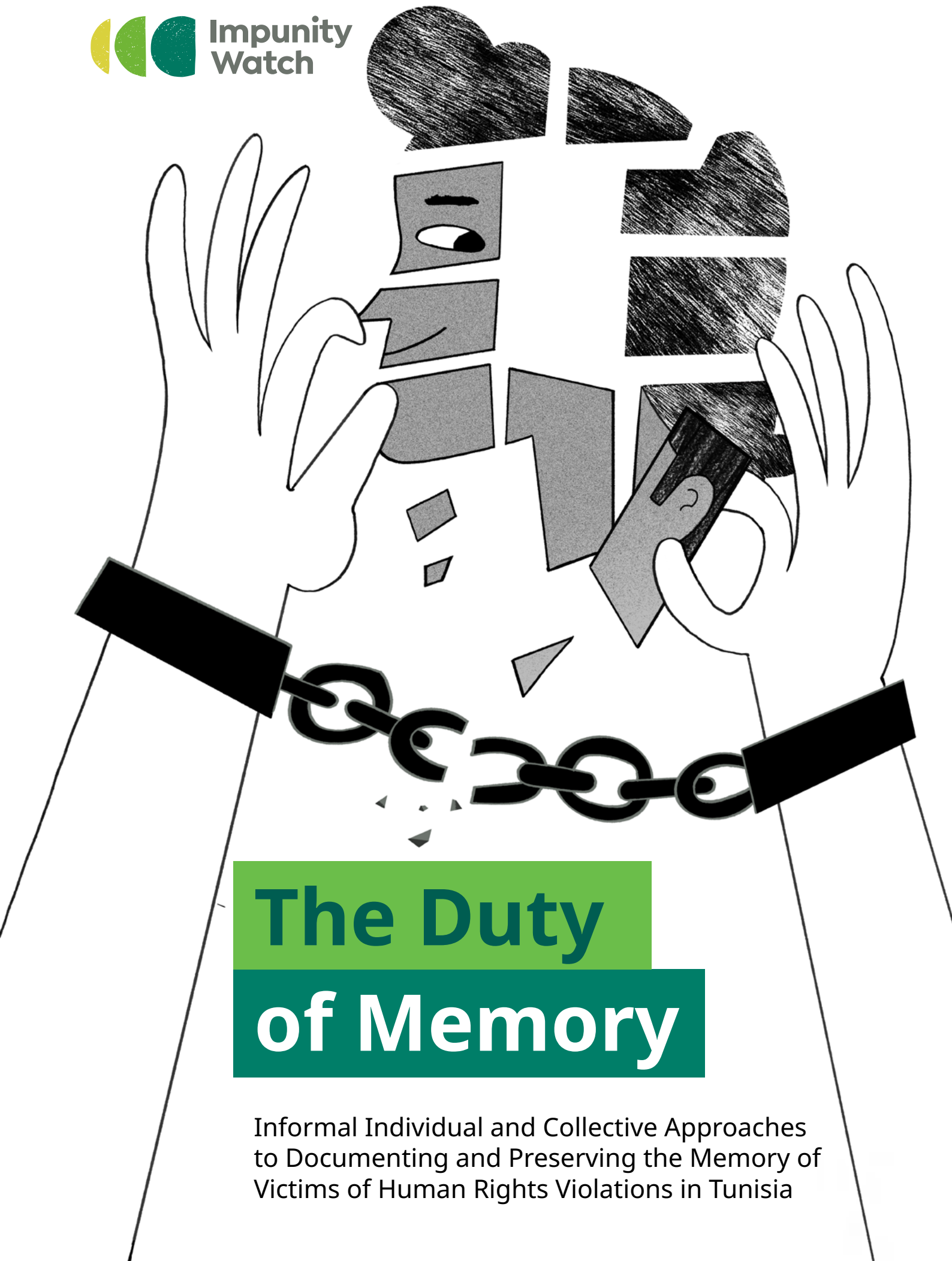




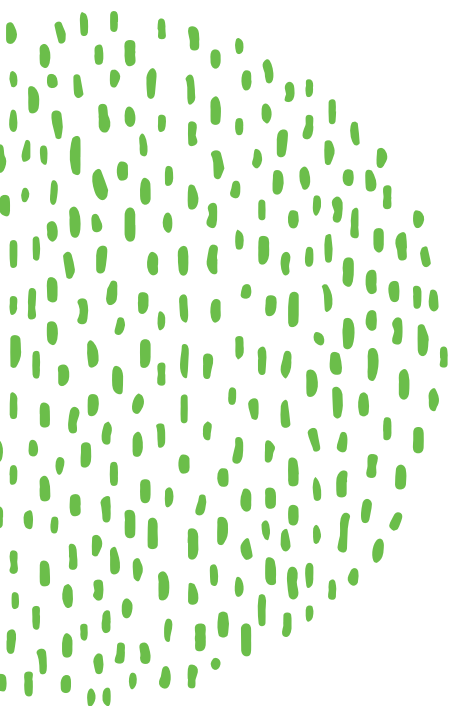
The Duty of Memory

Informal Individual and Collective Approaches
to Documenting and Preserving the Memory of
Victims of Human Rights Violations in Tunisia

