this change. Duval argues for a reverse logic: rather than promoting Qatar's national brand, the World Cup's global attention actually damaged the nation's reputation by associating the tournament to human rights violations. Headlines and campaigns that occurred prior to the World Cup, like "Qatar World Cup of Shame" and "Red Card for FIFA," are prime examples of how activists hijacked Qatar's intended narrative and turned the tournament's popularity from a positive asset into a negative liability.[44]

Paul Brannagan and Richard Giulianotti refer to this inverse of soft power strategy as the "soft disempowerment nexus." The authors argue that Qatar's strategy of relying on attracting global attention created the opposite effect. The visibility that Qatar sought became a weapon to expose the nation's human rights violations to global audiences. This soft disempowerment was not incidental but systematic. The ambush was successful precisely because the very mechanisms Qatar used to project power made it particularly vulnerable to reputational damage.[45]

This dynamic also supports Anholt's skepticism about nation branding as a viable strategy. Anholt has continuously argued that nations are evaluated based on their actions rather than words, rejecting the idea that nations can simply improve their reputations by advertising. His Good Country Index embodies this philosophy, which rates nations based on their actual contributions rather than other's perceptions. As Anholt stressed in his critique, in order for nation branding to succeed, nations must build long-term relationships based on trust and credibility through meaningful policy and behavior, not just aspirational marketing.[46]

However, Anholt's position is at times inconsistent. While he criticized nation branding as mostly ineffective and possibly misleading, he has simultaneously advised many governments and international organizations on how to manage their image and has built a profitable consulting business based on this very idea. This contradiction raises questions about the coherence of his theoretical stance.[47] Furthermore, Anholt admits that the increasing volatility in national images has made real-time reputation management expensive and stressful, especially in the social media age. This phenomenon casts doubt on the practical usefulness of nation branding efforts.[48]

The limitations of measurement tools further complicate our understanding of soft power and nation branding dynamics. The NBI relies on global public opinion surveys. However, nation branding strategies often target specific groups whose views may diverge from the general population, such as investors, tourists, students, and diplomats. Moreover, nation branding success may have a longer time horizon than what NBI's snapshot methodology captures.[49] This is especially crucial for relatively unknown nations that need to fundamentally alter pre-existing perceptions. Similarly, the GCI depends on aggregated data, which could obscure important variations and contextual elements. Both indices struggle to capture the complex, multi-dimensional nature of how nations are truly viewed by different global audiences in different contexts. Ultimately, Qatar's experience shows that the relationship between soft power initiatives and national image is far more nuanced than conventional wisdom has explored.

Conclusion

In the end, Qatar's paradox highlights the ambiguities inherent in measuring and achieving soft power and nation branding "success." Qatar's nation branding has greatly increased the nation's international visibility, as evidenced by its establishment of *Al Jazeera* as a regional media powerhouse, Education City with prestigious international campuses, and hosting of major events like the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Yet despite these achievements, Qatar consistently ranks near 50th out of 60 nations on the NBI. The case shows that building a "successful" nation brand may require sustained effort in order to overcome deeply rooted biases and gain genuine trust and credibility.

The measurement problem goes beyond Qatar's specific results. The NBI itself struggles to capture the nuanced, multi-dimensional nature of how different audiences perceive nations in different contexts. Qatar's strong performance in gaining visibility has not led to dramatic shifts in global perceptions as measured through the index. This discrepancy calls into question what "success" in nation branding truly means and whose perceptions really matter.

Beyond Qatar's specific case, it is also necessary to look into the NBI's commercial history. Anholt initially created the index through his consultancy in 2005, which later worked with GfK, a global data analytics company. In 2008, the partnership subsequently transferred to Ipsos, a multinational market research and consulting firm. These institutional changes reflect the growing commercialization of nation branding measurement. The recent privatization of the NBI in 2024 adds another layer of ambiguity to soft power and nation branding measurement. Under Anholt & Co. (Anholt's consulting firm), the index is now funded by subscribers rather than made public. This implies that only governments that subscribe have access to comprehensive data and detailed methodology, while scholars, journalists, and international organizations receive only very limited amounts of high-level data.[50] This raises questions about transparency and accountability. Will privatization obscure results by preventing the public from seeing negative

results? Will it enable governments to selectively present data that serves their propaganda goals rather than unbiased analysis? The shift from public good to private product threatens to transform the NBI from an analytical tool into a branding instrument itself, potentially undermining the very credibility that made it authoritative in the first place.

In the end, Qatar's experience highlights a fundamental reality about soft power: short-term investments cannot buy authenticity, and visibility does not guarantee positive credibility. The nation can build world-class stadiums, fund prestigious universities, and broadcast news to millions of people, but these expenditures alone are insufficient to change the narrative frameworks through which global audiences interpret the Middle East. As the NBI itself becomes a privatized commodity and less of a public analytical tool, we must consider whether Qatar's real challenge lies in moving up the NBI rankings or whether those ranking metrics truly matter.

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Necroviolence and the Work of Mourning

The Palestinian Body as a Territory for Zionist Conquest

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Even in death, even when no life is left in our dead bodies ... even when we have no power to move, no voice to speak, no ability to resist them ... even in death, they want to suffocate us ... they want to continue to uproot us. To uproot us from our graveyards is too inhumane, but they don't count us as human.

