

## Prison in the Middle East and North Africa: Histories, Cultures, and Practices

*“Darkness of prison fall upon us! We are the Passionate of Darkness!”*

- Line from “O Prison Darkness,” Najib al-Rayyes

The poem is one of the most renowned prison poems of modern Arabic literature

### Course Overview

This course is an introduction to histories, cultures, and practices in prisons across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Designing a course about an overlooked – and often intentionally obscured – topic like prisons and incarceration in MENA is like asking someone to cut the trees of a rainforest with scissors. This course is therefore neither exhaustive nor inclusive of all aspects related to imprisonment, torture, suffering, trauma, and despair across the geography of the MENA region. However, the course will address various aspects of prisons in the MENA region: including their roots, the internal environments, and how they exist in larger society. There is a continued legacy of incarceration in the Middle East; not only through the living memory of prisons and prominent prisoners, but also as prisons as central to state-building and rule of law development. The course is additionally not exclusively focused on individuals who have personally been placed within formal prison or incarceration systems, but also those whose lives are affected by related structures and systems of oppression. This course is just a step to address the related dynamics to prisons in MENA; a first layer that students, together with their mentors, are encouraged to further explore and excavate beyond the classroom.

The motivations of the course come from the fact that there are many courses on criminal justice systems, as well as courses that focus on wider dynamics and politics in the Middle East, that touch on the issues addressed in this particular course. However, this course fills a unique lacuna of specific attention both to the prison systems existing under authoritarian regimes in the region, and to various art and cultural forms that address these aspects. The course was developed out of the awareness of the central role prison plays in countries in the MENA region, and the belief that understanding the cultures and practices of incarceration can help unlock understanding of the wider region. Additionally, this course is aware that it does not exist in a politically empty environment. Therefore, the course will also address the continuing international/Western focus on prison systems in the Middle East, as tools of security in fulfillment of counter-terror objectives, as sources of concern around religious radicalization in prison, and as topic of security sector reform.

For students and professors, the purpose of taking or teaching this course should exist beyond simply a grade. The stories, readings, and various art forms that will be discussed every week will

present an unpleasant, yet important journey where emotions will be invested in individuals whose bodies and souls have been – and still are – humiliated and crushed by state and non-state actors. The materials and topics addressed in this course are highly sensitive in nature, and students of the course must be prepared to critically analyze often emotional and disturbing material. In this regard, participants of this course are advised to work together in groups and to collectively express their sentiments of anger, pain, and melancholy via fruitful discussions, research papers, and presentations.

The syllabus of this course was developed by the MENA Prison Forum (MPF). As the name suggests, the Forum is a critical meeting point where ideas and arguments about incarceration can assemble. Within this context, this course is designed for the sake of theorizing and conceptualizing nuanced and heterogeneous meanings of ‘the prison,’ that is usually taken for granted despite of how it changes destinies and shapes life-worlds. More information on the MPF can be founded [here](#).

### **Course Structure and Objectives**

The course is imagined to last fourteen weeks (dependent on individual university systems), and it is divided into four major sections. Each section is then divided into sub-themes, each of which will be explored through readings and additional resources. The resources used will be multidisciplinary, ranging from focus on individual prisoners and their testimonies, specific sites of incarceration, as well as songs, films, and other artistic representations that provide angles for analysis on the selected topics. While these resources are still being identified and selected thematically (see below), the aim is to put a variety of pieces in conversation with each other and to use them as objects of examination. It is highly recommended that students make connections between weeks and resources for more productive discussions and debates, and to discover additional themes, readings, and artistic elements in line with the topics of the course.

It is important to note that this syllabus is just a key to a whole complex world that is highly censored. The number of issues that are absent and/or silenced are much higher than the ones investigated throughout the semester. Resources included in the material lists, even once further developed, should not be considered exhaustive. Additionally, an objective of this course is to continually further develop the repository of content as this matter is taught at schools, institutes, and universities. The course aims to encourage the production and development of analysis on these issues to fill the identified void in materials, in full agreement with the students and their mentors. High-quality materials and projects produced by the participants of the course will be considered for display at conferences, screening, and books organized and edited by the MPF and its online platform. This will be an ongoing process, an open-ended phase of being and becoming that will be shared by all those who teach, study, or contribute to this course.

