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مقا كنبت

Checkmate Behind Bars: How Chess and Storytelling Kept Hope Alive

.The scene that day was anything but ordinary

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hearings before the Supreme State Security Court were
 .about to take place, which would decide her fate

In Syria, we are not used to political prisoners ever getting a formal trial. Arrests are made without hearings, and a prisoner can be locked up for 10, 15 or even 20 years until he is finally released by an amnesty decree or due to an incurable disease, which is effectively a death sentence. I had already spent five years in prison when, for reasons unknown, possibly after the Second Gulf War and the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, the authorities decided for the first time in modern history to actually try political prisoners. Although the so-called court was a security court, not subject to any real legal standards, the prisoners were at least told how many years they had left or when they would be released. The most agonizing thing is the uncertainty of whether you will ever leave this place or when that day will come. It was like a spaceship lost in space and cut off from Earth. All you could hear was a distant “hum”, holding out hope that there was still life on the other side. But you had no idea if you would ever get
 .back there

Contrary to my expectations, I had won my first three matches. The tournament was only open to experienced players. I almost lost the second game (the most difficult), but I managed to win thanks to a maneuver with the “minister” piece — chess players in the Arab world often call the queen the “minister” It is also known as the Halab maneuver, named after the famous player Fathallah the chess master from Aleppo. It is one of the oldest gambits, gaining popularity in the 18th century and experiencing its heyday around a hundred years ago. Of the 34 games in the 1927 World Championship, all but two used this opening. The Netflix series *The Queen’s Gambit* (2020) also reminded viewers of the importance of this gambit. The opening gambit involves sacrificing a pawn to achieve
 .strategic positioning for your pieces on the board



I woke up early, as usual. The first few hours of the morning passed with a series of repetitive tasks — mostly soulless. For half an hour, I jogged down an 80-meter-long corridor with narrow, tall windows flanked by ten dormitories on one side, then turned right into a shorter corridor (20 meters) that led to a parallel corridor on the other side, also with ten dormitories. This was the Sednaya military prison, paradoxically designed in the
 ”shape of the Mercedes logo with three “wings

A long line of political prisoners, old men past their prime, men who refused to age, and young men on the cusp of life in a place where there was no life, passed the time in a single rhythm. The sound of dozens of feet stamping on the floor of the corridor was so synchronized that it hardly disturbed the late risers. They continued until they were drenched in sweat and tasted the salty smell of a bull being let loose on a herd of cows for the first time in a long time. Then it was gymnastics and weightlifting in the short corridor, followed by an hour of yoga for a few. Then a shower with cold water, a meager breakfast, and so the
 .day began

A few months earlier, I had started learning chess. I got my hands on a Russian world champion’s book and discovered step by step the different openings and their advantages. I learned the essentials about endgames — how to win or force a draw when you are behind. I also learned that each piece has unique strengths and why one piece can be superior to another. I was still at the beginning of my journey and saw it as a mental exercise after the physical training. If you don’t engage with something in prison, the long years will eat you up bit by bit until you become a stranger to yourself and possibly
 .lose yourself forever

It was just before noon when I made my way — maybe to dorm 5, I don’t remember exactly — to play my fourth game in the prison wing’s annual chess tournament. This was my toughest game yet, against a fellow inmate who had been one of the best players before his incarceration. If I remember correctly, he had even won a major championship. I wasn’t worried; I had nothing to lose. After all, it was the first time I was taking part in the tournament, basically just to increase the number of participants. Most of the prisoners lacked the energy to participate. There was anxiety in the air as the final

always better? I lived in the moment, unencumbered by
 .the past and free from any expectations of the future

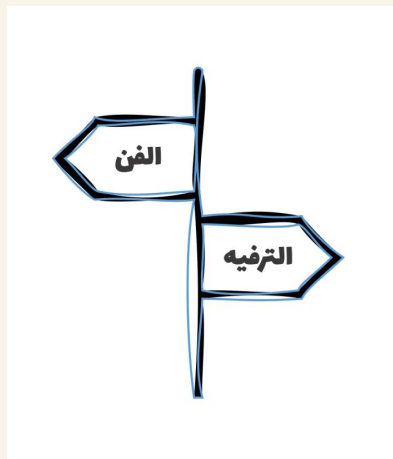
My chess opponent was only a few years older than me, although I was the second youngest prisoner in Sednaya at the time — arrested at the age of 17, which later saved me three more years in prison because I was still a minor when I was arrested. He was tall, had a slender build and his shoulders sloped slightly to the right. When he walked, he literally swung one leg and arm forward through the air instead of dragging them along, a bit like Shaggy in the cartoon Scooby-Doo. If you look closely, this defies the laws of human physics. Walking is basically a series of controlled falls— — you drag or roll your limbs instead of flinging them forward. Most inmates joked that if Christ were to rise again, he would surely choose this man's form — his pale face, broad forehead, fine nose, light blond
 .mustache and sparse, shaggy beard

