

CONVERSATIONS AND CONNECTIONS

# ASSEMBLY



Artists making change in  
the Middle East and North Africa

23



American  
Friends  
Service  
Committee





منارة  
Manara



Hello  
Weekend



In late January and early February of 2023, artists, activists, and cultural practitioners from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) gathered in the Jordanian capital of Amman for the American Friends Service Committee's (AFSC's) latest convention in the region. AFSC's June 2022 gathering in Casablanca, Morocco, examined how art and culture are making change in the MENA region. The prompt for Amman was to build on the experience, energy, and momentum of the Casablanca event and provide answers, practical knowledge, real-life examples, and relevant strategies for success.

A mix of presentations to the group, informal discussions over coffee and meals, and site visits to cultural centers provided ample opportunities for artists to speak with philanthropic organizations, for activists to listen to the experiences of educators, and for theater practitioners to meet with poets, to give just a few examples.

Amman itself could be said to echo some of those discussions: the Jordanian capital is home to large numbers of Palestinian and other regional refugees and has long been a crossroads and a generous if imperfect haven from conflict and dispossession.

The AFSC's Amman event offered a crossroads of its own. Despite it being well over a year since the worst of the COVID pandemic and its restrictions, attendees again relished the opportunity to travel across borders to meet in person. Artists, practitioners, activists, and funders from Egypt, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and Jordan itself, many of whom had joined the earlier Casablanca event, again appeared to enjoy the confluence of parallels and distinctions that drew them to Amman.

The pandemic, however, has left its mark. Beyond the illness itself, COVID gave certain governments an excuse to enact draconian policies that seem to have been withdrawn purposefully slowly as a method of control. A decade after the Arab Spring and the crackdowns on social justice activism thereafter, the hunger for art and culture to aid discourse, healthy public life, and civic debate appears to be even more acute.

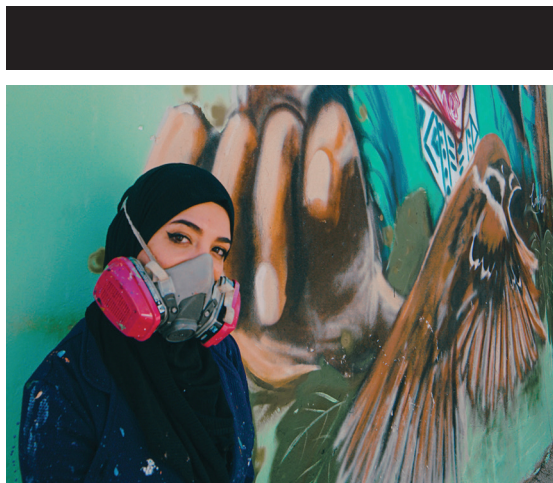


In terms of cultural production, not being able to meet has also made it difficult to make work. As one of the AFSC's Jordanian representatives, Khaled Elkhouz, pointed out: "It's clear that the pandemic disrupted lives, communities, and our movements and struggles for social change. But it also had a deep impact on the cultural ecosystem. Individual artists and cultural practitioners are still facing real challenges in getting the kinds of support that they need to survive, let alone prosper, in communities that are under a lot of stress. At the same time, the pandemic further revealed the importance of arts and culture for people as a major resource for resilience, connection, and mental wellness, all of which give people hope that a better future is possible."

With an eye on that future, the Amman event was designed to be a forum for practical help for this cultural ecosystem and a source of not just inspiration but also—through its speakers and themes—functional assistance to communities and organizations. Jason Drucker, AFSC's associate general secretary, advancement, said, "This event was designed specifically to build on our first in Casablanca." He added: "This second convening is letting us dig deep with artists to reveal in more subtle ways how they are seeking to shift perceptions, public discourse, social and political acts, and human relations. To do this, we also have commissioned new research on the arts that identifies social practices related to these goals and purposes—but also specific to the content in the MENA region. It is a fruitless conversation to talk about art for art's sake versus art for social change. The people we are bringing together hold both in their awareness, and our research is designed to inform our understanding of how aesthetically driven work operates in a larger social, political, and economic horizon."

This research, commissioned from Jude Sajdi of Sama Consulting, provided the AFSC MENA team with a framework for thinking about artistic and cultural activities and provided building blocks for the 4-day event.

Robert Bound, an editor with long experience in the region, joined the gathering to offer a broad idea of the topics discussed. He spent time speaking with several of the participants and those related to the field about their work. In the following pages, we hear from five individuals who represent the diversity of the Amman event and its goals. Each of these conversations has been condensed and edited for clarity.



