

OPINIONS ON PRISONS

Roland Abou-Shdeed

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MENA PRISON FORUM

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

MPF LOGS [1]

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A PRESENTATION IN THE MAKING

Sixty years ago, in 1960, a freshly graduated Lebanese lawyer Roland Abou-Shdeed decided he wanted to understand Lebanese prisons from within. He managed to get a mock warrant of arrest, and spent one week in Lebanon's most famous prison at that time: Ar-Raml Prison. Once released, the young lawyer reported his personal observations from this first-hand experiment and shared his views on needed prison reforms in a small booklet entitled *Opinions on Prison*. While the experiment of the young lawyer and his account remain present in Lebanon's judicial memory, the booklet had not been republished since its first release, and not much is known about Abou-Shdeed nor the motives that drove him to undertake this experience.

As part of UMAM D&R's MENA Prison Forum Logs series, we decided to republish this booklet as it is a significant milestone in Lebanese carceral history. *Opinions on Prison*, just like any other republished work, deserves to be presented alongside extensive context and background. This is especially true since its author had several seminal credentials: that of the legal profession, which is relatively straightforward to achieve, the unique choice he made to directly experience prison both physically and mentally, and finally, his work to draw attention to his experience by publishing a written testimony.

However, biographical information about Abou-Shdeed is scarce: all we knew about him when starting this republication project was that he left Lebanon permanently at the beginning of the Civil War, and that he passed away shortly after emigrating to Canada with his family. Therefore, we tried our best to track down further information

about Abou-Shdeed to try to understand his motivations to address first-hand carceral issues in Lebanon. We announced our interest in the publication and its author through social media, knocked on doors, and investigated as much as possible. While we succeeded to get some clues, we do not claim that what we have obtained has quenched our thirst or that it is sufficient to be described as a profile that fully captures this man. Instead, we present here just a brief introduction.

All that could be found in the records of the Beirut Bar Association (BBA) is that Roland Jarjoura Abou-Shdeed was born on July 1, 1936, he enrolled in the BBA on December 5, 1958, and that he was fully admitted to the BBA on March 8, 1961, and nothing else.⁽¹⁾ As for open sources that we had access to, there are only a few scattered references that describe him as a pioneer for awareness of the prison system and its problems. We also came across a statement dated November 19, 1974 in support of the “movement led by Imam Mousa al-Sadr,” and one of the signatures affixed is of attorney Roland Abou-Shdeed.⁽²⁾

As for testimonies, his cousin Mrs. Marilyn Abou-Shdeed Nasr generously agreed to provide information from what she remembers of him, and the following is a fragment of the transcript of her account:⁽³⁾

Roland Abou-Shdeed is my first cousin, and his father, George, is my uncle. We are four sisters: my three sisters and I did not know our cousins Edward, Roland, Michel, and Claire except during our teenage years because of a family dispute between my father and his brother George. The credit goes to my mother for our families ultimately reconnecting, as she urged my father to keep us, children, away from the dispute between him and his brother, especially since the two families lived in the same neighborhood: the neighborhood known

⁽¹⁾ An undated directory titled “The Graduates Guide to the Faculty of Law and Economic Sciences at Saint Joseph University” mentions that Roland Abou Shadeed is “Lebanese, graduated in 1957, a lawyer - home and office: Verdun Street, Bellevue Building” and provides two telephone numbers.

⁽²⁾ Statement published in *Al-Hayat* newspaper, issued on November 19, 1974.

⁽³⁾ Interview conducted with Marilyn Abou-Shdeed Nasr on June 1, 2020.

today as Adlieh (Palace of Justice area). We were mutually pleased to get to know each other, but while the ice was broken between the two families, the distance remained, and our visits were limited to holidays and special occasions. I will never forget my fascination with the Christmas grotto that my uncle's wife, Roland's mother, whom we used to call Aunt Mary, would design and implement.

The age difference between Roland and me was about ten years. I was astonished the day I met Roland, as he seemed very religiously observant to me. I was surprised, as our two families were not known for religiosity. He used to pray and recite the holy books a lot. Later, I found out that he was a member—perhaps while in secondary school—of the "Young Christian Students" group, which is a Catholic youth movement known in Lebanon during the 1960s and 1970s for its "progressive" stances. I also later learned that Roland was the organizer of a forum known as the "Monday's Club," (Club du Lundi), in which political and social issues were discussed. I remember that I attended some of these meetings, and my sister Nelly sometimes helped Roland to organize these meetings and send out invitations for them.

I do not know much about Roland as a lawyer. However, I remember that he trained at the office of lawyer Mohsen Slim, who was a friend of Roland's father George. And of course, I remember the uproar his prison experience and the publication he wrote caused.

Then on the eve of the war, or perhaps in its very beginnings, Roland married a female judge. We became overwhelmed by war, and in the crowd of life and death, it turns out that Roland and his family packed their bags and immigrated to Canada. When I asked his sister Claire about the date of Roland's death, she told me that he died at the age of fifty. Roland died? I am not sure that death really applies to what happened to him, as whenever I recalled the image of the cheerful and majestic young man with brownish skin and brown eyes, he would fade away.

We were also able to collect information from Judge Munif Hamdan, who graciously spoke to us about Abou-Shdeed. He stated that the public prosecutor who issued the mock arrest warrant that allowed the imprisonment of Abou-Shdeed was Judge Michel Tohme. And

among what Judge Hamdan recalled is that the media outlets buzzed in the early 1970s about an enthusiastic pleading Abou-Shdeed gave in court, as he was stabbed afterwards by the irritated party he was pleading against.⁽⁴⁾

We wished we had succeeded in obtaining more information about Abou-Shdeed in order to present *Opinions on Prison* with a full context, but the above information is all we were able to uncover.

However, we do not despair, as we believe this republication of the booklet will arouse more memories and willingness to speak about him among family, friends, and colleagues who knew Roland Abou-Shdeed. This will help us honor the man further by giving his biography and opinions the attention that they deserve in the introduction to a subsequent edition.

Accordingly, this presentation does not hide that it is simply the beginning of exploratory work on Abou-Shdeed, so let us say that this is a presentation in the making.

⁽⁴⁾ Telephone conversation with judge Munif Hamdan on May 13, 2020.