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About Impunity Watch

Impunity Watch is an international non-profit organization working with victims of violence to uproot deeply ingrained structures of impunity, deliver redress for grave human rights violations and promote justice and peace. It meets and shares knowledge on priority topics, builds partnerships and alliances, and conducts international advocacy to overcome impunity and transform justice. Impunity Watch currently works in Central America, North Africa and the Great Lakes region of Africa, the Middle East and the Western Balkans. It has presence in Guatemala and Burundi, and its headquarters are in The Hague, The Netherlands. Its work takes place at the local, national, regional, and international levels..

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Preamble

Tunisia stands today at a critical historical juncture, where the legacy of past abuses meets the current challenges on the path of justice and accountability. Given the urgent need to acknowledge the suffering of victims and document their experiences, preserving memory is paramount to reviving history and ensuring that its lessons are passed on to future generations. This contributes to establishing a sustainable culture of awareness and reflection and forms the basis of a society capable of learning from its experiences and building a more just future.

The process of documenting memory goes beyond recording events; it empowers victims to reclaim their narratives and transform their individual experiences of pain and injustice into a collective force for resilience and empowerment. This documentation enhances societal awareness of history and preserves the truth as a fundamental reference for learning and informed decision-making, thereby strengthening the foundations of the present and creating pathways toward a more balanced and just future.

The power of preserving memory lies in the diversity of initiatives, namely oral narratives, artistic and cultural works, community projects, and commemorative meetings which together form a vibrant network that preserves experiences and allows for the sharing of knowledge and expertise between generations. These efforts also open the door for new generations to learn about the past and understand the importance of human rights, justice, and accountability, enhancing society's ability to learn from past experiences and establishing a strong collective culture capable of resilience and renewal.

The importance of this study stems from the pivotal role that memory plays in preserving rights, promoting social cohesion, and preventing the recurrence of violations. When victims' narratives are marginalized or ignored, society loses the opportunity to learn from the lessons of the past to build a more equitable and just future. Hence, preserving and passing on memory to future generations is the cornerstone of a deep understanding of history, ensuring recognition of victims and promoting the values of truth and accountability, which form the basis for a society that rises strongly from experience and creates a better tomorrow for all.





Introduction

Preserving the memory of human rights violations in Tunisia raises complex and pressing questions: What is the purpose of documenting and safeguarding memory? Who bears responsibility for it? For some, these questions may seem secondary; for others, they are essential. The answers can appear both simple and complex, and they often become controversial when brought into public debate. Regardless of these differences, the official acknowledgment of past human rights violations in Tunisia remains essential¹. Since 2011, the efforts of civil society and the Truth and Dignity Commission have established a legal, human, and moral imperative to preserve and protect this memory. This urgency is reinforced by the State's formal commitment to transitional justice since 2014, a commitment that has yet to be fully honored—particularly regarding accountability. This impasse persists amid ongoing controversy over the fate and content of the cases referred to the Specialized Criminal Chambers, which remain stalled in the courts without adjudication. It also reflects the unresolved implementation of the Truth and Dignity Commission's comprehensive final report, especially its recommendations on memory preservation, which have not been adequately carried out. In addition, there has been a noticeable decline in the activities of civil society and international organizations related to memory preservation. This trend may be explained by victims' fear of prosecution and the possibility of renewed imprisonment, particularly as the political regime has repeatedly expressed its intention to amend the law on associations and to tighten oversight of funding sources and their use². These developments place the preservation of memory at the center of significant ethical and political stakes, making the “duty of memory” a fundamental human and moral imperative that cannot be ignored.