**LAILA AJJAWI**

*Palestinian Jordanian artist and social justice activist*

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Laila Ajjawi has been painting her evocative murals on city walls since 2014, when she took part in the Women on Walls festival for Egypt and the Middle East. Laila's work often centers on themes of women's rights and social justice, and her colorful and often huge images turn heads and stop traffic across the sites where she has wielded her spray cans atop a cherry picker. While she also works for commercial clients, her great drive is "the fear of being confronted with a big, blank city wall." Here Laila talks about her art, activism, and growing up a refugee.

**ROBERT BOUND:** *What was the last artwork you painted that meant a lot to you?*

**LAILA AJJAWI:** For International Women's Day this year, I painted a large figure of a woman under a galaxy of stars. She encompasses all sorts of women of different backgrounds, ages, places—she is a uniting presence. And the brightest star in that galaxy above her represents hope.

**RB:** *How much of your work is planned and commissioned and how much is spontaneous mural making?*

**LA:** Generally there are two categories of street artists: some do exactly what they want and make work in the street whether it's legal or

"The brightest star in that galaxy above her, represents hope."

illegal. But I have a responsibility to think my murals through, and the ideas go through some filtration before I go out to the streets. I am not just trying to tag things—I'm an artist who makes work about and within the frame of social responsibility.

**RB:** *Your work is very public—people don't have to enter a gallery to see it—they can't help but see it. Does working on city walls come with responsibility?*

**LA:** First, my sense of responsibility comes from the way that I was raised. Now, witnessing how people engage with my work in the streets also gives me a real feeling of responsibility. There is a line you can cross in a painting and how people may view it, so I don't put triggers in my work as some artists do. I don't want a bad scene to develop around my murals. Publicity is nice, but I want it to be of the right kind, and I'd like my murals to be preserved as much as possible.

**RB:** *So you don't intend your work to be read as political or obviously allegorical; you want it to be understood metaphorically?*

**LA:** Yes, I tend to move away from politics. It may put me in danger—I'm a mother, after all. My work is more concerned with social issues and particularly women's rights and the Palestinian case. They are different, and I don't tend to mix them.

**RB:** *You were born and raised in a refugee camp in Irbid. Can you define what perspective that gave you?*

**LA:** Growing up in the camp gave me a very particular perspective, of course. The first time I mixed with people from outside the camp was at college, where people could be racist and cruel because I'd come from the camp. There is a Palestinian or Jordanian issue: I am Palestinian with a Jordanian passport and ID number, but some other Palestinians don't have that. There are ideas about who is really Palestinian and then who is really Jordanian. So I got to know how people deal in stereotypes as soon as I left the camp, and this particularly affects how people judge women and girls. The camp is a big bubble: you're both insulated and isolated. I'm interested in making murals in the camp because I think there is an identity that is being erased step by step, on purpose. My work is there to remind future generations of the Palestinian case and what is happening.



## HATEM SALAMA

Program officer, Ford Foundation

# 2

Hatem Salama is a program officer for the Ford Foundation in Cairo, looking after arts and media grant making across the Middle East and North Africa. Hatem has spent 20 years working for international organizations that support culture in the region, having previously been on the other side of the desk, seeking aid for his own cultural practice, particularly in theater. Here Hatem talks about getting under the skin of grantees' projects, the attractions of risk-taking, and how large organizations may be passing the baton to local philanthropy.

It helps my work at the Ford Foundation that I spent almost 24 years of my life asking for funding myself. Now I'm on the other side, and I'm very interested in asking, "What do you really want to do?" My advice for people looking for funding would be not to use the terms or topics that you think I have in my strategy. Forget about that. Instead ask yourself what you really want to do as an organization. What is your main objective or purpose? Where do you want to develop strategically? What is the need that you see on the ground? Because you are the one with the knowledge of what is happening out there. Then it's my task to find the connections between what really needs to happen and the strategy to make it happen.

I love it when ideas are risky and there's a bit of going into the unknown, when there's a lot of energy and passion, and it's a risk that can open doors that we hadn't even imagined were there. When you think you have thought of everything and have a very clear plan, it shows something, but at the same time you are very confined; you have made limitations already. If you have a very clear objective in terms of values, then OK—then that's something we can work toward.

The Ford Foundation is focused on social justice, and this can be approached in so many different ways, from topics that

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concern gender to technology and society, natural resources, and climate change. It's a lot, and we're trying to work out how we can support or change something for the better. My area is the arts, culture, and media, and an example—something that the Ford Foundation is supporting—is Arij, which is a network for investigative journalists. Arij provides training and support for fact-checkers and for reporters to become highly professional investigative journalists. This way we support the public at large to have access to reliable information. What we aspire for is a collaboration between the governments in the future, hopefully between the civic space, civil society, and between the different elements that hold society together. It is our part to allocate or to support the allocation of resources to the players who are conscious of their role, of their relationship with the other players around them in the ecosystem.

