

# Scrutinizing prisons through art, activism, and academic critique

An interview with **Mina Ibrahim** about the work and recent history of the **MENA Prison Forum**

*In this piece Mina Ibrahim, project manager at the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Prison Forum, a project of UMAM Documentation and Research, is interviewed by Andrew M. Jefferson (senior researcher at DIGNITY — Danish Institute against Torture) about the Forum's cutting-edge work in advocating and facilitating a multidisciplinary engagement with 'the prison' and the experience of imprisonment in the region.*

**AMJ: Good morning and thanks for agreeing to meet for an interview about MPF. As briefed, I imagine this as a kind of open conversation. I thought we could organise it around three main themes. Firstly, aims: what's the purpose of the forum; second a bit about origins: how did it all begin; and third about the achievements of the forum: what is generated by the activities of MPF. But obviously since the theme of the SI is scrutiny, I also have my eye on how the work of MPF might be construed as a form of scrutiny and whether it is helpful at all to think in such terms. The special issue aims at capturing the way scrutiny can take multiple forms. I believe MPF is one such — possibly alternative — form. But let's see... Why don't you start by talking about what MPF does and what the scope and purpose is...**

**MI:** I'll also touch on origins since that is very connected to what we are doing. After the 2011 uprisings in different countries in the MENA region, discussions around prison and imprisonment started to grow in these countries. Even as undergraduates at that time we started to write papers about prisons, to think about prisons, though at that time I didn't know anything about UMAM Documentation and Research (UMAM D&R) the organization that later formed MPF in 2018. Monika Borgmann and Lokman Slim founded UMAM D&R in 2005 in Beirut, Lebanon. UMAM D&R is an archival and research centre that seeks to inform the future by dealing with the past. In 2008 Monika and Lokman undertook a project on the missing and forcibly disappeared in Lebanon, which led them to the *Association for Lebanese Detainees in Syrian Prisons*, a group of Lebanese who had been taken from Lebanon and imprisoned in Syria, and some of whom were later released. With this group Monika and Lokman made the film *Tadmor* in 2016 based on former prisoners' testimonies about life in Tadmor prison in Syria. At this point in time, carceral experiences in the region had, as I mentioned, been growing in attention in the MENA

region and in Lebanon and Syria specifically: many Syrians started to flee to Lebanon after the uprisings in 2011, and at the same time many Syrians in Syria or elsewhere were writing about prisons or started to be louder about prisons. So, there's no doubt really that the uprisings contributed to give people agency and courage to speak about their prison experiences and publish their memoirs or analysis about prison. And the cultural production about prisons began to increase. There are dozens of books published after the uprisings by Syrians, Egyptians, Tunisians and so on.

After the production of the film *Tadmor* and the increased production of carceral-related works in the region, the centrality of the topic of prison in the region became ever clearer. After conceptualizing and formulating an approach to address these dynamics, the MENA Prison Forum was established in 2018 by Monika and Lokman, at which point I joined the project. This is why the origins are important. It was an intentional creation of a space for work and dialogue between activists, artists, and researchers, to speak about their different projects and exchange their ideas and compare their different ways of speaking about prisons. The MPF engages with research, artistic, and advocacy work all in conversation with one another. We do artistic cultural production with an eye that it should have an impact on the world and that the voices of the people included in these productions should be heard. We are bringing art, academia, activism — these people — together and putting their outputs in conversation.

**AMJ: So it began with a desire to scrutinize the past but it's developed into an activity to scrutinize the present? Or what is the relation between past and present in the work?**

**MI:** Past and present here play a big role because if we want to really talk about justice and accountability, and if we want to move on we need to study what happened in the past. For example, it would not make sense to talk about prisons in Egypt without connecting it with previous times, even if you want to go back to the early modern times (19c begin 20c). That's why doing historical research even while talking about the current conditions of prisons in Egypt is very important. Let me give an example: At MPF we have started a new section called MPF Collections where we store magazines, publications etc. especially official government publications. In our search we found this magazine called *al-Soujun* in Egypt. It was published

during the 50s and 60s during Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime. If you look at this magazine it speaks a lot to the current propaganda videos produced by the current regime in Egypt about how the situation in prisons is great and how the prisoners are getting the best food and the best care. The same language is still used, though expressed in a different media. It's about propaganda and how prisons are represented by the state. If we want to emphasize the propaganda of the current regime, we need to get back and look at how this propaganda machine has been functioning for many years. The past is a very important way through which to understand, to examine the present... The focus of the work is carceral practice, detention as a process, a practice of everyday life, or even the everyday life of the state itself.

