

Living and Making Sense of the Prison Scene in the MENA Region

Detailed Report of the “State Force, Prison and Torture: The Afterlives of Political Imprisonment in the MENA” Workshop

November 11-13, 2020

Online Zoom Meeting

Administrated from Cologne, Germany, and Beirut, Lebanon

“I write to live.” Yassin Al-Haj Saleh spoke calmly, looking into the camera as he responded to questions and engaged in conversation with participants via Zoom. He had just concluded giving the keynote speech opening the online workshop “State Force, Prison and Torture: The Afterlives of Political Imprisonment in the MENA.” His talk addressed “Greater Jail: The Politics of Prison in Syria,” and combined analysis of the history of Syria’s regime and analysis from other cases of political violence such as genocides and politicides, in particular in Germany where he is currently based. His interlinking of personal and professional motivations to dedicate himself to work on carceral systems in the Middle East set the tone for insightful, nuanced, and dynamic conversations throughout the workshop.

While the in-person connection of a traditional workshop was missed, the online nature of the event allowed for one of the most striking elements of the workshop: presenters and participants were able to join the call from all over the world, totaling over 60 participants. The organization of the workshop harnessed advanced technical tools which provided simultaneous translations of both Arabic and English presentations and comments. This allowed the presenters and participants to speak in the language which they are most comfortable while allowing all participants to understand and respond without being impeded by a language barrier.

The presentations spanned cultures of incarceration in mainly Egypt and Syria, but also addressed conditions in Iraq, Morocco, Palestine, with participants chiming in, making connections between cases and countries, and sharing personal and academic exposure to prison dynamics throughout the MENA region. The wide range of expertise of the presenters and audience led to discussions and questions that included active resource sharing via the online chat function, and the fostering of possible future partnerships. There were repeated calls to further organize similar events in the future to make sense of and “to live” such a very complex, thorny, and timely topic. The workshop indeed pointed out the urgency to gather academics, human rights advocates and activists, psychiatrists, artists, and writers. The workshop was yet another step in creating a community of those who share the interest of exploring the worlds of prisons in the MENA region together with the lives and afterlives of victims and survivors of detention and torture. While the workshop opened the space for the thorough exploration of specific elements, it also planted seeds of specific areas for further analysis in prison contexts, which are posited at the end of this report.

This sharing of cases from various contexts continues throughout the two-day workshop co-hosted by the Institute of Oriental Studies at the University of Cologne and the MENA Prison Forum (MPF). Speakers and participants drew from their professional work, personal experiences, and resources they had encountered to discuss the multifaceted and extensive dynamics around carceral systems in the Middle East. The conversations spurred renewed

interest in prison work, and the comradery among the participants was a source of support and strength to continue undertaking this emotionally taxing and difficult work. This is just the beginning of the kind of engagement on these issues, and new forms of engagement: between activism and academia for example. The link between art, academia, and activism was also obvious through the presentations of activists and those who had personal experiences in prison.

Monika Borgmann and Lokman Slim of UMAM D&R, and Stephan Milich of the University of Cologne chaired the workshop and outlined the goals of the two days, which were two-fold: sharing of work by the presenters in their sessions, and collaborative discussions on prison-related areas of work that still need to be undertaken. This dual-motive of the event was supported by the newly-launched website of the MPF, which was introduced at the beginning of the workshop. The website is the production of the past two years of the Forum's work collecting, documenting, and producing books, films, artwork, and podcasts. The website aims to be an active repository of resources, one which is continually expanding to include materials, but also as a platform for collaboration in creating such resources. The workshop was an opportunity for friends and colleagues to learn about the work already produced by the MPF, while enhancing potential and future orientations that the MPF can work with participants to excavate in the coming months and years.

