

BAHRAIN'S CARCERAL SYSTEM

From Fidawiya to Death Politics

Abbass Al-Morshid

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MENA PRISON FORUM

[A project by **UMAM D&R**]

MPF LOGS [4]

Beirut 2019/2020

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This publication was produced thanks to financial support from the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (ifa), which is funded by the German Federal Foreign Office.

Bahrain: A Case of Prisons and State Building

This log, the fourth in the MENA Prison Forum Logs series, is clear in presenting a cursive introduction to carceral issues in Bahrain. Despite, or in fact due to, the limitation of its focus and scope, the reader is left wondering about the mentions and pieces of information briefly provided in the text. This log therefore raises a number of questions that can shed light on the often difficult to understand history of the prison issue in many countries of the Mashreq and Maghreb.

At the forefront of these questions are those posed by author Abbas Al-Murshid, a human rights Bahraini activist, about the genesis of the “political prisoner” in Bahrain, and further in the emergence of “politics” in the sense that have arisen in the 21st century. Bahrain, in the process of instituting itself as a state in the 1920s, created “public order” as a core tenant of its “politics” in a way that was a vast departure from its pre-state form. The country that emerged was no longer the same, and its people, accordingly, were therefore no longer themselves. The “reforms” that came with state-building abolished, at least formally, the organization of *Fidawiya*, the traditional security organization under the personal command of individual rulers. What arose in its place was the modern format of prison under the auspices of the police apparatus that relegated carceral punishment to alignment under state institutions, and thus became physically and conceptually separated from the private rulers.

The author is clear on his position towards the “colonial” nature

of these reforms, and how they belong to colonial legacies writ-large. Al-Murshid is also certain on the outcome of these dynamics being the ultimate transformation of prison in Bahrain from a private to a public facility. It is up to the reader whether he or she agrees with the position taken by the author that the prison has turned into "an ostensibly independent institution that is run by the police chief and directed by the ruler" or not.

Additionally, the emergence of the state carceral institution in Bahrain can be seen as having broadly developed from similar contexts that defined the respective emergence in other states of the Mashreq and the Maghreb. However, what is striking from the case of Bahrain is that the state institutionalization process happened in a comparatively short window. The transformation of the "Fidawiya batons" to what the author calls the "politics of death" is confined to a relatively narrow and accelerated time frame and phases of implementation. The development of the Bahraini carceral system can therefore be seen as "exemplary" in its establishment in this same context that other countries similarly experienced, albeit as part of a slower and anfractuous course.