There are of course lots of other international donors that we all know that are either governmental, like the United States Agency for International Development, or private, like us at the Ford Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the Drosos Foundation, and so on. What is interesting is that we can also see here and there in the region that there is an emergence of local and regional interest in philanthropy. Now it is about how you can engage with these newcomers. Let's say it's our responsibility as donors and foundations that have been working in the region for such a long time to engage with these new organizations to share our experience and learning but also to listen to their fresh perspectives.









“As much as the arts are resilient in withstanding challenges, art is continually a site of resistance.”

**TATIANA MOUARBES**



**Photography:**  
Shady Adwan



## TATIANA MOUARBES

Director, Soros Arts Fellowship, Team Manager, Open Society Foundation Culture and Art program

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Tatiana Mouarbes is a curator, grant maker, and creative strategist. A team manager with the Culture and Art program at the Open Society Foundations, Tatiana also directs the Soros Arts Fellowship, with its focus on the Southern Hemisphere, and was previously program officer for the Open Society Foundations' Middle East North Africa Program. Here Tatiana talks about funding strategy and the resilience of the region's cultural scene.

**ROBERT BOUND:** *What are your broad aims within the Open Society Foundation, and what does the MENA need in terms of funding?*

**TATIANA MOUARBES:** It's such a huge and varied region that it's difficult to talk generally, but our work is based on advancing diverse artistic practices and strengthening the aesthetic and political capacities of artists. We take an artist-centered approach, and so while the MENA region is vast, we're lucky to witness one of the most highly advanced cultural scenes in the world here. It's a scene that has survived despite such great challenges.

**RB:** *Can you give us an example of the resilience of the scene in this region?*

**TM:** Despite everything, Lebanon stays culturally strong, and Beirut is a major art world center down to the dedication and work of independent artists and organizations like Ashkal Alwan and the Arab Image Foundation. There is a complete lack of government support there—none. In Egypt artists, writers, critical thinkers, and arts institutions have stayed strong and been on the front lines of the revolution and so have been among the first and most harshly attacked by governments.

“Art has the power to tap into collective imagination and transform oppressive power structures...”

**RB:** *So you could say that these often harsh regimes very much understand the power of art?*

**TM:** Oh, yes, ironically authoritarian and repressive regimes truly get the power and agency of arts and organizing around it while the “the left” often doesn't. You saw this in Tunisia during the Arab Spring—that artists were at the forefront. As much as the arts are resilient in withstanding challenges, art is continually a site of resistance. Resilience is a tricky word—maybe it's something to be proud of, but people and institutions also ask: “Why should we have to be resilient? Why should we accept so much turmoil?”

**RB:** *Are there consistent regional themes to the work that is produced with the help of your funding and the institutions that show it?*

**TM:** There is a consistent effort toward designing alternative blueprints for the future and toward voicing the need for and importance of freedom of expression and creativity. Art has the power to tap into collective imagination and really transform oppressive power structures, and this is why you've seen—ever since the Arab Spring—that arts and culture are at the epicenter and front lines of movements for change across the region.

**RB:** *How close to politics can you get as a foundation? When does funding a project become taking a stance?*

**TM:** I think it's important for us to operate in listening mode, not top-down. We're set up to allow our grantees to do their best work and to support the field, asking what needs to be done and how philanthropy and our role in shaping larger conversations could be helpful. We are focused on human rights and social justice, so the work is highly politicized, but we try to take the back seat and highlight the work of our grantees. Some of the artists we support are very political, but our focus is on them and their safety. We've often been on the defensive, but with rising authoritarianism globally and personal attacks on the foundation and our founder, George Soros, himself, we have gone more on the offensive in our communications in recent years. Our work is becoming more focused on safeguarding artistic and cultural freedom globally.





## NIDAL KA'BI

*Executive director, Palestinian Performing Arts Network and performer and choreographer for El-Funoun Dance Troupe*

# 4

Nidal has been with the Palestinian Performing Arts Network (PPAN)—13 organizations working in dance, theater, music, and circus—since 2022. He manages the overall objectives, initiatives, and strategy of the network, particularly bridge building between arts, civil, and national organizations. For 20 years Nidal has also been a member of the legendary El-Funoun dance troupe, performing across Palestine, the region, and the world and helping to showcase the troupe as a dynamic and shrewd example of Palestinian soft power. Here Nidal talks about El-Funoun's mixture of traditional and contemporary styles and how dance can push boundaries.