The “duty of memory” inherently carries a quasi-sacred dimension, given the legal, human, and moral imperative it imposes on both the state and society. It seeks to acknowledge and document past human rights violations, prevent their recurrence, and resist deliberate amnesia or the political and ideological manipulation of memory³. Ultimately, it aims to foster comprehensive reconciliation among the different components of society, as well as between society and the state, in order to guarantee non-recurrence and promote justice and fairness. In practice, however, political systems often abandon the “duty of memory” during periods of democratic backsliding and may even attempt to distort it. They frequently legitimize a selective memory through institutionalization

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1. The public hearings of the Truth and Dignity Commission brought some of these violations to light, in addition to testimonies and reported events documented on digital platforms.
 2. When contacting several survivors for interviews, many expressed fears of prosecution and legal repercussions, as well as concerns about reliving their experiences of imprisonment. According to the testimony of one of the detainees, these fears reportedly intensified following the arrest of nearly 100 individuals in 2024 who participated in a meeting intended to provide assistance and material support to victims living under precarious social and health conditions.
 3. Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), pp. 579-584.

and reshaping, preserving it through officially sanctioned and ritualized narratives⁴. This abandonment is often countered by individual and collective efforts to document and preserve memory by victims of violations and their relatives, whether in public or private, organized or spontaneous, individual or collective, and expressed through both modern and traditional forms. Such initiatives often remain marginalized and lack official recognition, particularly when they involve more marginalized groups such as women, who have often played a central role in preserving memory through emotional labor, caregiving practices, and intergenerational transmission. Their contributions include smuggling letters from imprisoned relatives, preserving materials linked to memory, and narrating events across generations—thereby adding significant qualitative value to countering erasure. Without their dedication and engagement, a substantial portion of the memory of violations would have been lost. The practice of documenting and preserving memory has been observed across multiple societies since the decline of grand historical narratives and the rise of what is often described as the emergence of “memory consciousness,”⁵ particularly after the fall of the Soviet Union and in the aftermath of revolutions against Latin American dictatorships within transitional justice experiences worldwide⁶. These initiatives take diverse forms, including press articles, print and digital publications, narrative literature—especially the global tradition of “prison literature”—artistic expression in its various forms, oral testimonies, participation in transitional justice processes, civil society activities, and digital platforms. These practices often rely on both physical and symbolic materials preserved by victims and their families. This reality supports a fundamental observation: the more authoritarian regimes intensify repression or political systems abandon the “duty of memory,” the more victims develop strategies to preserve their memories and protect them from erasure or distortion. Community-led initiatives have also received significant international support, particularly through the United Nations framework, which constitutes a major pillar in supporting memory preservation. In the 1990s, the United Nations adopted international standards known as the “Principles Against Impunity,” emphasizing both the “right to know the truth” and the “duty of states to preserve memory.” In addition, the Human Rights Council has adopted several resolutions on the “right to truth,” and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has highlighted the preservation of memory as a fundamental pillar for reconciliation in societies that have experienced conflict or authoritarian rule⁷. This UN framework has therefore played an important role in supporting and legitimizing informal initiatives in countries affected by conflicts.

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4. Tzvetan Todorov, *Mémoire du mal Tentation du bien: Enquête sur le siècle* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2000), pp. 175-176 ; Ricoeur, pp. 522-535.
 5. Pierre Nora, “L'avènement mondial de la mémoire,” *EUROZINE*, 19/4/2002, accessed on: 04/08/2025, at: <https://bit.ly/4iaOvm7>
 6. “Chile: Operation Condor Judgment Major Win for Accountability – Türk,” *United Nations for Human Right, The Office of the High Commissioner*, accessed on 29/7/2025, at: <https://bit.ly/4iaLsdC>
 7. E/CN.4/Sub.2/1997/20/Rev.1 (2 October 1997), accessed on 20/08/2025, at: <https://bit.ly/3XBerh7>; E/CN.4/2006/91 (8 February 2006), accessed on: 20/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/CplaC>; A/HRC/12/19 (21 August 2009), accessed on: 20/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/IOjiR>; Jonathan Sisson, “A Conceptual Framework for Dealing with the Past,” accessed on: 20/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/GVuxo>; “Truth and Memory,” ICTJ, accessed on: 20/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/va8IW>; Do Memory Initiatives Have a Role in Addressing Cultures of Silence that Perpetuate Impunity in Bosnia and Herzegovina?, impunity watch, Netherland 2012, accessed on: 20/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/iIlq0>

To name but a few, several international experiences highlight the prominent role of informal initiatives in documenting and preserving memory, whether to promote accountability, uncover the truth, prevent the recurrence of violations, or secure justice for victims. In South Africa, for example, victims played an active role in preserving memory⁸ through oral tradition practices, the intergenerational transmission of stories⁹, personal writings such as letters and diaries, and the establishment of museums. In Guatemala, families of civil war victims documented their memories to combat forgetting and resist official denial of enforced disappearances. The Church's Project for the Recovery of Historical Memory (REHMI) was launched to uncover the truth by collecting thousands of testimonies, culminating in a comprehensive report detailing the history of the civil war and the abuses suffered by the population—an important moment of collective mobilization¹⁰. The Guatemalan Foundation for Forensic Anthropology (FAFG) was also established to exhume mass graves and identify victims' remains, contributing to the creation of a DNA database used by researchers and documentation specialists¹¹. In addition, the community initiative known as the "Caji Tulam" House of Memory was created as a museum dedicated to preserving the memory of human rights abuses through educational and artistic narratives¹². In Cambodia, following the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge, civil society organizations launched initiatives to document and preserve collective memory. The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) was established to archive materials related to this period and organized mobile educational activities in villages, using testimonies to raise awareness and safeguard memory beyond state institutions¹³. The Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center was also founded to use filmmaking and audiovisual storytelling as tools to resist oblivion¹⁴. In Argentina, female activists – relatives of those forcibly disappeared during Operation Condor and the "Dirty War"¹⁵ – founded the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo¹⁶. Despite restrictions, they gathered in