– Manar, a 39-year-old woman from East Jerusalem[1]

Manar's words echo the deeply disturbing sentiment, shared by many Palestinians, that not even death offers peace and dignity. Since 1967, the Israeli state has practiced an arbitrary policy of detaining Palestinian corpses, withholding the bodies of the dead as a form of collective punishment, and leveraging them as bargaining chips in political negotiations.[2] Israeli authorities retain these bodies after military insurgencies conducted on Israeli territory, popular uprisings, terrorist attacks, or, in rarer cases, following deaths in custody or Israeli prisons.[3] From 1967 until the Second Intifada (2000–2005), these corpses were buried in "cemeteries for enemy combatants," or what Palestinians refer to as maqaber al-arqam – the cemeteries of numbers – in reference to the systematic way in which bodies are carelessly stacked atop one another in plastic bags, marked only with numbers, without the

consent or awareness of family members.[4] Starting in the 2000s, Palestinian bodies were held in morgues primarily at the Israeli National Center of Forensic Medicine in Abu Kabir, Jerusalem. Located in undisclosed military zones in the upper Galilee and the Jordan valley, the cemetery of numbers embodies what anthropologist Randa Wahbe describes as "the *post-mortem* imprisonment of bodies," where Palestinians are "criminalized beyond death."[5] Burial sites are no longer viewed as sacralized places but are instead managed through the logic of settler-colonial domination and carceral politics. This view is additionally striking in Jerusalem, where funerals are subjected to harsh conditions imposed by the Israeli police. Families are dictated the burial location, the number of attendees is limited to 20 to 40 people, the use of phones is strictly prohibited, and funerals are forced to take place between midnight and one o'clock, as if the deceased were criminals, their deaths unworthy to be mourned.[6] If the imposed conditions are not met, families risk losing a financial deposit of 20,000 to 25,000 shekels (roughly €5,000 to €6,250), which they must provide beforehand.[7]

The instrumentalization of spaces of death and dying is imbricated with the broader project of Zionist colonialism, one that aims to uproot Palestinians from their ancestral homeland by denying their existence as a people and as victims of ongoing and historical oppression. This rhetoric, mediated by racialized frameworks, was already seen in European Zionist circles in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. According to Chaim Weizmann, the first president of the State of Israel, Palestine was a land without a people: "The British told us that there are some hundred thousand negroes [Kushim] and for those there is no value."[8] A closer examination of this statement reveals that Zionists were not unaware of the existence of an indigenous population; rather, they did not recognize them as *a people*. This logic positions Jews as racially superior to the uncivilized indigenous Arab inhabitants, reinforcing the foundational Zionist myth of Jews as the 'Chosen People' with a divinely sanctioned claim to the Holy Land. As Palestinian theorist Fayez Sayegh understands it, racism is "the basic motivation for Zionist colonization and statehood."[9] By

Disclaimer from the Author

"Throughout this paper, I have purposefully opted to use the word 'martyr' instead of 'Palestinian dead' or 'deceased.' This is a deliberate choice that seeks to counter scholarship which censors Palestinian voices through the use of ostensibly 'neutral' terminology in the guise of objectivity. It was therefore important to use the language employed by Palestinians themselves. While martyrdom has historically referred to Palestinians killed by the Israeli state in active struggle, it has since expanded to include those killed for their Palestinian identity as a result of exile and displacement. As this paper shows, the veneration of the martyr is a deliberate act of dignity restoration, situated within the broader framework of anticolonial resistance against the Israeli necrocarceral state. To substitute this term would be to strip the dead of the meaning their communities ascribe to them — an act of symbolic violence I am unwilling to perform."

"isolating themselves [Jewish settlers] from the Arabs in Palestine, and later on, by evicting the Arabs from their homeland," Zionism mobilizes racism to expel Palestinians from their homeland – and humanity – negating centuries of individualized and collective suffering under colonialism.[10]

Understanding how Israel wields and inflicts violence on Palestinian bodies demands an exploration beyond life and land annexation to include the politics of death and mourning. Expanding upon Michel Foucault's notion of *biopower* – the aspects of life governed by power – Achille Mbembe conceptualizes *necropolitics* as the "subjugation of life to the power of death" in its ability to "deeply reconfigur[e] the relations between resistance, sacrifice, and terror."[11] Put otherwise, the state's ultimate expression of sovereignty resides in its ability to dictate who is able to live and who must die. In what he terms "necropower," Mbembe highlights how the spatial politics of colonial occupation underpin terror in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.[12] Under a regime of "vertical sovereignty," where power is exerted not only on land, through military checkpoints, illegal settlements, demolitions, and the separation of traffic networks, but also from above with assault helicopters, satellites, and facial recognition drones, Mbembe demonstrates

how necropolitical technologies are mobilized to create "death-worlds," imposing a unique form of living conditions which confer upon Palestinians the status of "living dead."[13] While Mbembe's scholarship on necropolitics remains a crucial theoretical framework for this essay, I privilege Jason De Léon's idea of *necroviolence*, which he defines as "violence performed and produced through the specific treatment of corpses that is perceived to be offensive, sacrilegious, or inhumane by the perpetrator, the victim (and her or his cultural group), or both."[14] This subtle yet critical distinction carries significant theoretical weight: Mbembe's necropolitics risks rendering the colonized as passive subjects consigned to "death-worlds," where no alternative for resistance is possible, while De Léon's framework foregrounds the relationally embedded dimensions of violence – dimensions that, in targeting the sacred, provoke its defense. This distinction positions Palestinians as active resistors rather than passive "living deads."[15] Such differentiation allows for a reading of unrecognized methods of resistance, enabling engagement with the politics of *karameh* – dignity – as theorized by Randa Wahbe.[16] Additional attention is devoted to dismantling Eurocentric narratives of suffering, which negates the cultural, historical, and political dimensions of the "other's" suffering by "individualizing" it.[17] While this essay is primarily guided by ethnographic interviews with martyrs' families, it aims to inscribe these personal testimonies within a broader analysis of how necroviolence produces *collective* suffering.