**AMJ: the way you put it confirms my assumption that this really is a project about scrutiny, in one sense about scrutinizing the state in a very deliberate fashion, in another about turning a critical gaze onto the prison, and I find it particularly interesting this idea of comparing the way the state acted in the past and today. So, you observe, find, trace, and conduct deliberate analytic scrutiny to make sense of these things that occurred at different times but look very similar... You also talked about cultural production. I noticed that a lot of MPF's events and activities put an emphasis on the voices of incarcerated or former incarcerated people. Is this a conscious decision to put the spotlight on what we might call first person-perspectives?**

**MI:** Yeah, of course, like for example this talk we had on the psychological and social impact of imprisonment in November it featured psychiatrists and physicians working with prisoners after release but they themselves are often former prisoners.<sup>1</sup> We also had this other project called the *Impossible Stage* which is a podcast series, a dramatic treatment of testimonies of prisoner experiences in Syria towards the end of the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> The people contributing to the podcast are not professional actors, they are former prisoners who were trained to record their voices. We believe these cultural productions — or if we are hosting a zoom talk — we believe that priority should be given to first-hand accounts not only because they tell us 'what happened' without any second layers of analysis (though of course they can provide layers) but they can tell us *directly* what happened, also about co-inmates.

We also believe this is important if you want to contribute to processes of justice and accountability, because many people who are victims of injustice don't

get the chance to meet human rights activists maybe because of geographical distance, maybe because of language barriers, so here comes the 'forum' part of MPF to try to invite human rights activists or researchers, even artists to meet with former prisoners or detainees. Often even after talks and events we get requests from journalists, by human rights activists who want to talk further to these people, so we put them in touch and try to build a network so, kind of enabling scrutiny by making connections and building networks and facilitating these conversations between different actors.

**AMJ: So, you enable scrutiny by other actors such as journalists and human rights activists. I also noticed that you have quite a focus on prison writings or prison literature as one specific form of cultural production. Do you also feature more graphic forms of art?**

**MI:** It's on our agenda: We have produced publications for the past four years, mainly in Arabic, also three books about Syria and Egypt mainly. But what we are trying to do now is to convert these texts into graphic novels or comic stories.

**AMJ: This is what is quite unusual about MPF, it's not just a bunch of researchers or human rights activists creating reports and doing advocacy etc. in a traditional way. I think the cultural production side of what you do is extremely valuable.**

**MI:** We are trying as much as possible to see how we can appeal to different audiences. I'm always starting with my family members. How can I tell them the stories about what I am doing: something that cannot be traumatic, cannot be too heavy, can be accessible. That's why for example the *Impossible Stage* was so appealing to people who don't like to read or attend talks for 90 minutes; the podcast series is accessible while driving or cooking and we have this radio culture in the Middle East, we love to listen, so that was really appealing and what we are trying to do through the graphic stories is to take books which are personal testimonies and sometimes also human rights reports and turn them into graphic stories. For example, we are supporting a project to publish a book form of the *Branch 251* podcast that focused on the Koblenz trials in Germany of members of the Syrian regime, to make these forms of scrutiny more inclusive by making the information and data more accessible.<sup>3</sup>

**AMJ: When I was preparing these questions I was also thinking more abstractly about the relationship between scrutiny and representation, which is why I am asking about the different forms of representation. There's another paper in the**

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1. [https://www.menaprisonforum.org/outreach\\_detail/111/](https://www.menaprisonforum.org/outreach_detail/111/)  
2. [https://www.menaprisonforum.org/radio\\_detail/54/](https://www.menaprisonforum.org/radio_detail/54/)  
3. <https://branch-251.captivate.fm/>

**Special Issue by Jamie Bennett about a TV series where he discusses issues of representation and authenticity, which is concerned similarly with how prison life is mediated through cultural production... Do you think art or cultural production is scrutiny or representation or is it both. Or put another way is it about looking or showing?**

**MI:** I don't know really: as a person always doing fieldwork and starting with grounded vernacular terms, doing the *Impossible Stage*, or these graphic stories, or collecting testimonies like on the website, this is representing their voices, but at the same time you cannot separate the representation from the examination, so producing art or text is always both a representation of the interlocutor's perspective and your examination of what is happening.

