

CONVERSATIONS AND CONNECTIONS

# ASSEMBLY



Artists making change in the Middle East and North Africa



American  
Friends  
Service  
Committee

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The American Friends Service Committee's (AFSC's) 2022 gathering for artists and activists from the Middle East and North Africa began with a single question: how are art and culture part of making change in the region? The answer to this, and many other questions, formed the foundation of much of the discussion during the event's official panels and presentations. Presentations from philanthropic organizations, such as the Open Society Foundations, Drosos Foundation, and Lambent Foundation, were combined with sessions in which artists discussed their work and activists fielded questions. These were followed by informal conversations that gave participants opportunities to make new connections, talk about their practices, and articulate the purpose, goals, and impact of their work.

For Jason Drucker, AFSC's Associate General Secretary, Advancement, the five-day event in June 2023, which welcomed fifty people from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, and Tunisia, was an opportunity to coalesce the participants' ideas into a shared vernacular.

"Among artists, culture makers, activists, and the organizations that support them (foundations, museums, performing arts venues, etc.), we are trying to build a language for talking about how art and culture work on individual subjectivity and the larger society, especially in the Arab world," he said.

"The event was designed to validate or pressure test some of these ideas in a relaxed, informal setting," Jason added. "We are also pretty self-aware, especially in a group of artists and cultural practitioners, that we

should hope for unintended consequences and lean into that dynamic fully."

The convening took place in Casablanca, Morocco, an important meeting point for countries and cultures from across the region. For the AFSC team and all those present, there was also the significance of gathering in person after two and a half years of living with COVID-19, as well as the difficulty of crossing national borders, which has always been fraught.

"Most of our staff are used to these constraints, but it is still frustrating and painful to see how extreme the limitations on movement are for those living in the MENA [an acronym for Middle East and North Africa], compared to their counterparts in the United States and Europe," explained Khaled Elkhouz, AFSC's Director of the Middle East Region, who is based in Jordan. "It's very discriminatory."

Overcoming these bureaucratic odds, the convening succeeded in generating not only feelings of fellowship but also opportunities for participating artists to speak freely about their work and its resonance. Many face friction and official opposition to their work at home, leading to self-censorship. Sparks burned with brilliance and intent, as Elkhouz explained.

"It is always very difficult to hear from our guests about the high levels of stress they face, and the level of trauma that unfortunately has become normalized. Many deal with this through dark humor, but emotions also can run high, which was the case during our event as well. Some of our guests commented about how wonderful it was to feel cared for; sometimes offering a quiet, private room or beautiful meals can be restorative in the context of a world full of Zoom calls."

Robert Bound and Marisa Mazria Katz, journalists and arts writers with long experience in the region, joined the gathering to paint a broad picture of the topics discussed. They spent time speaking with several of the participants about their practices and their views on where the regional arts scene is heading. In the following pages we hear from five individuals who represent the accomplishments and diversity of the participants in the Casablanca event. Each of these conversations has been condensed and edited for clarity.







“I broke this tradition, this wall, and I really opened the door for other women.”

**LALLA KABER**  
*Cinematographer and video maker*

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Lalla Kaber is a Mauritanian cinematographer and video maker. She also runs an organization for deaf people and works on sign language translation. One of the very few people in her country who is working to prioritize issues deaf people face, Lalla is working to ensure that disability topics become more integrated into her country’s culture. Here Lalla talks about how she embarked on her transformational path and the challenges that she sees ahead.

For someone of my tribe to enter into the field of image and cinema was hard. In Mauritania we’re a very traditional, tight-knit community in which women work for the family, not for themselves. We can go out, we can travel, but there are certain fields that women can’t enter. One of those is cinema; it is a breaking of tradition, and I did that. I broke this

tradition, this wall, and I really opened the door for other women.

After me, four or five other women entered into the field of cinema. I’m really proud of that. Not everyone is still around; some are married and focused on their home life, but a couple of us are still working in cinema. One of us, another woman, went as far as taking off the traditional head wrap and dress worn by women in Mauritania, and she can’t even come back anymore. She’s living and studying cinema more formally in Egypt.

I’m a president of the Cinema Division at the Institute of Fine Arts in Mauritania. At the same time, I do translation into sign language on national TV, as well as run my own organization focused on providing art training and resources for deaf people – which are otherwise unavailable in my country. I also made a film about deaf people in Mauritania. There are thousands of them, yet there are only three translators in the whole country. This poses so many problems. When a deaf person needs to take care of official paperwork, or something in a hospital or a government building, they’re really unable to.