The first panel focused on exploring dynamics **“Inside Prison.”** Rehab Chaker spoke about her research analyzing the role of the jailor in prison literature from Syria. She noted that while the prisoner is a recipient of the prison system, the jailor has motives or circumstances that have led them to their role in the prison system, which while controversial and central in prison memoirs written about detainees, is not well understood. She uncovered and analyzed personal encounters, such as cases of prisoners and jailors who knew one another prior to their immersion in the prison system, as well as gendered relationships between female prisoners and male jailors. This fostered an engaged conversation among participants around the terminology used to describe the different actors seen as responsible or playing a role in the carceral system across different contexts. “Jailor” was felt by some to be too vague to consider all workers in a jail under one term (admin workers vs. guards vs. torturers), and not capturing the nuances between different types of prisons (military vs. administration prison, prison vs. detention center). The conversation dwelled on the understanding that a deeper understanding of the jailor would lead to a better understanding of the prison system, and an understanding of how the jailors also experienced the prison system.

Next, Jaber Baker focused his presentation on the seminal moment of release from prison. He described the moment of freedom as offering a complex set of responsibilities, and the freedom of leaving one small prison, only to be released into the larger prison that was Syria before the revolution. He also speaks of the many moments of freedom from the layered prison: first freedom from jail, then freedom from Syrian once people fled. He deeply addressed the way that social treatment of an ex-prisoner imposes conditions and constraints on the “freedom” of a person once released from jail, which can be imposed on him or her by the state, the family, or the society into which she/he is released. He focused on the need for strategies to be developed to manage “post-prison.” Part of this is managing the stigmas of society against ex-prisoners, as well as the internal memory and effect of torture on the individual. Baker spoke of the many

adjustments a person must go through once placed in a prison, and once again when they are released. The discussion revolved around possible options for constructive coping strategies that could address this array of dynamics.

The panel “**Outside Prison**” was comprised of two presentations, as unfortunately Basma Abdelaziz was unable to join to present on “Prolonged Pre-trial Detention: The effects of helpless waiting on the families of detainees.” Sonja Hegasy spoke about the successes and limitations of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission in Morocco. The Commission is not allowed to name perpetrators in public, but evidence of abuses has been collected and reparations have been paid to some of the cases. While there has been significant criticism of the Morocco process, it did change the political culture of Morocco. Hegasy also drew attention to the necessity to understand the blurred lines between ‘criminal’ and ‘political’ prisoners: as this is because political activism is simply considered a crime by ruling regimes in the MENA region.

Literary scholar Shareah Taleghani explored how the poetry of Faraj Bayraqdar, who was imprisoned in Syria during the 1980s and 1990s, enabled theorizing meanings of “freedom” and “space” among (ex-) prisoners. Bayraqdar’s works break the binaries that imagine differences between the inside and outside of the space of the prison on one hand, together with the before and after of the imprisonment duration on the other hand. His poetry opens ways to think of the extended time and place that the prisoners experience, addressing elements of what is missed in prison, such as nature, animals, and women. Elements of the carceral system are not only seen in the contents of his poems, but in the practicalities of his work as well: his choice of writing poems facilitated their spread outside of prison walls, as other inmates committed poems to memory and recited them once released, allowing them to be recorded. However, Bayraqdar did not want his work published while he was incarcerated out of fear his visiting privileges would be revoked. Participants contributed stories of Bayraqdar’s methods of communicating his work to fellow inmates, which included using morse code to convey the poem to another inmate who then memorized the poem. The access to writing utensils impacted the nature of the work that could be produced in prison, and the level of censorship also impacted the way prison material was developed. For example, participants who spent time in prison spoke about how some prisons had easy access to paper, writing utensils, and the newspaper, while inmates in other prisons resorted to writing on onion skins and cigarette papers.

The workshop on the second day stressed the importance of looking into prisons not as ‘another’ world that needs to be discussed for its own sake, but as a phenomenon that surpasses spatial and temporal borders that are wrongly imagined as barriers between the ‘insiders’ and the ‘outsiders.’ Therefore, the third panel addressed “**After Prison.**” The workshop emphasized an important aspect that the MPF has previously researched during its meeting in Tunisia in September 2019: that is, prisons and their studies should not be limited to the institutions administrated by ruling regimes, but they should supersede the modern understandings of discipline and punishment.