He saw me at the dorm entrance, smiled, and said, "Ready to lose?" followed by his usual laugh, starting off high-pitched, then tapering off in choppy lower notes until it abruptly ended. I replied, "Ready." We sat cross-legged on the hallway floor and drew lots for colors. Luckily, I got White, which meant I could set the tempo of play. Naturally, I chose to open with the minister/queen gambit—I felt most at ease with it, understanding its
 .possibilities better from that book I'd studied

Other prisoners who were pacing the halls back and forth gathered around to watch. A hush fell over the corridor. Some would resume their walk, then come back to catch any new developments. The game started with a calculated pawn sacrifice to gain central control. My opponent swiftly demonstrated his skill by thwarting every attempt I made to breach his defenses. He was calm and seemed to know exactly what he was doing. Meanwhile, my mind was working overtime as the game grew complicated; I wasn't sure which piece to move next. The veteran players observing were fully aware of the optimal move. They also knew the position still favored me, if I could only figure out that "right" piece to move. Really, I didn't have many viable options. Every line I analyzed led to outcomes not in my favor. In chess, not every move is about improving your position; sometimes, the goal is simply to nudge your opponent to take the initiative and
 .hopefully make a mistake

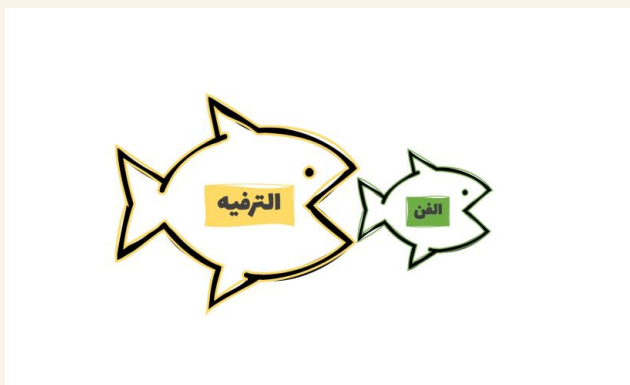
To be honest, I was nowhere near as immersed in chess as many of the other tournament players. There were some big names in the prison known as the "sheikhs of the game" When I arrived in dormitory 5, the former champion had just finished his breakfast — he had slept in. He wasn't worried either, because he thought I was, as one of the inmates put it, "a little goat challenging big rams" By now, word of the tournament had spread and more and more people were gathering to watch the fights. Finally, there was that unlikely contender on stage. To add to the excitement, they began to place small bets — usually for a meal, a few cigarettes, a mate or a cup of tea. After all, a little entertainment didn't hurt in a life marked by monotony while we waited for our court dates in the security court — our only chance to see the outside world from the tiny windows of the lost spaceship, or rather, from the meat truck that took us to the courthouse. All our contact with the outside world consisted of visits every two or three months, each lasting no longer than half an hour, speaking through two barriers at least two meters apart. The news reached us from behind the opposite barrier, where the families were standing, like a series of rapid blows. There was no time for explanation or context. Someone learned that his father or mother had died, another that his wife or girlfriend had left him, yet another that his daughter— — who in his memory was still alive as a child — had married. Everything comes to a standstill in prison. Time stands still, feelings freeze, sensations wither and memory becomes silent. We used to call this "the refrigerator" Even the normal physical growth of the
 .human body takes a different course

And although no one should be imprisoned for their views, prison life was not all bad. Paradoxically, although prison walls robbed you of freedom— — freedom of choice— — they also freed you from their control. I was free from the tyranny of money because we lived a communal life. I was free from the tyranny of clothing because any piece of clothing would do. I was free from the tyranny of food; there was enough to keep hunger at bay, and if not, then not. I was free from the dependence on doctors and medication because we had our own doctors among us to look after me. Most importantly, I was free from the tyranny of the future itself. There is no future in prison; you are not obliged to do anything you don't want to do. You had few choices, but who says more choices are



.Yet, things in reality are more complicated

Like every industry, the “creative economy” doesn’t quite work that way. If you’re an artist or aspire to be one, you’ve likely noticed the massive budgets allocated for producing films, series, and entertainment programs—some good, some bad—while you might struggle just to find a gallery willing to exhibit your paintings. Why? Because the entertainment sector has .swallowed up the lion’s share of the art market