I made a movie to bring attention to this issue. The film is about a society in which only one person can speak and everyone else is deaf. So, the film switches the normal roles and makes the minority the majority. The film won first place in the Human Rights Festival in Mauritania in 2021. And after that we were able to open a new school; it is the first to teach sign language formally.

This conference has been such a beautiful opportunity for me. Before coming I wanted to create the first-ever festival in sign language in Mauritania focused on multidisciplinary arts. I feel that being here, exchanging ideas with all these people from around the world in different fields, has opened my mind. I have more ideas about what to do and how to do it, and I truly feel more equipped to do this work. I’m feeling more inspired.



**EMAD HAJJAJ**  
*Cartoonist*

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Emad Hajjaj is a Jordanian cartoonist who has had a long career that, as he explains, earned him all kinds of attention – some of it unwanted. Despite it all, he never stopped making his work. Here Emad talks about his 25-year career and his cartoon character Abu Mahjoob (a Jordanian “everyman”) and how he sees art as a way to transform our everyday lives.

I created Abu Mahjoob as a character dedicated to Jordan – a small country with a lot of problems. I try to bring out funny things from the bad things we face in our daily lives. This is the wonderful characteristic of cartoons – they are a representation of our reality. The cartoonist wants you to laugh about your reality and maybe push you a little bit to change it. Cartoons are about ideas; you have to find that idea. Sometimes I listen to the news, but it’s not enough. I have to live my life – walk, talk to people – and sometimes it will spark an idea.

But drawing cartoons has been like working in a minefield. Cartooning in the Middle East is a very dangerous, tough job. I’ve been imprisoned many times after my cartoons were published, and I’ve lost my job many times. I used to work for a good newspaper; I have a good name, but when I drew the “wrong” cartoon, I was fired. In spite of all that, I am proud that I’m still struggling. It’s my right to express myself. And I’ll say this boldly: we live in a region where, for one reason or another, we cannot choose our leaders. We cannot choose our policies. But it is our right to laugh about

“I am proud that I’m still struggling. It’s my right to express myself.”



things, to make cartoons, to draw our dictators, or rulers, whatever. I always insist on that.

The one idea I would like to pass on at this convening is that art is the solution. You have to look up from your reality and come up with something creative, and from that you can solve problems. I tackle many complicated and sophisticated issues and still made people laugh. Use your art in a creative way, and try to change your reality. Art is a wonderful tool, and if you are creative enough you will change people.





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EMAD HAJJAJ



Photography:  
Mohamed Morchidi  
and Marisa Mazria Katz



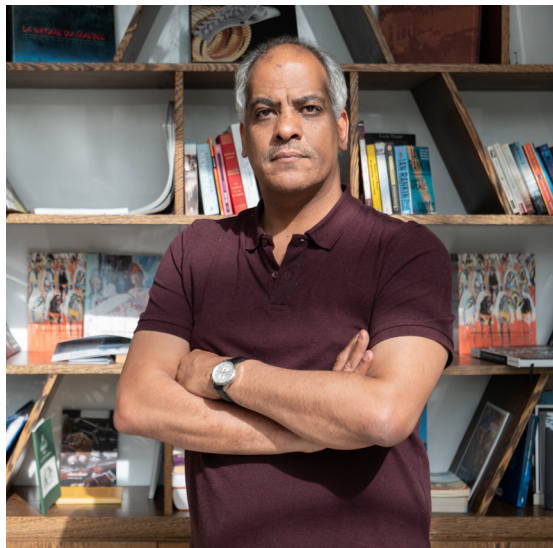
## TALAL AFIFI

Film curator, producer and director

# 3

Talal Afifi is a Sudanese film curator, producer, and founder and director of the Sudan Film Factory. He has long been seen as a pioneer in the world of Sudanese film, an emergent art form in his country and one often forced to reconcile itself with tumultuous political events. Here Talal talks about the state of affairs in his country and why he is freshly optimistic about what the future holds for Sudan's cinematic community.

If I had to describe Sudan, I would say it is in a fluid state. There was a revolution three years ago, and last October in 2021 there was a coup. Following that, people began to develop institutions and a constitution. Everything started from zero, and now people are in a state of resistance. The whole environment now is like a battle. It's not calm, and it's not easy to implement cultural activities.



“Participating in the filmmaking scene is being part of the resistance against all that has happened.”

I started the Sudan Film Factory in 2010. The organization has operated under different kinds of models. We tried being underground, and then we tried being part of the mainstream, creating in a very open way with press conferences and advertisements. Now we are a little calmer in our approach because the Sudan Film Factory is a big institution; we can't be low profile anymore. Today we host film classes and classes on cultural management. But for the moment we don't have open film screenings and events.

