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# Making Prisons Visible: The Work of the MENA Prison Forum



Al Amal (Hope), a 1980 work by the Palestinian artist Sliman Mansour, is one of the images featured on the MENA Prison Forum's website (Photo from the Palestine Poster Project Archives).

**The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Al-Fanar Media.**

Prisons are often hidden in shadow. Across the Middle East and North Africa, a host of detention centers, remote prisons and covert facilities referred to as “black sites” have been kept secret or quasi-secret over the past decades. Many more prisons in the region are visible from the outside, yet researchers, family members, and human-rights organizations have struggled for access

Some of the best information we have about prison life comes from literary works, art and films made by former prisoners. That's one of the reasons why .the [MENA Prison Forum](#) has a special focus on art

But it's also because the project wants us to expand our view of prisons and prisoners. According to three organizers from the forum—Mina Ibrahim, Monika Borgmann and Lokman Slim—prisons have a broader impact on society than we think. The three said over email that “prisons contribute to the interactions of people's everyday lives, even if they are not directly aware ”.of it

Even if you can't see them, they said, prison systems are “a silent threat in the ”.background

*Editor's note: The correspondence with the organizers took place days] before [Lokman Slim was shot to death](#) by unknown assassins in southern Lebanon this week. An outspoken critic of Hezbollah, he had gone missing on Wednesday, February 3, after visiting friends. His body was found in his car the next day with multiple bullet wounds to his head and body, [.according to news reports*

## **Teaching and Learning About Prison Life**

When the MENA Prison Forum launched in the fall of 2018, organizers aimed to help bring this silent threat out of the shadows. The group had three core aims: collating information about prisons, conducting research, and doing public outreach and advocacy. It now has a [bilingual website](#) that reaches out to several different audiences. The group is speaking not only to researchers, activists, instructors and people who live in the region, but also to the governments of Western countries, “who are often supportive of the regimes .in the MENA,” the organizers wrote

The forum is a project of the Beirut-based organization [UMAM Documentation and Research](#). It is also building and strengthening its

network throughout the MENA region, and developing a sister organization  
in Europe

Since its start, the MENA Prison Forum has helped organize [five conferences](#) and drafted material for a [university course](#). Instructors interested in teaching the course can find a detailed recommended syllabus online. It not only examines the history and politics of prisons across the region, but also looks at prisoners' everyday concerns: hygiene, food, spirituality, social hierarchies, and love

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Borgmann, Ibrahim and Slim  
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But this engagement doesn't only mean presenting research and reports. “Art and cinema are central to our project, since they are usually produced by ex-prisoners or individuals who have conducted research about prisons,” the three organizers said. These glimpses take “a humanistic approach” and “allow more empathy and sympathy with the prisoners' daily lives beyond the long and repetitive human rights reports that are usually made by and for  
”.experts and officials

## **Between Art and Testimony**

On the MENA Prison Forum's website, readers can find sections on [recommended films](#), [books](#), and [works of visual art](#) that address the role of prisons in the region. While some of the books are scholarly works, others are testimonial literature, such as Aziz Binebine's [Tazmamart](#), a moving account of the author's 18 years in Morocco's secret underground prison. Others are

deeply knowledgeable fictions about the effects of prison systems. These include Egyptian author Basma Abdel Aziz's [The Queue](#) and Syrian writer .Mustafa Khalifa's [The Shell](#)

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The coronavirus pandemic has curtailed the forum's in-person meetups, but it has also meant a sharp growth in digital activities. Much of the project's recent work has focused online, including [an online workshop](#) and [podcasts of prison testimonies](#). The project is "collecting a large amount of audio-visual testimonies of former detainees from several parts of the MENA region, the majority from Syria and Iraq," the organizers said. "This year we aim to bring these testimonies into post-production and have them published ".on the website

The pandemic has changed their work in other ways as well. They said they "are hoping to build upon the growing awareness of the medical dangers presented by prison systems that have made Covid-19 a major concern in these institutions, such as overcrowding and insufficient health and safety ".measures

### **Dictionaries, Maps, and Making Prisons Visible**

For the nearly two decades of its existence, [Morocco's secret Tazmamart prison](#) could not be found on any map. Part of understanding prisons is knowing the basics of who, what and where they are. Some organizations have started work on demystifying prisoners. The Arab Network for Human Rights Information, for instance, has an important "[Know Your Prison](#)" .feature on its website

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This project is “still in the research phase,” the organizers said, “but we hope to launch it during the coming few months. We will begin with a few countries before going regional

They are also at work on a [pioneering prison dictionary](#) that will bring together colloquial terms used around and in prisons across North Africa and the Middle East. The dictionary began back in 2012, when the forum’s parent organization, UMAM Documentation and Research, was entrusted with the testimonies of a number of former Lebanese detainees in Syrian prisons. From that, they began building a glossary of terms, which they are continuing to work on with the help of former detainees from across the region

This is truly the goal of our work: yes, creating material as the MPF, but “equally importantly fostering collaboration and awareness of these types of work and analysis, and encouraging others to conduct their own research on these issues,” the organizers said. The MENA Prison Forum platform thus aims to bring “different people’s and countries’ understandings of carceral terms together in one comprehensive accessible form

The project welcomes public input, the organizers said. They’re interested in “suggestions, artwork, writings, and other means of contribution and collaboration.” People who want to contribute can reach out through social media or the website to project manager Monika Borgmann or to project coordinator Mina Ibrahim