### **Course Outcomes**

- Create collaborative and supportive learning environment that encourages critical engagement, a responsibility to contribute, and mutual accountability based on the principal of respect for all
- Combine artistic productions on traumas and sufferings of incarceration with relevant historical, sociological, and anthropological writings about prisons in order to allow for analysis and exchange of themes and trends between these sources
- Grasp different historical roots of MENA region beyond the hegemonic colonial and nationalist narratives, and to understand the significance and role of prison for people of the MENA region and beyond, through the lived experiences and expressions of those affected by the prison system
- Investigate how individuals survive their traumas and heal their wounds and scars, and how victims shape memories of their oppression while struggling with dominant authorities and ruling powers.
- To come up with further themes, topics, and contents about cultures of incarceration in the MENA region that can help in developing this field of study in the future.
- To develop creative methodological and theoretical frameworks for the study of prisons in the MENA region.

### **Course Requirements**

We envision that students who take this course would have taken previous courses on Middle East and/or African culture, history, or politics. Previous academic exposure to broader topics such as penal systems, human rights, and criminal justice will also be accepted. Students who do not have a background regarding the history of the MENA region, can be enrolled in the course on the condition of getting familiar with background and introductory texts to the Middle East and North Africa (some of which are suggested in the Appendix).

## Course Components

### Part I: Histories and Roots of a Complex Present

These three weeks will provide a history and context to ground the analysis of continuing systems of incarceration.

- **Week 1: The MENA Region beyond the Modern Discipline and Punishment**  
This week aims to establish the origins of prisons in the early history of the region.
- **Week 2: Colonial Cells**  
An introduction to how prisons were used under the colonial system, in order to understand how the legacy of prisons and law in MENA countries developed under external rule and as part of “modernization” of the region.
- **Week 3: Post-Colonial State-building through Prisons**  
A look at how states center around legacies of power and the rule of law left in the aftermath of colonial periods as they underwent independence, and as part of their continual state formation.

### Part II: Daily Lives and Intimacy in Prison

These weeks will dive into the lived experienced of those imprisoned by the state, drawing on testimony and accounts of prisoners.

- **Week 4: Tortures and Humiliations**  
A central part of lived experienced in prisons revolves around corporal, mental, and emotional punishment and torture that aims to dehumanize and crush the body and soul of inmates.
- **Week 5: Hygiene and Food**  
A look into daily and corporal needs while existing in prison.
- **Week 6: Gender, Love, and Sexuality**  
Analysis of how gender dynamics and sexual relations operate in prison as an extension of control over the confinement of desires.
- **Week 7: “God” in Prison: Religions and Spiritualities**  
This week will focus on the role religion and spirituality plays in prisons, and not only how religious radicalization happens, but also how it is a focus of domestic and international concern.
- **Week 8: Social Hierarchies**  
A look at the social divisions in prisons, either as continuation of social hierarchies, such as class and race, that exist in larger society, or as the creation of new social order within prison.

### **Part III: (Un-)Placing Prisons**

This section addresses how “prison-like” systems exist outside of formal, established carceral systems.

- **Week 10: Secret Prisons and Forced Disappearances**  
This week addresses clandestine operations of imprisonment by the state: either in using secret prisons or in undertaking forced disappearances/kidnappings.
- **Week 8: Non-State Prisons**  
This week will look at how non-state groups replicate prison systems and methods in order to derive state-like power and status.
- **Week 11: Exile and Displacement as Prison**  
Prison-like systems exist in a range of phenomena outside the prison system, and these can be seen among the exiled and displaced, whether they are forced to live in camps or in other countries.

### **Part IV: Healing the Scars, Oppressing the Memories, and Strategies of Survival**

The final section of the course will address the legacies and overall effect of the prison system.

- **Week 12: Traumas and Survivals**  
This week will specifically address the continuing experiences of prisoners even after they have left incarceration, often through sensory triggers and haunted memories.
- **Week 13: Memories and Remembrances**  
As states undergo periods of transition (be it the ending of a regime, war, or other change) there is often a state- and societal-level of memory and commemoration, or conversely in some cases, amnesty and forced repression of memory of prisons, as the past continues into the present.
- **Week 14: Un-Thinking Prisons and Prisoners**  
The last week explores the possibility of alternative forms of justice and power, both within and outside the parameters of “security sector reform” in the region. This will include consideration of a globalized world without prisons.