**AMJ: Yes, that is a cool response — you mentioned your family as ideal audience — who are the stakeholders of the forum?**

**MI:** A primary audience is former prisoners but also researchers and activists concerned with justice and accountability who can make use of our work to pursue those processes. For example, I was recently contacted by a lawyer from abroad who is filing a case against a regime in the region, and he told me he is using our site to collect evidence for his case which made me very proud of our website. Of course, the audience is also the public, people who know that prisons exist but don't really understand the mysteriousness of prisons, the things that are unseen, the everyday happenings. So, to make people believe that there are violations, there is torture, there are deaths inside prisons we are trying to create snapshots or traces of what is happening. But even we don't know everything, even former prisoners tell us they don't know everything, they cannot describe everything. What we are really trying to do as much as we can is to find language, to find words. Sometimes what is happening in prisons is beyond description, is wordless, you cannot find the words to describe it. So, the MPF is about trying to find words, either in existing language or even to make new language, that is specific to and captures prison experiences.

**AMJ: I'd actually anticipated some of the things you might say, and I had formulated a question based on the fact that you do have an incredibly impressive website that is a means through which to allow others to scrutinize prisons, like the lawyer you mentioned, and journalists and human rights actors... And you mentioned the representations you make available: talks, reports, reviews, webinars, blogs etc. So, I guess you would agree that MPF has an enabling role? I've also noticed that you are not shy of attending to matters of religion or faith,**

**matters that I think some scholars and activists shy away from. I attended the very thought-provoking conversation on carceral theology not so long ago.<sup>4</sup> How come this focus?**

**MI.** Yeah, again it's a good example of how we try to engage with elements related to the carceral situation in the region that are overlooked in other forms of writing. We've heard that in the Tadmor prison, for example, prisoners were 'welcomed' into the prison with the sentence 'Welcome to Tadmor, where God cannot enter without the permission of President Hafez al-Assad.' Here we see that religion and faith was a focus of the carceral treatment. These are not just invented things, these are people's experiences. But of course, as you mentioned, people are shy about it because usually the violations usually talked about are torture or physical manifestations of violence. People will not speak about how they lost their faith, for example, as an impact of being in prison or about how they were 'traumatized in God' because they were there. They thought that God would help them. They were waiting for a miracle that didn't happen. These are impacts of detention that are not usually mentioned in court sessions, or human rights reports because there is a need for empirical evidence. As described by Darius Rejali in his book *Torture and Democracy*, stealth torture that leaves no marks on bodies causes lawyers and courts a problem. So, this is also a torture technique, to make you lose what you have been brought up with, to question your ultimate foundations through mockery and humiliation: like if they say 'If your God really exists how come you are here?'

We are talking about countries in the MENA region, whose prisoners and regimes are religious or assume that they are religious or are religious along varying degrees. So, these forms of torture targeting people's religiosity or faith do impact people. I mean it's something, even if unseen. So, it is something very important to deal with. If we dismiss these things we lose a lot, even in the pursuit of justice because religion and religious practices and people's relationship with God can be a main pillar in people's lives.

**AMJ: A lot of readers might not be familiar with the acronym MENA (Middle East and North Africa). Are there specific countries that you target. Or do you cover all the countries in the Middle East and North Africa?**

**MI:** For the last years, we were intentionally focusing mostly on the Arab countries of the MENA region. We were not really covering Turkey, Iran, or Afghanistan which some people also include in the region, but we were covering the North African countries such as Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco. We tried as well to cover Mauritania somehow.

4. [https://www.menaprisonforum.org/outreach\\_detail/117/](https://www.menaprisonforum.org/outreach_detail/117/).