The cemetery of numbers and the intentional withholding of Palestinian bodies in morgues are not the only means through which Israel controls Palestinians through death. The performance of burial rites, their geography, and Palestinians' access to them – particularly in East Jerusalem – effectively encapsulate this necropolitical dynamic, where death is weaponized as a form of collective punishment towards both the dead and living. While this essay primarily focuses on the management of spaces of death and dying, I briefly discuss necropolitics in the context of the living, particularly in regard to carceral architecture. In sum, this essay aims to demonstrate how necroviolence functions as a cornerstone of Zionist colonialism to erase Palestinian presence, and how Palestinians have resisted Israel's violence against the dead. To illustrate this, I will first examine the cited reasons and legal framework that enable the settler state to withhold the corpses of Palestinian martyrs and regulate their burial. Then, I address specific case studies to illustrate the colonial criminalization of commemoration, burial, and mourning. Finally, I analyze how Palestinian civil society, and the families of martyrs and those passed away, have responded to Israel's regime of necroviolence.

Methodology

To address the ethnographic limitations posed by my inability to conduct on-the-ground research in Palestine, I interviewed anthropologists Samirah Jarrar and Clémence Vendryes, whose research on the desecration of Palestinian cemeteries closely aligns with the focus of my essay. Both generously provided valuable guidance and ethnographic insights acquired from their fieldwork in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Additionally, this essay draws upon legal rulings from various Israeli judicial bodies, reports from Palestinian NGOs, and relevant scientific literature to support its analysis.

Court Decisions: The Legality of Criminalizing Martyrdom

The Counter-Insurgent Narrative of the Palestinian Dead

Israel is, alongside Russia, one of the only countries that legally permits the retention of bodies as part of its broader counterinsurgency program.[18] Derived from Article 133(3) of the 1945 British Emergency Regulation – enacted to suppress anticolonial revolts during the final years of the British Mandate – the law states that "a military commander may order that the corpse of a person be buried in a location, time and by a person of their choosing."[19] Yet, since 1967, the practice of withholding martyr bodies has undergone various shifts, evolving from *ad-hoc* applications such as burying martyrs in mass graves after significant episodes of uprisings, to an increasingly institutionalized practice, grounded in Israeli legislative and executive

decisions, and sanctioned by an acquiescent judiciary. The first shift occurred in 1994, after a suicide attack perpetrated by Hisham Ismail Hamad on November 11, 1994.[20] Affiliated with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad movement, Hamad detonated an explosive vest, killing himself and three Israeli soldiers at a military checkpoint in the illegal settlement of Netzarim in the occupied Gaza Strip.[21] Since then, the practice of withholding the bodies of Palestinians who conduct suicide attacks, or what Palestinians often refer to as *ameliyeh istishadiyeh* – martyr operations – has become systematic. In the 1990s, a number of these operations were carried out by the Islamic Jihad Movement and Hamas in protest of the Oslo Peace Process negotiated by the Palestinian Authority (PA), which they deemed as illegitimate and a betrayal of the Palestinian cause due to its compromises with Israel.[22] In 2004, this practice was codified by a directive issued by then-Israeli Attorney General Menachem Mazuz, in which he stated that "exceptional justifications" may be applied for detaining corpses in cases of "a concrete prisoner exchange deal with enemy groups."[23] However, while prisoner exchange deals occurred regularly between Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt following the 1948, 1967, and 1973 wars, historian Stéphanie Latte Abdallah contends that these were "virtually nonexistent with Palestinian parties and the PLO" as the PLO was considered an "enemy group" and thus an illegitimate political negotiator "outside the law of war."[24]

The second shift occurred after a wave of individual attacks against Israelis in Jerusalem in October 2015, an episode referred to by the Israeli and international press as the "Knife Intifada" and commonly known among Palestinians as the "Small Uprising (*habbeh*)."[25] To quell the uprising, the Israeli cabinet enacted a repressive punitive campaign, withholding *en masse* the bodies of Palestinian martyrs (*shuhada*) and ordering demolitions of the martyrs' families' homes. This retaliatory practice was most evident in the case of Bahaa Alayan, a 23-year-old native of Jabal al-Mukabeer in occupied Jerusalem who was killed on October 13, 2015 after he attacked a bus in the illegal settlement of Armon HaNatziv and left three Israelis dead.[26] In retaliation, the Israeli authorities demolished Bahaa's family home. Meanwhile, his body was seized at the scene of the attack and placed in a police morgue for ten months. For Bahaa's father, Muhammad Alayan, the absence of his son's body suspended any chances of a proper mourning and burial – the absence of a physical confirmation looming over Muhammad's grief, rendering closure impossible.

Neglected Bodies as Ransom

In 2017, the amended Counterterrorism Law legalized the practice of withholding bodies, this time on national security grounds, enabling the police to delay the release of martyr bodies and restrict burial rites under the pretext of maintaining "public order."[27] Withholding corpses violates Article 130 of the Geneva Convention, which obliges states to "ensure that internees who die are honorably buried, if possible to the rites of the religion to which they belonged, and that their graves are respected, properly maintained, and marked in such a way that they can always be recognized."[28] Israel blatantly violates international law, even as a signatory to the Convention since 1951. On October 17, 1999, a military commission convened to improve the identification system for martyrs' bodies reaffirmed the Israeli army's full custodial responsibility over the deceased, from the moment of death to the burial, even when interred in civilian cemeteries such as Beersheva.[29] Israel's inhumane practices fully came to light in 1994, when the Supreme Court ordered the Army Rabbinate to help locate the body of Bassem Sobeh, missing since 1984 and presumed to be buried in the Adam Bridge cemetery of numbers in the Jordan Valley.[30] Following this, the Rabbinate admitted that the headstones had only been placed recently, not at the time of burial, indicating that the deceased were originally interred anonymously.[31] Both the commission and lawyers representing families seeking the return of their relatives' remains reported additional disturbing elements after visiting the cemetery of numbers. They described scenes of mass negligence: bodies buried hastily, without proper separation, at times even on top of one another. They were wrapped in plastic bags, marked with numbers. Oftentimes, identification was impossible as the ink faded over time, bones became mixed, and some human remains even surfaced from the ground due to shallow internment.[32]

