

# PRISONBIRDS' DICTIONARY

An Outline of Egyptian Prison Lingo

Ahmad Said

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#### **MENA PRISON FORUM**

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

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# INSIDE PRISON, OUTSIDE CONTROL

This notebook is the fifth installment of the MENA Prison Forum Logs series. Both the Forum and its logs initiative stem from a long-standing interest of UMAM Documentation and Research (UMAM D&R) in carceral-related issues. This series of publications seeks to convey the testimonies of former detainees as well as monographs exploring a multitude of prison topics and conditions throughout the MENA region.

In 2012, UMAM D&R had the great honor of being entrusted with the testimonies of a number of Lebanese men formerly detained in Syrian prisons. The contents of these testimonies spurred UMAM D&R to begin to compile a glossary of words and expressions that these former prisoners employed to describe their detention in Syrian custody. Upon amassing a significant vocabulary, UMAM D&R felt compelled to continue and broaden this endeavor, and thus began to examine other written testimonies recounting individual experiences in Syria's prisons. In doing so, UMAM D&R analyzed published prison testimonies and extracted from them identified prison terms and expressions. Gradually, the glossary expanded into a dictionary and was published under the title, *Keys of the Syrian Prison*.

In 2019 a conversation with friend and colleague Ahmad Said began with the horrors taking place inside Egyptian prisons, and subsequently, to the idea behind *Keys of the Syrian Prison*. Conceptualizing terms and phrases as “keys” resonated with

Ahmad, and he set about considering his own period of detention in Egypt, and reflecting on his personal experience through the lens of the prison vernacular to which he was exposed. This process led him to identify and delineate his own series of “keys.” A few months later, Ahmad shared his own dictionary with the MPF, entitled, *Prisonbirds’ Dictionary: An Outline of Egyptian Prison Lingo*. In his adaptation of this overarching metaphor, Ahmad elicits the image of keys bound to one another on a chain, secured at one end by his prison memory and unobstructed on the opposite end, thereby extending to others an invitation to contribute and add to his collection. In this same spirit of collaborative exchange and interaction, Ahmad’s work is now being incorporated into the MPF’s ever-expanding prison lingo database.

For Ahmad, however, working on this project also served as an opportunity to further reflect on the roots of “prison lingo,” and the array of needs, functions, and objectives it is intended to address and satisfy. As he recounts:

The first time I dreamed in German was when I was a prisoner at ‘High Security Prison 2.’ Today, as I remember and reflect upon it, I have no doubt that my subconscious led me to do so in an attempt to find a way to rid myself of the obsession of having my thoughts and expressions monitored. It seems to me that this pursuit of escaping control is what drives prisoners to create a new ‘language’ that separates them as individuals or groups from ‘others.’ The ‘others’ in prison are, of course, the jailers.

In the aftermath of dreaming in German, I began writing down my thoughts in English or in German whenever I had the opportunity to do so, and kept doing this until a letter I wrote in German fell into the hands of the wardens. It was like a fatal accident, not only because I had violated the ban imposed on communication with the outside, especially written communication, but also because the letter was written in a language that the warden did not understand. Thus, the crime turned into two crimes, and perhaps the second one – the inability of the warden to understand the letter – was even more dangerous than the first.

He goes on to state:

Language is a social product fulfilling the need to communicate, but it is not a neutral instrument: it expresses the power of balance within the society that produces it. At the same time, language continuously reproduces those hierarchal relationships and even maintains and consolidates them. The language we use is an identity statement and expression of our position in the society. Hence, language is as much a political instrument as it is a political practice.

In both *Keys of the Syrian Prison* as well as *Prisonbirds' Dictionary: An Outline of Egyptian Prison Lingo*, one will quickly become aware that much of the prison lexicon stems from the need to name objects and phenomena that do not exist beyond prison walls. This logic also applies to items that are forbidden in prison, yet entirely permissible outside. New terms—that evoke a shared meaning among prisoners—must be created and assigned to such “contraband” as a means of circumventing its prohibition and evading those charged with the ban’s enforcement.

From his own experience, Ahmad highlights the manipulation of certain terms and expressions used outside prison to impart praise and admiration, and illustrates the ways in which—behind bars—they were inverted to assume new, slanderous or otherwise defamatory connotations. Discussing these deliberate reversals of meaning Ahmad explains that he “often saw a kind of resistance to the society and its language, and this rebellion was against its morals and hierarchy, and an attempt to create a counter-alternative, even if this was so done without awareness of the language being used as resistance.”

From a structural perspective, Ahmad points to the influx of political prisoners that followed the military coup executed on 3 July, 2013. The consequent overcrowding now synonymous with Egyptian prisons facilitated the blending of expressions and terms originally adopted by “ordinary prisoners” and those used by “prisoners of opinion.” This exchange and sharing of language not only occurred across “classifications” or “categories” of prisoners, but also permeated out beyond the prisons, as some of the jargon continued to be employed within the wider community as well as on social media platforms.

Prison lingo is thus in a perpetual process of modification and evolution, pervading multilayered spheres of circulation as it is transmitted within, across, and outside prison cells.

Ahmad's remarks on his personal prison experience eloquently underscore the importance of the MENA Prison Forum's Prison Language project. What we might term "prison slang" is far more than a secondary or obscure linguistic feature; on the contrary, it constitutes an unbreakable tether connecting the worlds inside prisons and those that surround them, in spite of the unrelenting efforts that regimes exert to sever these ties.