**AMJ: How many people in your team?**

**MI:** There's a core team of eight, but we have friends based throughout the specific countries. We are trying to expand to Turkey and Iran because of Syria, especially with regard to how parts of it are controlled by Turkey and because what's happening in Iran has an impact on Syria and Lebanon and Iraq of course. So, we discovered that it doesn't always make sense to consider countries in isolation from their neighbours. At the end of January 2023 in Berlin we had a film screening and discussion about prisons in Iran and that's something new. But to be honest the main countries that we have been focusing on are Tunisia, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Morocco. This year, we did good work in Iraq and in Sudan. But the Gulf needs more work. Of course, Yemen needs a lot of work. It depends on many things — even logistics prevent us sometimes from doing what we want to do in some countries.

**AMJ: It strikes me that another way in which your work might be a bit unique is the breadth, it's extremely broad. I mean you talked about how taking the presence or absence of God seriously was partly about recognising the person in all their wholeness given all their experience, but you are also attuned to the societal or political. The backdrop for your activities is often a set of political and historical conflicts. It's definitely not a narrow focus on just the prison and what goes on there. It is the prison in context. Is that an accurate portrayal?... You're not narrow. You have a broad scope. You take history and society seriously, you're very open?**

**MI:** We are very open, yes. And sometimes, of course, it's a problem because sometimes, for instance, like when the trials happened in Germany, at that time we intended to focus on something else in Iraq, but sometimes because prison issues are really fluid, we have to be responsive. New things are happening every day. So, we moved quickly to organize an event about the trials and about the verdict when it was issued in January 2022. So that's why this year we are continuing our work of observing what's happening in the carceral scenes across the region every day. We are aiming to grow our team to do field work, media reviews, and observations about everyday developments in the field of prisons. We are also aiming to take this monitoring to another level to try to write statements on developments and share with other NGO's and human rights organizations or organize a campaign about it, and then to produce databases and metadata about what's happening in the region.

In the last years we have been both producing and advocating in our work, and this will continue. This year additionally we will make use of what we have produced already to make these campaigns and make

these statements, but also to produce an archive for future research, or future cultural productions. But for this year, we want to continue and increase this kind of database. But when should we focus on what? That's really a big question that every day we are grappling with because there are so many things happening all over the region.

**AMJ: This gives us more clues about the breadth of the work and the level of ambition — it's admirable. I know you already touched on origins. And you mentioned Monika and Lokman. Could you say a little bit about who Monika and Lokman are? Also, the relation between the MPF and UMAM.**

**MI:** Lokman Slim is a late Lebanese writer, scholar, and filmmaker who studied in France and then returned to Lebanon in late 1989. At the end of the Civil War in Lebanon he was faced with the absence of archives, with the absence of memory. In Lebanon, the school syllabuses don't deal with the Civil War. So, Lokman's passion was to produce this archive to really open up conversations about what happened. And how should Lebanese society speak about it? He also aimed to produce written works, as he co-founded the publishing house Dar al-Jadeed with his sister Rasha Al-Ameer. He met Monika Borgmann, I think, in the early 2000s and they produced their first film together, *Massaker*. *Massaker* is a film about the perpetrators of the Sabra and Shatila massacre in Lebanon during the 1980s. In 2005 they established the UMAM Documentation and Research where they started with projects that are mainly concerned with Lebanese and later Syrian memories. This involved continuing the collection of archives of old newspapers from Lebanon in particular, but also the Middle East in general. The story continues with the film *Tadmor* that I told you about. And then in 2018, the MPF, was established as an initiative of UMAM documentation and research. MPF is connected to UMAM D&R, it's one of the initiatives of UMAM D&R. Its work has the same idea of talking about memory, justice, accountability but mainly concerned with prisons — really concerned with the histories and cultures of incarceration in the region in general.

**AMJ: So some shared sources of inspiration, emphasis and focus but narrower in a sense. I don't know if it's even possible for you to answer this next question: is there a way to say in general or specific terms what prisons are like in the region? I mean in principle I'm against 'photofit' overgeneralized accounts of what prisons look like but are there any common characteristics or common qualities that you can identify? And here I'm thinking of our readers who probably don't know so much about prisons in the region. What are they like?**