.But that’s not where the problem ends

Until recently, the entertainment industry had been growing steadily, with what used to be alternative or independent art forms shrinking as collateral damage in entertainment’s rise. Yet in the last decade, we’ve seen the emergence of a new culture, a “post-entertainment” era. The fastest-growing sector right now is what you might call “frivolous scrolling,” championed by TikTok. Call it what you will: the scroll culture, endless feed, time-killer content—whatever name you choose. It’s definitely not art, and it’s not quite entertainment; it’s just a .constant flick of the thumb to watch the next video

The key to this infinite scroll is that each clip (the “stimulus”) lasts just a few seconds before the next one

I knew many of the onlookers had placed bets on me. I wasn’t ready to give up yet. I could also tell that this little audience had, for the moment, forgotten about the Supreme State Security Court. They’d forgotten the meat truck with its tiny windows where we could barely make out people on the streets. They’d forgotten that they were drained of energy. Forgotten that the future was nonexistent, that those who passed on had passed, that wives and girlfriends had left—God bless them—and that the kids had grown up and even gotten married. No one cared about money or clothes more than the sleeveless undershirts they wore in this searing heat. They had set it all aside, and surely they deserved some enjoyment in this moment. What mattered now was this fleeting instant: the
”. “here and now

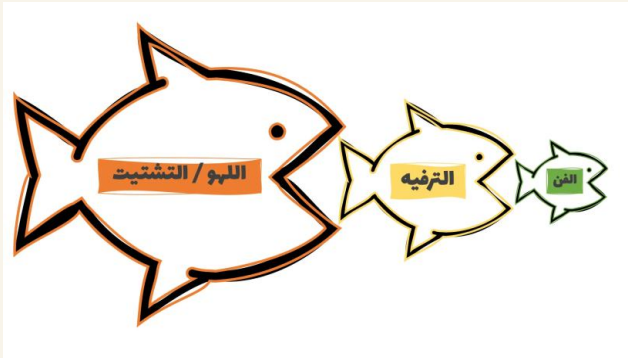
And here I’ll pause the story to confess that I sometimes miss that world. Of course, I never wish to be imprisoned again—it’s not fit for humans—but I miss the sense of world that existed inside it. The older I get, the harder it becomes to adapt to life and its technological complexities. Not because I’m far removed from technology, but perhaps because I understand it more than I should. After all, I sometimes find myself spending two or more hours a day on TikTok—an app cleverly designed to make you think, Alright, this next video is the
.last one I’ll watch

.Spoiler alert: it’s never the last

There’s no shame in that. We all need some playful distraction to cope with life’s daily pressures. Creative communities often believe they must either give the audience exactly what it wants—pure entertainment—or .demand something of them, which is what we call art

In entertainment, for instance, the audience expects convincing performances from actors and a compelling plot. If the director fails on that front, they’ll likely stop watching. In art, that same audience going to the Louvre is implicitly expected to make an effort to understand the painting in front of them. If they don’t, they’re just passing
.through without appreciating the art

The problem with “scroll culture” videos is that they can go on forever; they rely on our body’s chemistry rather than fleeting trends or aesthetics. Our brains reward these quick bursts of distraction by releasing dopamine, leaving us wanting more. It’s like sitting at a slot machine, with the bells and whistles that make you feel good just because the video is loud and flashy—never mind its content. And, like any addiction, it works on the same .mechanism of repeated stimuli and diminishing returns



Big Tech—“the dopamine cartel”—knows this all too well. Their ultimate goal is to create a world of addicts, politely dubbed an “ecosystem,” because that guarantees them secure profits. The rise of AI has further fueled this wave by simplifying how these videos are produced, using tools like Captions.ai or Veed.io. Now, the prevailing culture is the absence of culture. But what does this do to our ?brains

The more dependent we become on these micro-stimuli, the less pleasure we derive. Eventually, we hit a stage psychologists call “anhedonia,” the inability to feel enjoyment—even from experiences supposedly designed to provide it. It’s like a painkiller addict who no longer feels relief but keeps taking pills to avoid the pain caused by low dopamine. And at some point, taking more just leads to more pain. Our minds spiral downward in a kind of purgatory, a reflex meant to protect us. This has happened to countless people who quit social media after repeated .attempts to cut down and failing

Fortunately, there’s now a trend among top content creators to pivot back to personality-driven storytelling, free from flashy gimmicks, and they’re getting more views than ever. Why? Because everyone else is producing these high-speed “retention” videos that lack humanity. Audiences are starting to miss the warmth of a personal .touch

pops up, seldom leaving an impression or anything you .can recall

According to cultural critic Ted Gioia, it’s a massive industry he believes will soon eclipse art and entertainment combined. Everything is morphing into TikTok. Facebook is doing it with Reels, Instagram has it, YouTube has it—everyone eyeing quick riches on social media is following suit. Except, perhaps, for a single individual who invests most of his profits in making more .content he loves