The Israeli state has bureaucratized death, requiring families petitioning for the return of their loved one's body to prove that the remains are being held by Israeli authorities. This rule further complicated matters for those detained before 1976 because no central registrar was created to record their names, as cases were under the jurisdiction of the police, private institutions, or the National Institute of Insurance until the creation of the Army Rabbinate's Department of Identification and Inhumation on September 1, 1976.[33] Moreover, after providing the location of the bodies, families are asked to provide positive DNA results. Issa Zawahareh's case exemplifies the bureaucratic nightmare imposed on Palestinian families as they fight for dignity and closure. After disappearing from his home in 1990, a Palestinian organization in Lebanon reported that Zawahareh had been killed on February 3, 1990 in southern Lebanon alongside two combatants during an armed confrontation with the Israeli Army.[34] Following a petition filed by Zawahareh's mother in November 1992, the prosecutor affirmed that he had been buried in tomb 245 in the cemetery of numbers located in the Golan Heights, 11 days after his death. However, DNA testing after exhumation determined that the remains were not his. The Israeli court concluded, on information provided by the army, that landslides had displaced Zawahareh's remains into neighboring tombs.[35] In response, an injunction was filed at the behest of the family requesting additional DNA tests, all of which came back negative. Zawahareh's case underscores how Israel instrumentalizes bureaucratic procedures to withhold not just bodies, but the grieving process itself.

It is crucial to recenter the role of the judiciary, especially the Israeli High Court of Justice (HCJ), in enabling these practices. According to a 2019 report published by the Jerusalem Legal Aid and Human Rights Center (JLAC), the HCJ's "failure to outlaw the policy, repeatedly approving the army's decision to withhold bodies as a proportional and reasonable measure" has greatly legitimized necroviolence as a sanctioned component of state policy.[36] Such a conclusion is derived from the HCJ's refusal to examine the legality of the practice until its 2017 decision, in which it ruled that "neither the police nor army were authorized to withhold corpses, either for security reasons or as bargaining chips."[37] This precedent was overturned two years later, while a 2018 Knesset law allowing the police to withhold the bodies of those killed by the IDF and impose strict burial conditions went unchallenged by the HCJ. The Palestinian NGO Al-Haq contends that, although this law formally applies to the Israeli police, "the practice of withholding corpses is also exercised by the Israeli army against Palestinians across the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT)."[38] According to a 2023 report published by the UN Special Rapporteur to the OPT, as of May 2023, Israeli authorities were withholding the bodies of 125 Palestinians, among whom 13 had died in Israeli detention.[39] Other sources indicate that about 300 Palestinian and Arab martyrs – Lebanese, Syrians, and Jordanians who participated in armed revolts against Israel, primarily in the 1970s-80s – remain in the cemetery of numbers.[40]

Racialized Bodies: A Territory for Zionist Conquest

Anthropologist Samirah Jarrar highlights that under Israel's "counter-insurrectional" rhetoric, which aims to frame the practice of withholding corpses as an "anti-terrorism" measure, lies a dimension of collective punishment, aimed at "dissuad[ing] Palestinians from partaking in uprisings."[41] Jarrar continues by stating that "Palestinians are aware of this [logic] of collective punishment, [which constitutes] an additional pain and burden."[42] The Palestinian body thus becomes a *territory* of conquest, an arena for the Israeli state to express its ability to dictate who lives and who dies, as terror has become "a way of marking aberration in the body politic."[43] Understanding this logic requires attention to how the Israeli state's racialization practices, which systematically categorize Palestinians as inherently dangerous, criminal or subhuman, render their lives expendable and their deaths inconsequential. In other words, "terror and killing [have] become the means of realizing the already known *telos* of history," which for the Israeli state amounts to the creation of an ethno-nationalist Jewish state, as reflected in David Ben-Gurion's October 1937 letter to his son, Amos, in which he wrote, "We must expel the Arabs and take their place."[44] Conquest is

"In colonial contexts, maintaining a cemetery becomes a form of visibility and survival, where genealogy inscribes belonging to a contested land."

no longer confined to controlling the living through carceral politics; it now operates at the intersection of race, land, and necroviolence. In Foucauldian terms, racism, above all, permits the exercise of biopower, regulating "the condition for the acceptability of putting to death," by denying the humanity of the 'other.'[45] Racialization, then, is not merely a backdrop to Israeli policy; it is its organizing logic.

Israel's logic of racialization is evident in its framing of Palestinian martyrs as "terrorists." In 1995, the Israeli State Attorney's office refused a petition to release the body of Abbas, killed during an operation in 1994.[46] Classifying him as a "terrorist," the state declared that his body would remain withheld and buried in a military-designated site until the remains of "a missing [Israeli] soldier, Sa'dun, were located and returned to his family for proper burial."[47] This response illustrates how the racialization of Palestinian as enemies of the state does not cease at death – it is precisely through its denial of dignity towards the dead that Israeli state enacts one of its most insidious mechanisms of domination. By rendering families "indebted" via the repatriation of their loved ones' corpses, the occupying state's surveillance system surpasses life, imbricating itself into the management of the afterlife. The racialized Palestinian body becomes an instrument, wielding value only when it can be leveraged to meet political demands. The aforementioned cases illustrate that Zionist colonialism mobilizes necropolitics by criminalizing martyrs and their families, neglecting their bodies, and using them as bargaining chips. While Israel conceals this in an extensive, and at times ambiguous, legal framework, it is crucial to remember that "colonial warfare is not subject to legal and institutional rules."[48] In the colony, the subaltern's condition is dictated by terror as violence provides the structure for supreme rule over the "absolute enemy."[49]

Desacralizing Spaces of Death

Secularizing Cemeteries

Cemeteries are not only a place of eternal remembrance; they are a symbolic representation of the social order, etching the cultural and religious values of the living. In colonial contexts, maintaining a cemetery becomes a form of visibility and survival, where genealogy inscribes belonging to contested land. For Palestinians living under Israeli occupation, Saree Makdisi conceptualizes a "double erasure," wherein Palestinian presence is initially eliminated, followed by the systemic removal of all traces prior to their existence.[50] Rather than building over the indigenous society, Zionist architecture seeks to remove historical records, advancing its ultimate vision of a homogenous Jewish state. As the Israeli historian Israel Shahak writes, cemeteries and tombstones were all wiped, "so that literally a stone does not remain standing, and visitors are passing and being told that 'it was all desert.'"[51] Thus, when discussing the necropolitics of the settler state, the desacralization and destruction of burial sites can be analyzed as a primary battleground for territorial land grab. To illustrate this, I will focus on two important Palestinian sites: the Mamilla and Yosefiya cemeteries.