Accordingly, Amer Matar’s talk emphasized dynamics around prisons and detention centers of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. He addressed how such places reflect the necessity of digging into features of incarceration that do not necessarily fall into the parameters of the so-called “modern nation-states.” Matar has personal connections to both state and non-state prisons in Syria, but

his work is currently largely focused on documenting ISIS prisons. The dispersed nature of non-state prisons and the widespread issue of forced disappearances has motivated his interest in these sites: he expressed how through his work he has noticed unique geographic aspects of ISIS prisons. Instead of formal, centralized prisons, ISIS turned many houses, old prisons, stadiums, and key infrastructure buildings into prisons. He also addressed how for Yazidi women who were taken captive by ISIS members, every house was turned into a prison in which they were imprisoned. He also noted that there are similarities between ISIS prisons, and prisons and treatment in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, those under the Assad regime, as well as Guantanamo methodology. This is largely due to the fact that ISIS members have been imprisoned in other contexts, and their experiences as prisoners have influenced their role as jailors.

The intervention of Sabine Sayegh provided a different perspective to “after prison,” as she is a psychotherapist based in Germany who described her work with survivors of imprisonment and torture in Syria and Lebanon. In psychotherapeutic terms, she mainly referred to the difficulties and possibilities of forgetting prison scars even after getting released, moving to another country, and after a long period of time. Her work has been on looking at the overlap of chronic pain and PTSD, as both conditions are very present in torture survivors. PTSD is a memory disorder, as the brain fails to extinguish the negative memory, and there are consequences of constant stress on the brain. The conversation after her presentation saw questions on positive coping mechanisms and benefits of therapeutic interventions for those who have suffered such traumas.

Mohammad Berro then gave a presentation entitled “Second person: associations of return and absence,” in which he spoke about his recent book, which addresses the return of a person after prison. He looks at the short and long conditions of imprisonment, as well as the individual personality of the detainee and his social system. He spoke about the types of release: some prisoners were moved into prisons where they began to acclimate to the outside world, as a type of rehabilitation. He also addressed the family dynamics of an ex-prisoner as they try to return to their previous role in the family, or try to build their own family. Ex-prisoners can be put under intense scrutiny from the family: it can be easier for the parents to blame the victim instead of the regime, because if they blame the regime, they will have to take responsibilities and could be targeted as well. Instead, parents of ex-detainees often take the role of controlling and watching them to protect the family. Outside of family dynamics, there can also be an impact of “social siege” on the ex-detainee, as friends and relatives don’t even dare approach because they’re afraid of the security ramifications of associating with former prisoners.

Originally scheduled for Thursday morning, Saif Alislam Eid’s presentation on “The generational conflict inside the Egyptian prisons and the possibility of producing new movements” was postponed to Friday afternoon. It focused on the generational gap that has arisen between the young members of the Muslim Brotherhood inside the Egyptian prisons and members of the Islamist organization’s leadership who currently live outside Egypt. His analysis focused on a set of open, collective letters written on behalf of younger inmates in prison addressed to the external leadership criticizing the dismissal of their grievances and pains. These “Detainees’ Messages” focused on political, ethical, and religious claims, and addressed practical issues in the prisons. From his analysis he found that a generational conflict had arisen from outside of the prison, in terms of allowing open discourse on fundamental issues, and the lack of resources and legitimacy being shared with the youth within the movement.

For the concluding presentation, Mina Ibrahim spoke on “Modes of post-prison alienation and estrangement in Egypt.” He explored the failures of prisoners to reintegrate into their societies and communities following their release into Egyptian society. Ibrahim particularly argued that this failure results not from the ‘imperfection’ that prevents ex-prisoners to dissolve into an assumed ‘perfect’ Egyptian society. However, it is because the Egyptian nation-state itself has been always involved in the process of struggling for clear moral, social, and political regulations. His work critically explored the central role of the “sinner” in the Coptic belief system in comparison to the ways in which politically “sinners” are dismissed.