**MI:** OK. Look. I was struck by something that I was working on last year. It's also one of our last talks in December.<sup>5</sup> It's a recent report about prison reforms, about what prison reform means in the region and what different actors mean by prison reform.<sup>6</sup> The first part is mainly about how and when the first prison reforms were introduced and whether one is talking about the war on terrorism, or even the time after the Second World War, like when do regimes in the region speak about prison reforms...? And part two, which will be produced soon, is mainly about programmes and agendas, it's mainly what did the regimes do by way of prison reform and why they are talking about prison reform at all. But the reason I'm talking about prison reform is because prisons in the region are — and that's maybe something common to other regions too — are very central to understanding the politics of the countries and of the regimes. So, prisons are not only places for reforming people, of making them good citizens, or not even that at all. To fully understand prisons it's important also to understand how opposition to the regimes is being formed inside prisons, how ideologies are being formed inside prisons, how even killing and practices of getting rid of this opposition also happens inside prisons. And that's not to mention detention centres that are unknown to most people, that are unknown to us, and as we clearly state in the report, we don't know everything happening in the carceral scene. We might know about prisons or at least their empirical location but maybe there are other sites of detention, of incarceration, that we don't know anything about. So, as I usually say about this, talking about scrutiny as well, like the examination, it's as if you are, as Lokman used to say, taking a scissor and using it to cut through a forest entangled with trees and undergrowth. You cannot make easy headway. You don't have the tools. What we are trying to do in the MPF is to try as much as possible to find the tools and the language. But what we are doing is just scratching the surface of what could be known about prisons in the region. It's just one or two layers. You know, there are many things we don't know.

That's why MPF is a project where you cannot really tell when it will end, or if you will ever reach an idea of what prisons really are like. It's more about how prisons are working, or operating or how we as people, researchers, activists, artists who are interested in or who are concerned with justice, accountability, ending of impunity, and this process need to understand prisons by looking at how they operate and at their effects. But how the prisons in the region look, it's really difficult to answer. But what I can assure you, and assure maybe the readers as well, is that it's very important to understand not only the past, as we have been talking about, but the future as well, but also to think about the future of the regimes in the countries and the future of

the people. The past is embedded in people's memories in the region. And it's embedded in the practices of the authoritarian rulers, the dictators, and the dictatorial practices of the regimes in the regions.

**AMJ: It strikes me you do this work with a lot of integrity. It sounds great, but what do you hope for in the long term?**

**MI:** Sustainability, of course, for the projects. I'm always saying this but we're working on a topic in a region that is very unstable, that is very random, it's very mysterious as I said, full of mysteries and things that you don't know. What we are doing now is to further develop our approach. We have a new office now in Berlin, for example. So that's something really important that we try to develop this office, but without leaving or without forgetting that our project is deeply tied to the Middle East and North Africa. We also have our headquarters in Beirut and we are trying to develop partnerships in Tunisia and in countries where we can do this kind of work. So that's the first thing. And the second thing is to expand a bit to other regions, to try to learn from other regions. We began that already. I talked about Guantanamo in November — with Lisa Hajjar about her new book.<sup>7</sup> We believe that things are connected. So, in her book she wrote about how some of the prisoners of Guantanamo were sent by the CIA to Egypt, to Libya, to Syria, during the 2000s after 9/11. We believe even that it's not off limits to speak about Guantanamo at the MPF or to speak about even the Stasi regime. There are historical connections to the region. So, two long term aims: sustainability, but also try to learn from other regions and other people who are working on these topics.

**AMJ: Thank you so much for all these great insights. I wonder if we could just finally come back to the topic of scrutiny. What do you think — now that we have had this conversation — about my initial hunch that one productive way to think about the work of MPF is through the idea of scrutiny? Could you maybe sum up for us the different means through which MPF scrutinizes prisons and politics in the MENA region?**

**MI:** Yeah, I think it makes sense to think of what we do as scrutiny. MPF scrutinizes the everyday lives and affairs of prisons via monitoring media outlets and through the daily work of human rights activists and researchers. We also examine prisons' archives and historical records together with cultural and artistic productions that are produced by official, governmental agencies or former detainees. In sum, we seek to put all these elements in conversation to search for innovative and influential ways to further examine cultures and histories of incarceration in the MENA region.

5. [https://www.menaprisonforum.org/outreach\\_detail/116/](https://www.menaprisonforum.org/outreach_detail/116/).

6. [https://www.menaprisonforum.org/observer\\_detail/11/](https://www.menaprisonforum.org/observer_detail/11/)

7. [https://www.menaprisonforum.org/outreach\\_detail/112/](https://www.menaprisonforum.org/outreach_detail/112/)