Nestled in the west of Jerusalem (*Al-Quds*), the Mamilla cemetery is a Muslim burial site whose origins trace back more than 1,400 years.[52] As a resting place for the Prophet's Companions (*sahabah*), scholars (*ulama*), as well as thousands of Muslims and Christian soldiers from the pre-Islamic and Crusader eras, Mamilla is a venerated site.[53] Over the centuries, many mythological beliefs have woven themselves into the history of Mamilla cemetery. Among these, Palestinian-Jordanian historian Kamil al-Asali notes that the name *Ma'man Allah* is a modern echo of the ancient phrase "Water from Allah."[54] In 2004, however, the Jerusalem municipality started its preliminary

groundwork for the construction of the Museum of Tolerance, otherwise known as Israel's Center for Human Dignity, on the grounds of the Mamila cemetery.[55] This project led to mass excavations, resulting in the displacement of ancient burials and prompting mass outrage by the descendants of those interred. In response, the HCJ upheld the legality of the museum, emphasizing its intended purpose to "link past, present, and future in upholding the basic rights of the individual as a supreme value of human life and in the regimes of peoples and states."[56] The court's reasoning reveals a deeper contradiction in its justification for the site's location, asserting: "It is no surprise that he [Simon Wiesenthal] chose to realize the idea in Jerusalem, as the capital of Israel and of the Jewish people."[57] This statement illustrates the occupying state's racializing logic of elimination. By conflating the historical presence of Judaism with Israel's supreme right to the land, the court effectively evicts Palestinians from the Old City, inscribing a narrative of eternal Jewish ownership. While the Jewish geography of Jerusalem is sacred and must be safeguarded to instill in the public the idea of human dignity, Palestinian bodies are utterly inconsequential, because the other's history is to be obliterated, erased, and forgotten.[58]

Similarly, the reclassification of Yosefiya cemetery as a "green" urban space follows identical practices of dispossession.[59] The cemetery is located in East Jerusalem and dates back to the Ayyubid dynasty. Its desecration began on March 31, 1974, when approximately 274 acres of land surrounding the Old City walls were declared a "national park."[60] The Yosefiya cemetery lies along the eastern Old City walls, within the broader Bab al-Rahmeh cemetery, and sections of both burial sites were destroyed to make way for a "Biblical Park." In 2004, then-head of the Jerusalem Municipality, Uri Lupolianski, issued an administrative order to destroy several graves within the cemetery.[61] Efforts intensified in 2014 and 2020, when twenty graves, belonging to martyrs killed during the Six-Day War, as well as Yosefiya's historic stairway and stonewall, were demolished.[62] While legal petitions have been filed by Muslim Jerusalemites to halt further exhumation and construction, the Israeli Magistrate Court dismissed these claims, enabling the project's steady expansion, including the construction of a parking lot and a "Biblical Trail," which cuts through the entire cemetery. In reclassifying a cemetery as a 'green' space, anthropologist Cléménce Vendryes argues, this project "strips [Yosefiya] of its religious and cultural identity, neutralizing it in both the landscape and collective imagination."[62] This colonial logic becomes even more apparent in Israeli maps, such as the Jerusalem Development Authority's "The Old City of Jerusalem Accessibility Map": the Jewish cemetery on Mount Olives is delineated in grey – rendering obvious its presence as a cemetery – while the two Muslim cemeteries, Yosefiya and Bab al-Rahmeh, are depicted as "green" spaces.[63]

The cases above are a microcosm of the struggle between the "Zionization" versus "Palestinianization" of landscapes. As understood by French sociologist Henri Lefebvre, domination expresses itself in who produces and is represented in urban space, while those excluded find alternative solutions to resist.[64] As landscape "embodies competition over legitimacy of expression," the Zionist state understands that creating a hegemonic landscape, by Judaizing the Holy City, is the only way for it to uproot Palestinians.[65] Yet, it is not enough to solely view the desecration of cemeteries through the prism of "the politics of identity," as argued by Yitzhak Reiter.[66] While the contestation of religious, and thereby identity, narratives is significant in the construction of the Museum and the "Biblical Trail," it is important to recenter the logic of racialization, underpinned by Zionist necroviolence. As Randa Wahbe argues, the appointment of Bab Al-Rahmeh's reconstruction under the Nature and Parks Authority rather than the Burial Affairs Department in the Ministry of Religious Services demonstrates "a lack of acknowledgment that Palestinian cemeteries are legitimate or sacred sites of burial."[67] Even in death, considered as the "quintessential cosmic issue" which "brings us all face to face with ultimate questions about what it means to be human," Palestinian lives are still not equal to Israeli lives, with the remains of the dead exhumed by bulldozers in defiance of their family and loved ones' wishes.[68] Israel's "territorial self-fashioning" is even more disturbing when considering

the sanctity of cemeteries in Islam, which forbids the exhumation of corpses except under exceptional circumstances.[69] As all three cemeteries are classified as holy Islamic endowments (*waqf*), the appropriate jurisdiction for deciding their fate is the Shari'a Court. Nevertheless, Yitzhak Reiter argues, the High Court decided the case "while ignoring the shari'a position" because they were convinced that "the president of Shari'a Court [was] biased and motivated by an ideological agenda that contradicts the state of Israel."[70] This rhetoric aligns itself in a continuum of discrimination against Palestinian Muslims. As Clémence Vendryes underscores, the desecration of cemeteries by Israeli authorities reveals a double standard as "Christian Palestinian cemeteries are not treated the same."[71] This is likely attributed to the Israeli state's intimate foreign policy position with the Christian West, which compels it to maintain favorable relations with its Christian Palestinian population.