## Appendix: Identified Resources\*

\*To note that these resources are still being developed and currently in the initial stage

### Introductory Texts to the MENA Region

- *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Middle East*, Soraya Al-Turki (Ed.)
- *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939*, Albert Hourani
- *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Roger Owen
- *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Michael Provence
- *The Modern Middle East: A History*, James L. Gelvin
- *The Social Origins of the Modern Middle East*, Haim Gerber

### Prison Texts - General

- "A Political Ecology of the Camp," Benjamin Meiches, in *Security Dialogue*
- *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Angela Davis
- "Security in Anarchy: Utopian Realism in Theory and Practice," Ken Booth, *International Affairs*
- "The 'Watchful Eye of God': The Role of Religion in the Rehabilitation and Reentry of Repentant Jewish Prisoners," Michal Morag and Elly Teman, in *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*
- *Torture and Democracy*, Darius Rejali

### Prison Texts - MENA

- *Cultures of Confinement: A History of the Prison in Africa, Asia, and Latin America*, Frank Dikötter and Ian Brown (Eds.)
- *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East*, Dawn Chatty
- *Edward Said's Concept of Exile: Identity and Cultural Migration in the Middle East*, Rehnuma Sazzad
- "Freedom and Dissidence in the Arabic Prison Novels of Abd al-Rahman Munif," Geula Elimelekh, in *Die Welt des Islams*
- *From Slaves to Prisoners of War: The Ottoman Empire, Russia, and International Law*, Will Smiley
- *Oriental Prisons: Prisons and Crime in India, the Andaman Islands, Burmah, China, Japan, Egypt, Turkey*, Arthur Griffiths
- *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons*, Banu Bargu
- "The Politics of Terror and Traumatization: State Violence and Dehumanization in Basma 'Abdel Azīz's al- Ṭābūr," Stefan Millich
- *Prisons in the Late Ottoman Empire: Microcosms of Modernity*, Kent F. Schull

- *Policing and Prisons in the Middle East: Formations of Coercion*, Laleh Khalili and Jillian Schwedler (Eds.)
- *The Criminal Underworld in a Medieval Islamic Society: Narratives from Cairo and Damascus Under the Mamluks*, Carl F. Petry
- *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire: The Design of Difference*, Madeline C. Zilfi
- *The Social Life of Memory: Violence, Trauma, and Testimony in Lebanon and Morocco* Norman Saadi Nikro and Sonja Hegasy (Eds.)

### Prison Texts – Specific to Regions/Countries

#### Egypt

- *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army, and the Making of Modern Egypt*, Khaled Fahmy
- "Egypt and the Age of the Triumphant Prison: Legal Punishment in Nineteenth Century Egypt," Rudolph Peters, in *Annales islamologiques*
- *In Quest of Justice: Islamic Law and Forensic Medicine in Modern Egypt*, Khaled Fahmy
- *Rules of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*, Timothy Mitchell
- "Shattered worlds: political trauma amongst young activists in post-revolutionary Egypt," Vivienne Mathies-Boon, in *The Journal of North African Studies*

#### Gulf Countries

- *Slavery, Agriculture, and Malaria in the Arabian Peninsula*, Benjamin Reilly

#### Libya

- *Libya since 1969: Qadhafi's Revolution Revisited*, Dirk Vandewalle (Ed.)
- "'You Exile them in their Own Countries': The Everyday Politics of Reclaiming the Disappeared in Libya," Amina Zarrugh, in *Middle East Critique*

#### Morocco:

- *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam*, Chouki El Hamel

#### Palestine:

- *These Chains will be Broken: Palestinian Stories of Struggle and Defiance in Israeli Prisons*, Ramzy Baroud
- *Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies*, Laleh Khalili
- *Palestinian Political Prisoners: Identity and Community*, Esmail Nashif

#### Syria:

- *Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria*, Benjamin Thomas White

- “Imprisonment, Truth Telling and Historical Memory in Syria,” Sune Haugbolle, in *Mediterranean Politics*
- *Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and their Politics*, Hanna Batatu

#### Tunisia

- *The Abolition of Slavery in Ottoman Tunisia*, Ismael Musah Montana

#### Turkey

- *Healing The Nation: Prisoners of War, Medicine and Nationalism in Turkey, 1914-1939*, Yucel Yanikdag