Youtuber Jimmy Donaldson, known as MrBeast, wasn’t always like this. He used to be a symbol of what’s called the “Retention Edit”—videos produced in such a hyper-stimulating way that viewers stay glued to their screens as long as possible. Loud sound effects, blazing editing pace—these elements have become the dominant style for online creators. Videos all started to look the same, .almost impossible to tell apart

But this “bubble” seems to have reached its peak. And now, it’s poised for a possible shift—maybe for the better. Hints are emerging that the high-speed wave of content is .receding

Last month, Donaldson tweeted that it was time to “ditch the fast content,” mentioning he had slowed down his videos last year and focused more on storytelling. He gave the footage room to breathe, toning down the noise by .making them longer—and the result was a surge in views

To grasp the magnitude of that: Donaldson has over 250 million subscribers across his channels, and each new video gets at least 100 million views. That number has recently skyrocketed to 150 million since he began shifting to story-driven content. In 2023, Time magazine named him one of the 100 most influential people in the world. His annual income is around half a billion dollars .from ads and brand deals

TikTok’s algorithm encourages users to swipe to the next video if they’re not hooked in the first second. So content made for “retention” starts with a boom, capturing attention, then tries to hold it with flashy graphics, text overlays, and sound effects. This has led to a generation of teens who can hardly focus for more than a second if something isn’t instantly “fun” enough, resulting in .scattered attention spans

Stories are the connective tissue of humanity, no matter the subject. At the heart of every issue, every event, there's a human dimension that leads us to four words which might be the most widely used in Arabic—or any other language on Earth: “What happened next?” And that's exactly what you want to know now about the chess match. Once a story hooks us, we're flooded with curiosity: we want more. That's the engine powering every day of our lives, every hour, fueling us with hope and .energy

That day, every option on the board was fraught with danger, except for one move—a piece maneuver to a marginal square. It didn't give me a better position, but it kept me from disaster. I took my time to assess immediate threats on the board and then made the move. My opponent realized what I had done. Beads of sweat began to form on his broad forehead like clusters of mushrooms at the edge of a field, on a stormy day full of thunder and lightning. He played his move, creating a gap in his defense, and almost instantly recognized the game was practically over. Two or three moves later, he gently extended his right arm and placed his index finger on the crown of his king, pressing it just enough to tip it forward. The king fell on its face beside the knight in front of it. He resigned. A chorus of “Oooh!” rose from the onlookers, they clapped hands in celebration, and I felt a hand rest on my left shoulder from behind. Turning, I saw one of the “sheikhs of the game” smiling. “Well done,” he said .quietly. “He had no choice

In that tournament, held nearly thirty years ago, I clinched victory in the seventh round—the penultimate one. I didn't lose a single match. I was that “young goat” who butted heads with the “big rams,” beating them one by one. The Supreme State Security Court sentenced me to ten years, later reduced to five because I was underage at the time of arrest. When the verdict was read, I had already spent about seven years in prison—from 1987 to 1994. Since then, I've been moving from one marginal square to .another, never once catching a lucky break

And this notion of “personality” brings me back to the chess match I was telling you about. The openings might look the same, but each match has a distinct character—different from any that came before and any :that will follow. Picture this

Each player has 20 possible opening moves (16 with .(pawns, 4 with knights

After two moves (one move each), there are 400 possible .positions

.After three moves each, around 8,902 possibilities

.After four moves each, around 197,000 possibilities

After five moves, roughly 5 million possibilities, and it just .keeps expanding as more pieces come into play

The total number of unique chess games is effectively infinite—estimated as “Shannon's number,” 10^{120} . That's just 32 chess pieces on a board. Imagine how many stories lie on the board of life. Now, do you still want to ?know how my match in Dorm 5 turned out

Alright, I'm not trying to torture you—well, maybe a little. I simply want to lift the veil on the magic, that power within the engine that keeps us asking: why do people gravitate .to stories? Ask yourself

We watch the news for facts, for information. Yet we repeatedly get pulled into stories because we need to see where we fit in all those facts and data. For thousands of years, Homo sapiens has documented his life. Before writing was invented—before we scrawled the first words on papyrus—we ground up minerals and charred animal bones to make pigments of ocher, amber, charcoal. We used these earthy reds, orange-yellows, and coal blacks to fingerpaint on cave walls. We painted pictures of our dreams, chronicled the latest gazelle hunt. Stories have always been an essential survival tool for human beings. It's how we make sense of ourselves. Without that, we'd be lost. It's how our external world stays woven together and how we hold ourselves together psychologically.

عن هذه النسخة

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