The Topolitology of Mourning

Reflecting on the intrinsic character of mourning, Judith Butler writes, "I think [mourning] furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility."[72] Simply understood, mourning anchors a profound sense of interconnectedness, creating a political community through shared vulnerability and loss. Grief propels a language of outrage by challenging the very notion of autonomy and control, for no one chooses the pain that follows. For Palestinians, this is compounded by the weight of historical oppression, creating an outcome of collective mourning and outrage shaped by the society's identification with the violence enacted on martyrs – an affective force that Israel recognizes and therefore seeks to repress by restricting funeral gatherings.

This phenomenon can be further understood by invoking Jacques Derrida's "topolitology of mourning."[73] He argues that "there is no politics without an organization of the time and space of mourning, without a topolitology [spatial logic] of the sepulcher [grave], without an anamnesic and thematic relation to the spirit as ghost, without an open hospitality to as ghost whom one holds, just as he holds us, hostage."[74] Derrida's analysis underpins the manner in which politics is founded on controlling the space (*topos*) of the dead; however, simultaneously, "ghosts" whose deaths are unacknowledged and improperly mourned persist in haunting the present, holding us hostage. This modality of violence, as neglecting the dead and dying, constitutes the ultimate form of domination, and questions the very legitimacy of the colonial state by reminding us of the division between the "chosen" sacred Jews and the unmournable, profane Palestinians. As Fanon notes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, "it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging or not belonging to a given race, a given species."[75] It is precisely this racial logic of belonging that determines whose death is mourned and whose death is forgotten – for if belonging to a race determines one's place in the world, it equally determines one's place in death. Following this, I argue that grievability is a precondition for recognition as a life that matters.

For Palestinians, such dispossession deprives them of their rituals and reveals the inscription of necropower, as their humanity is violated and death and dying becoming a tool for Zionist colonization. While the Mamilla, Bab al-Rahmeh, and Yosefiya cemeteries exemplify the historical, political, and legal maneuvers used to demarcate spaces of death, I now turn to testimonies that speak to the everyday ordeals of mourning. Salwa recounts how she was unable to visit her deceased mother, Nuha, who lived and passed away in East Jerusalem. Although only twenty minutes away, Salwa had to apply for a permit to enter the Holy City, as she lost her permit once she began renting an apartment in the West Bank. Despite numerous attempts, the Israeli state refused to issue IDs for three of Nuha's children, preventing them from paying proper respects to their mother. "The feeling of knowing that your mother is lying dead in your house, while you are unable to reach her and kiss her before she departs, paralyzed me... I was totally anesthetized... I wanted to rush to her, but I knew there was a barrier, they wouldn't let us," says Salwa.[76] Nuha's death unsettled her community, as Islamic burial rites require that

the body be laid to rest within one or two days. After unsuccessful appeals with Palestinian officials, the family had no alternative but to make the painful decision to let Nuha's neighbors proceed with her burial, fulfilling religious custom at the cost of her children's absence. While applying for a burial permit, the family discovered that Nuha had lost her Israeli right "as an officially recognized Jerusalemite," as she had moved into her daughter Salwa's apartment after suffering a bad fall and stayed there for three months before her death.[77] As Nuha was born in Jerusalem, it was of utmost importance that she be buried on her ancestral land; the Israeli state's decision to "delete" her right to burial illustrates a gross attempt to erase Palestinian genealogy, as gravestones are markers of generational and geographic belonging. Nuha's loved ones were resolute in honoring her wishes, deciding to bury her body without a proper burial certificate. However, on their way to the cemetery, they were stopped by an Israeli security patrol accompanied by soldiers, who requested an official burial authorization. In light of the authorities' intransigence, the mourners were compelled to leave, fearing that additional resistance would brand them as "rebels" or "political activists" – or even worse, affect their Jerusalemite residency rights. With limited time remaining, the group opted to bury Nuha's body at Bab Al Asbat cemetery, next to her house, at 3:40 in the morning. Fearing that even a gravestone bearing her name might provoke reprisals against her family and community, Nuha was buried anonymously, rendering her invisible to the Israeli surveillance apparatus.[78] The harrowing journey of Nuha's body echoes the tribulations of countless Palestinians, whose deaths are entangled in a system of colonial control. Palestinian scholar Nadera Shalhoub Kevorian writes, "What is provocative, however, is a complex dynamic of simultaneous living and dying, where the deceased's identity and personhood are eclipsed by the anonymity in which they are presented."[79] The Palestinian body is intrinsically profane, considered a security threat, unless it is regulated by official Israeli permits. This renders Palestinians to remain in a constant "state of disappearing" – even in death.[80]