In summary, the workshop was a great opportunity to take stock and exchange ideas of work on carceral systems in the Middle East, as well as to think of what further work can be done. Guided by the enthusiasm of the participants, the MPF will further organize other meetings and events that integrate other thematic focuses as well as a geographic focus on other countries of the so-called MENA region, such as Sudan, Somalia, Mauritania, Turkey, Iran, and Yemen. Furthermore, the MPF finds itself responsible to explore innovative methods to manoeuvre the prison scene and to make sense of its complex life-worlds. Identified key topics for further fruitful work included the following, summarized under the headings of the three panels held.

- **Inside Prison**

- **Prison terminology:** Consideration of the differences in terminology used for members of the prison system, ranging from “jailor,” “warden,” “torturer,” “guard,” “perpetrator,”
- **“Jailor” testimonies:** Aim to collect the often-overlooked perspectives from those who work within the prison system in order to garner more insights into their roles and motivations, thus leading to a better understanding of the overall prison system
- **Prisoner communities:** Looking at differing experiences of prisoners depending on their societies of origins, political affiliation, and community support during and after incarceration. Some specific areas of discussion were the impact of affiliation to a wider political movement has on prisoners’ experiences, and how prison populations have changed over time: in Syria, for example, many prisoners were detained because of their political affiliations, while now they are a result of random arrests and detentions.
- **Prison testimonies:** Increased attention and gathering of messages from prisons, such as open letters and communiques
- **Prison literary remains:** Attention to collecting literary remains of materials produced in prisons, even if they are not finalized or complete. These literary remains are under threat, and there should be an effort to capture and preserve them. One possible method is the digitization of such materials, which would allow these resources to be shared (selectively) while the originals can be kept by the authors, as they are intimate and sentimental
- **Prison publication centers:** Analysis of where prison literature is published, as these centers of publication have moved regionally over time and can tell us something about the socio-political dynamics in a region
- **Prison collective experiences:** Exploration of the commonality in daily life in prison, regardless of the country of context. Individuals who had personally spent time in prison

remarked on how their experiences and memories of their time there are reflected in the recollections of others from other countries.

- **State/non-state prisons:** Analysis of dynamics and influences from state-prisons to non-state prisons, and the similarities and differences between them.

- **Outside Prison**

- **Greater jails:** Analysis of countries in the MENA region as “greater jails,” ones in which individuals are still incarcerated within upon their release from prison, or even without ever entering a formal prison environment
- **Continual colonialization:** Consideration of Arab regimes as continually colonial regimes that continue colonizing populations, bodies and the minds
- **Systems support:** Analysis of how capitalism and the carceral system, as well as the educational system and the carceral system, are intertwined systems that support one another
- **State of exception or state of rule:** Explore how the state sees prisons under its rule: do they see the most violent or brutal prisons as exceptions to their rule, or as the embodiment of their power and bureaucracy? If the former, the prisons form part of the double standard of the regime, but one which is continually implemented and does not need a declaration (versus something like a state of emergency)
- **State centered on prisons:** Looking at insights that can be garnered from comparing the centrality of prison in the Middle East to something like the Dutch system, that is moving to create a system without prisons at all?
- **Legacy of regimes:** Role of regime’s heavy use of prison, such as the Ba’ath regime in Syria that turned the prisons into graveyards for the living due to the huge number of torture and prisoners

- **After Prison**

- **Moment of release:** Addressing dynamics around “release” and “freedom” from prison, not only for the prisoner but also for their family and the wider society
- **Afterlife to prison:** Consider the different levels of afterlife of prison regarding relationships and reintegrating to the family, neighborhood, including employment and social opportunities, and how different communities react to and reintegrate ex-prisoners, and trans-generational trauma both within families and within communities
- **Reintegration of prisoners:** Analysis of how former political detainees are seen across different country contexts. For ex-prisoners who are released and welcomed as heroes, how does this welcome and messages around their positive contribution to society during their incarceration affect how they process their experiences?