El-Funoun was established in 1979. It began with three young men with a dream of introducing folkloric dance to their community in Palestine in order to preserve that heritage. Through the years El-Funoun kept growing and kept producing. The choreography has developed over time, so it's a mix between folkloric and contemporary dance. Now El-Funoun has its own school for the performing arts in Palestine and through its productions has tackled many social issues relating to women, for example, and related to the political statement we make as Palestinians, which is that we are under

“It’s a long process working with society; you need to have patience and let things take their time.”

occupation. We can make many political statements by putting them onstage in this frame of creative dancing that mixes folkloric and contemporary elements.

El-Funoun believes in heritage as a living culture. We believe that it has its own identity that can always be developed. The organization has really pushed forward, always working with the community. In the 1980s people were refusing to allow men and women to dance hand in hand onstage. But El-Funoun broke this taboo. In the 1990s, later on, it seemed very normal for men and women to dance together onstage. So these small changes are due to El-Funoun pushing and pushing in order to make this statement of a progressive community whose members respect one another and that has a vision of its own, an independence, especially in this context of the Israeli occupation.

The organization has managed to really work with the people: they have so many programs, like outreach training; they go to refugee camps; they go to villages; and they train the youth. In a way, we build our own audience. Something that El-Funoun is very aware of is knowing our communal history and reviewing it with the tools of contemporary daily life. Overall I think El-Funoun uses a soft ideology, really depending on the cumulative work through the years. We know it’s a long process working with society; you need to have patience and let things take their time.

I ask myself why El-Funoun is such a success. I think on an artistic level it has kept developing itself. The dancers can do contemporary dance, ballet, other traditional folklore dances from the region or from Africa or Latin America. There’s always this exposure to other experiments in dance from all around the world. The second thing is the audience. I mean, when you build this healthy relationship with your audience, they have a feeling of belonging, of communicating and belonging to this body, to this entity. Plus we’re working with the youth and giving them space to express their feelings, their opinions. That’s very healthy and important for El-Funoun to grow and develop.

El-Funoun is aware of the political and social statements within its artistic productions through the years. It has been giving joy to people and giving them hope also since the Palestinian context is really complicated.

## FARAH CHAMMA

Poet and performer

# 5

Farah is a Palestinian poet and performer, known for mixing prose, performance, and live music in her spoken-word work. She has performed in Arabic, English, and French at cultural, literature, and music festivals across the world. In 2021 she and the Brazilian producer Liev founded Chameleon, a musical duo that combines poetry and electronica. Here Farah talks about the practicality of working as a poet and her personal take on Palestinian identity.

For me, it all started with poetry, with writing at the age of 12 at school and wanting to show what I write to the teachers. Then slowly realizing that I'm confident enough to stand in front of an audience—things started coming together. I write, but not only do I write, I like to share it out loud. My practice actually started with a small group of poets in Dubai called the Poeticians, run by a beautiful Palestinian poet and filmmaker named Hind Shoufani. I went there as a 16-year-old, and she told me, "Well, it's an 18-plus event, but I'll let you in this time!" Later I decided to study performing arts to broaden my relationship to performance. My work is not just performance poetry—I'm interested in all the attention-seeking arts, all that sharing, and asking why we do this as humans. There's always a storyteller among us in a social circle. Someone who grabs more attention, someone who tells more jokes, and I started getting interested in these personas. I know how to grab attention, and I know that I do it.

I'm writing about identity, what that means, what it means to be Palestinian, what it means to have a passport that doesn't let you travel. All these travel restrictions, all these stories I have heard and I still hear from the people around me. You start looking at the world and you say, "What the hell is this?" Why can some people just go and travel somewhere tomorrow and others have to plan it for six months and then maybe get the chance to go—or maybe not? So this is what I started exploring in my own identity

"I've been unboxing myself and my work for as long as I can remember."

as a Palestinian whose dad grew up in Syria and whose mom grew up in Jordan. I was really more focused on Bilad al-Sham, on the Levant. In your head, though, you can go in many different directions.

The language I write—and perform in—changes the content of my work. I've been writing in spoken Arabic, so that really feels like having a conversation. It's so casual and opens up so many different plays on language because it comes naturally, because that's how I speak. When I write in English, it can sometimes be a bit more formal, a bit more academic. Now I'm exploring love—what is this universal thing that we've always written about and how would I write about it? It's still a free space for me. I've been unboxing myself and my work for as long as I can remember. Whenever I'm boxed in by the Palestinian question, I say, well, yes, of course, but the Palestinian question is not in a vacuum. There is a "Palestine" of the everyday—an idea that has to expand to all social justice problems.



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