Israel's biopolitical technologies of fear and securitization are mediated by its military checkpoints, gates, and roadblocks, which control and manage every step of Palestinian movement. As of March 2025, there are 849 permanent "movement obstacles" in the West Bank, according to the UN, none of which apply to the Jewish population.[81] When Seta, a mother of three girls, passed away suddenly in her sleep while visiting her mother in a West Bank village near Jerusalem, the journey to lay her to rest was obstructed by the difficulties imposed by Israel's checkpoints. To bring Seta's body home to Jerusalem for proper burial, her husband, Musa, had to smuggle her body through a military checkpoint: "I was driving my car, with my wife sitting in the back seat, dead. [At the checkpoint], I presented my ID card and my permit to be in Jerusalem to the soldier. He asked me to step out, checked the trunk of the car, and then allowed us to pass. I brought her back home."[82] Musa's testimony illustrates how the Israeli state inscribes power over the dead body by regulating the *topos* of burials. Seta's family was only able to bury her in Jerusalem, in "the church that she loved," because Musa lied about her place of death, effectively circumventing the biopolitical Israeli bureaucracy.[83] Without this courageous act of defiance, Seta's family's grief would have been indefinitely suspended, caught in a labyrinth of paperwork required to justify the *topos* of her rest. The pervasiveness of such surveillance relies on the visibilization of carceral control as the military checkpoints act as an open-air prison, filtering movement based on "security threats." In this sense, carceral architecture is regarded as both an "enclosure" and "exposure," simultaneously *containing* bodies and using them as *spectacle*.[84] Surveillance is no longer about physical containment, but it must also produce visibility, creating a spectacle that naturalizes racialized violence by rendering it a daily routine and a justification for maintaining order. Violence and profanity against the dead are strategically displayed to reinforce the biopolitical order, maintaining Palestinians in a constant state of fear.

Resistance: Reclaiming Topos and Karameh

The cases above reveal the particularity of life under Israeli colonial occupation, where the disciplinary,

biopolitical, and necropolitical converge to define Palestinian bodies as the ultimate threat and locus of domination. Yet, Israel's use of death and dying as a point of control does not go unresisted. Through individual and collective actions, Palestinians actively reject the sovereign's efforts to consider their lives as disposable, reclaiming the topolitology of mourning and placing the dignity of the dead at the center of their resistance. As Palestinians live under spatial segregation – their territory constantly fragmented due to the sealing off and expansion of illegal settlements – funerals are amongst the only public spaces where they can occupy the streets and practice mass politics. Although subject to extreme regulations, Palestinians have professed a struggle for the "right to the city," which Henri Lefebvre defines as "a superior form of rights: right to freedom, individualization in socialization, to habitat and inhabit."[85] While Lefebvre writes in criticism of the capitalist urbanization of the 1960s, his theoretical framework can be invoked to analyze how Palestinians have reclaimed public landscapes by resisting Israel's control over mourning places and the *topos* – burial place – of the dead.

As Cléménce Vendryes notes, the funeral of Shireen Abu Akleh, a Palestinian-American journalist who was killed by Israeli forces on May 11, 2022, while reporting on the IDF's raid in the Jenin refugee camp, was a "moment of profound contention and collective resistance" for the Palestinian community in Jerusalem.[86] The violent disruption of her funeral procession by Israeli forces, who assaulted mourners with batons for chanting Palestinian slogans and carrying Palestinian flags, causing her coffin to fall on the ground, only heightened the symbolic power of mourning.[87] By refusing to cede public space, Palestinians affirmed their collective strength and unwavering commitment to dignity. For Abu Khaled, a Palestinian Christian who has tended Jerusalem's Christian cemeteries for over four decades, Abu Akleh's funeral was unlike anything he had witnessed: "Never had I seen such a force…such sadness and strength in one go."[88] Posters of Abu Akleh and Palestinian symbols were plastered all over buildings – including those overlooking the venerated Dome of Rock – and all the churches in Jerusalem "united in their decision to ring their bells together in her memory."[89] In Lefebvre's terms, this moment disrupted the production of *abstract* space, designed and controlled by the state to serve power and capital, and reasserted *lived* space, transforming the streets of Jerusalem from a profane and unapproved *topos* of mourning into a sacred and protected one.[90] By guarding Abu Akleh's coffin and reclaiming visibility, Palestinians resisted the imposed Zionist spatial architecture, enacting what Lefebvre terms a *counter* space – a space born out of collective action and grievances, powerfully reaffirming their right to inhabit.[91] Here, Palestinians transformed Abu Akleh's body into a sacred entity, challenging the securitized dialectic of the occupation's power over the dead Palestinian body.

Abu Akleh's burial is a microcosm of the Palestinian society's strategy of resistance. In 2014, the "Israeli authorities issued burial prohibition orders in Muslim sites, such as Yosefiya cemetery," says Cléménce Vendryes.[92] Yet, Palestinians, like Nuha's family, continue to bury their loved ones clandestinely, resisting the Zionist state's attempt to efface Palestinian genealogy. One notable example occurred on October 11, 2021, when Jerusalemites reburied the remains of bodies that had been excavated the previous day by Israeli police to make way for a "Biblical Park" in Yosefiya cemetery.[93] For families whose loved ones' bodies remain withheld by the state, preserving the dignity of the dead (*karameh*) lies at the heart of their fight for repatriation. Since 2008, the JLAC's National Campaign for the Retrieval of Palestinian and Arab War Victims' Bodies and the Disclosure of the Fate of the Missing has worked to return the bodies of those withheld in the cemeteries of numbers, primarily through litigation before Israeli courts. After protests organized by the Committee for Martyrs' Families, the campaign extended its objective to include those whose bodies remain detained in Israeli morgues. Through extensive litigation and grassroots efforts, the campaign produced a booklet entitled "We have Names, We have a Homeland," the first comprehensive publication to document Israel's practice of withholding the bodies of deceased Palestinians.[94] While legal efforts remain crucial in exposing the Israeli state's necropolitical practices, I focus instead on the

*"....*karameh *is not merely the preservation of the deceased's dignity...but the refusal to allow death to be weaponized as a tool of surveillance."*

interviews with martyrs' families conducted by Randa Wahbe in Ramallah in 2016 and 2017.[95] Their testimonies, I argue, reveal how the politics of *karameh* motivate resistance, and thereby expose the limits of the Zionist necropower.