We worked for 10 years under very difficult circumstances – during the regime of Omar al-Bashir – and we were able to make it. Still, it requires sensitivity to predict exactly what's going to happen. Our dictatorship in Sudan was about culture. Yes, it was a military dictatorship, but it was like the Nazis in Germany; it was a cultural thing. It was about Arabizing diverse Sudanese culture, centralizing the culture in Khartoum, and Islamizing things. So, one aspect of the fight in Sudan is a cultural fight and participating in the filmmaking scene is being part of the resistance against all that has happened.

The women and men who have worked on making the film scene happen, they have a new identity. It's not a tribal identity or a class identity but a new identity that relates to film. This unity is a new concept and something that we need in Sudan: to have something in common with other people. I feel that people are more empowered and exposed to interactions with others from within Sudan and outside the country as a result. This new identity is a celebration, a kind of liberation from a lot of things that they have been through.

## ASSEMBLY: Q&A



## FYRAS MAWAZINI

Country Director, Morocco & Tunisia, for the Drosos Foundation

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Fyras Mawazini leads the Casablanca office of the Drosos Foundation, a private Swiss organization established in 2003 to promote skills and economic independence as an alternate to providing individual or emergency aid. The foundation works strategically and on the ground across the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. Drawing on his years of experience in international development and humanitarian assistance in the Middle East and North Africa, Fyras told Robert about the realities of operating in such a youthful part of the world.

**ROBERT BOUND:** *What are the priorities for your work in this region?*

**FYRAS MAWAZINI:** The real priority is the economic empowerment of youth. The objective is to bring them toward economic

“Arts and culture provide space for expression, space to discover yourself and what you can achieve in society.”

autonomy so that they can grow up, decide to stay or leave, and think about the future the way they want. The big challenge is unemployment – a very big issue for the MENA region. Broadly, 50% of the population is below 25 years of age, but if you don't take care of these people, then a country doesn't function, and you see youth on the migration routes, dreaming of a life somewhere else.

**RB:** *What role do the arts and culture play in your ambitions?*

**FM:** This is a field that presents so many opportunities for young people; it's something that they're interested in, that inspires them. They're fed up with being obliged to go into vocational training for jobs that are no longer attractive or that may not exist in the future. Digital connections have clearly inspired new ambitions.

**RB:** *Do you sense more than a simple generational change here?*

**FM:** I think there is a changing mentality. I've realized in the past five years or so that there is a growing distance between youth and religion – and that's something that is quite new here in the region, to see young people distancing themselves from traditions and religion. Arts and culture provide space for expression, space to discover yourself and what you can achieve in society.

**RB:** *This gathering seems a good place to test these ideas. Has it created fresh perspectives?*

**FM:** It has offered the chance to feel the pulse of the situation within one another's societies. At Drosos we have tracked this before but now we see it here: there is a strong sense of Africanity, with, for example, artists from North Africa wanting links with West African and sub-Saharan countries. They feel there's something that could be developed together. But at the same time, the North Africans are on the shore of the Mediterranean and believe that this should be a connection too. Really, it is all about connections.

## JUDE SAJDI

Founder and managing director  
of Sama Consulting

# 5

Jude Sajdi is the founder and managing director of Sama Consulting, a company that researches and evaluates social and environmental issues in the Middle East. Ahead of the convening, Jude was commissioned by the American Friends Service Committee to map out the most relevant artistic and cultural practices in the Middle East and North Africa today. Marisa sat down with Jude to ask her about the role of art in creating social change and her prognosis for the field at a moment when so much in the region remains in flux.

**MARISA MAZRIA KATZ:** *What did your research focus on, as you turned your lens on culture across the MENA region?*

**JUDE SAJDI:** Since the Arab Spring, the region has been facing a set of very dynamic and complex challenges, whether it is the economic situation or political instability. Add to all that COVID-19, which created additional restrictions, especially on artists, journalists, activists, and so on. For this research I looked at what artists and cultural organizers have done and, despite all these challenges, they have worked with communities to create social change, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

**MMK:** *What potential do you see art having on the local level?*

**JS:** We know that art has huge potential to create or deconstruct some spaces; it provides us with mediums and room for expression that otherwise can be very restricted. Through

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the arts we can critique dominant power structures, try to break them down, and raise awareness.

**MMK:** *In what ways have the artists participating in this event done that?*

**JS:** So many artists here have accomplished inspiring collaborations with marginalized communities. We also saw that through the arts, some have been fostering a sense of empathy, understanding, and belonging, especially important in the MENA, which has so many crises in terms of refugees, migration, and so on. Using art to create spaces to understand differences is very important. While getting here was definitely challenging, it was so important because the outcomes of such a gathering create opportunity for people to rethink, critique, and reflect on their own artistic practices.



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