Killed in the 1960s during a military operation in the Jordan valley, Abdel Mohsin, like countless martyrs, was buried in the cemetery of numbers. For Mohsin's niece, Waala, burying her uncle in the family plot is of both religious and political importance. Visiting the graves of loved ones, especially during religious holidays such as *Eid al-Fitr*, is deeply significant in Islamic tradition. "Myself, and the families of martyrs want to bury our dead… the religious way…" says Waala.[96] Yet most importantly, Waala asserts, "this is so that the community knows that [he is a] martyr," and "in the end, the thing that is ours, from our blood and flesh, [is] that we buried them [the martyrs] the way we want to, not the way the [Israeli] occupation wants to. They [the Israelis] come and throw the bodies in a hole, and we don't want that."[97] Waala's words demonstrate how choosing the *topos* of the dead is, for Palestinians, a way to reject the necroviolence of the Zionist state, and the narrative imposed on their bodies. Although the Zionist practice of withholding Palestinian bodies in morgues or burying them in mass graves denies Palestinian Muslims a proper burial in accordance to Islam – which necessitates the body to be washed, dressed in a white shroud, and positioned towards Mecca – Waala's assertion that her uncle be buried accordingly and returned "back to his town even if he is only bones" effectively maps his burial as a site of resistance.[98] Though only bones remain, Mohsin embodies a living trace of Palestinian ancestry, a presence that directly defies the Zionist project of dispossession.

While some families resist the necropolitical order by demanding a proper burial, others reject the Zionist attempt to render them "indebted" – as Israel holds the authority to repatriate the bodies – by refusing to accept their loved ones' bodies. According to JLAC, the detention of bodies in police morgues is "carried out in humiliating and inhumane conditions… bodies [are] frozen into blackened blocks of ice, deforming them to the extent that families can hardly recognize them when they finally received them for burial after months of negotiation."[99] The report cites the case of Hasan Mansara, whose family refused to accept his body, "as it was stiff, in a contorted position" – likely mimicking the position in which he died.[100] While the Israeli state cites its practices of freezing dead bodies as a form of preservation, numerous sources attest that corpses are purposefully treated negligently, at times degraded, as a form of punishment towards the living.[101]

After Raouf was killed in 2000, Israeli soldiers interrogated his 10-year-old sister for 4 hours. Her mother recounts that the Israeli authorities asked her to name all her siblings, and when she mentioned Raouf, the soldier mockingly asserted: "Raouf? We blew him up, and we won't give you his body."[102] In response, she said, "He is in the sky and he's a martyr that's flown and his body will become dirt – we don't want it," which made the soldiers "go crazy."[103] Although both cases illustrate remarkably different responses to the occupation's criminalization of death and martyrdom, both families exhibit the politics of *karameh*. By refusing to submit to the soldier's authority, Raouf's sister disrupted the colonial narrative that seeks to reduce Palestinian grief to a request for permission via the repatriation of martyr bodies through official Israeli channels. By negating the need for Israel to return her brother's body, Raouf's sister asserted her ability to grieve on her own terms, effectively subverting Mbembe's notion of the "living dead" and orienting martyrdom away from Zionist control by lifting Raouf's memory into a realm of sacred vitality. In Raouf's context, *karameh* is not merely the

preservation of the deceased's dignity amid violence and desecration, but the refusal to allow death to be weaponized as a tool of surveillance.

Conclusion

How does necroviolence manifest itself in Zionist settler colonialism? What makes a life grievable? As the testimonies invoked in this essay illuminate, in death as in life, Palestinian bodies experience what scholar Joseph Pugliese terms "the doctrine of less eligibility," a category which defines "those reduced to mere bodies" as opposed to those "allowed to retain their humanity."[104] Remaining within the "architecture of spectacular penalty," Palestinians are governed by a racialized logic, which dispossesses them of their humanity and justifies their suffering as a necessary measure in maintaining the sovereignty of the ethnonationalist Israeli state.[105] By rendering dying and death spaces as hubs for criminality, the Israeli state turns the Palestinian body into a site to signify control, surveillance, and biopower. The conditions of Palestinian life under occupation – defined by carcerality, legal exclusion and the permanent threat of death – bear a structural resemblance to what Giorgio Agamben identifies in the concentration camp: "the place in which the most absolute *conditio inhumana* ever to appear on Earth was realized;" where members are reduced to "bare life" as they are devoid of legal and political status.[106] Yet, as sociologist Sunera Thobani criticizes, Agamben misses the crucial distinction that "bare life is racialized life" because camps – similarly to life in the colony – is built on a racial logic, where a life that stands in opposition to the sovereign's power is disposable, devoid of human dignity.[107] Thus, "bare life" in Israel does not constitute a mere Schmittian "state of exception;" it is the *racialized* life which governs the subaltern existence. The continuous dispossession of Palestinians is provoked not merely by spatial militarization, carceral logic, and culturcide; it is intrinsically fostered by the settler state's management of the afterlife, nurturing a system where "Palestinians remain under the Israeli state's gaze."[108] Yet, as the families of Abdel Mohsin and Raouf have illustrated, the legitimacy of the Israeli state remains questioned as the colony's authority is never total; violence and terror cannot uproot Palestinians from their land and history, for they remain steadfast (*samideen*) in their resistance. The "spectacle" one day ends in liberation.

While this essay primarily analyzed the necroviolence of the Zionist colonialism through the question of withheld bodies and the desecration of Muslim burial grounds, much discussion can be made regarding the alleged practice of stealing Palestinian organs, which Samirah Jarrar conceptualizes as the "ultimate symbol of necropolitics."[109] The shared stories have shown that necropolitics creates not only physical violence on the dead; it is deeply intimate, retaliatory, and psychological as it aims to punish the living. Inscribing itself in a decolonial methodology, this essay argues for a revised epistemological framework, which understands Palestinian suffering not through the *pathos* of "trauma," but via the dialectics of racism and settler colonialism.

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