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8. Norman Duncan et al., "Living through the legacy: the Apartheid Archive Project and the possibilities for psychosocial transformation," *South African Journal of Psychology*, vol. 44, Issue. 3 (2014), accessed on: 30/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/BHdRd>
 9. "Oral histories and archiving memories in South Africa," *University of Cape Town* (2013), accessed on: 02/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/3QSek>
 10. The Official Report of the Human Rights Office, Archdiocese of Guatemala, *Guatemala Never Again ! Recovery Of Historical Memory Project*, (New York: Mary Knoll, 1999) ; Colette G. Mazzucelli & Dylan P. Heyden, " Unearthing Truth: Forensic Anthropology, Translocal Memory, and "Provention" in Guatemala, " *Politics and Governance* 2015, Vol. 3, Issue. 3 (2015), pp. 42-52, accessed on: 15/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/34cuy>; Truth, Justice and Historic Memory, GHRC, accessed on: 15/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/tDf42>; Report of the Commission for Historical Clarification: Conclusions and Recommendations, Guatemala Memory Of Silence, accessed on: 16/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/JEOlp>
 11. *Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala*, accessed on 15/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/veq2u>
 12. "Casa de la Memoria," International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, accessed on: 17/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/UT4l2>; *Casa de la Memoria*, accessed on: 17/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/WwFkp>
 13. Timothy William, "NGO Interventions in the Post-conflict Memory scape. The Effect of Computing 'Mnemonic Role Attributions' on Reconciliation in Cambodia," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol. 13, Issue. 2 (2019), pp. 158-179. Accessed on 17/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/ZZUql>; Laura Goodwin et al., "Searching for The Truth," *Magazine of the Documentation Center of Cambodia* (October 2011), pp. 1-64. Accessed on: 17/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/twgKb>
 14. "The Act of Constructing Memory at Cambodia's Bophana Center," Association for Asian Studies, accessed on: 17/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/2jw5O>; Frako Loden, "Preservation and the Importance of Memory," idea, accessed on: 17/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/MsEOP>
 15. Fernando J. Bosco, "The Mardes de Plaza de Mayo and Three Decades of Human Rights' Activism: Embeddedness, Emotions, and Social Movements," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 96, no. 2 (June 2006), pp. 342-366.
 16. For more information about the association's activities, please visit its website at the following link: "Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo," accessed on 29/7/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/PwXUn>
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public squares holding photographs of victims, documenting their memory and demanding to know their fate. Memory sites were later created, including the ESMA¹⁷ Museum and Site of Memory, alongside digital initiatives such as the Memoria Abierta¹⁸ platform. In East Germany, activists opposing the Stasi used writing as a key means of documenting abuses through samizdat-style publications¹⁹, while victims preserved personal letters and materials from their imprisonment. Many survivors later gained access to their files through the Stasi records, enabling them to establish December 5th as a Remembrance Day. Over time, these commemorative initiatives expanded to include witnesses, artists, and researchers²⁰ leading to the creation of museums and digital platforms. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, following the ethnic cleansing of the town of Prijedor, May 31st has become a day of commemoration for the victims of the campaign, despite persistent local denial of these events²¹. In parallel, the Gallery 11/07/95 in Sarajevo was established as one of the first exhibitions dedicated to preserving the memory of the Srebrenica genocide through photographs, and documentary evidence²². Meanwhile, in Nepal, following the decade-long conflict, victims and their families preserved material traces of abuse, including personal belongings, torture instruments, farming tools, photographs, medical reports, and identity documents. These efforts were complemented by digital memory initiatives aimed at documenting violations and supporting calls for justice²³. In Syria, detainees and survivors resorted to multiple forms of documentation, including writing on prison walls, literary expression, and electronic records²⁴.

In Tunisia, for decades, human rights activists and victims have sought to document violations through both national and international organizations, including the Tunisian

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17. "ESMA Museum and Site of Memory – Former Clandestine Centre of Detention, Torture and Extermination," UNESCO, accessed on: 01/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/yQe4w>
 18. For further information, see: "Sobre Memoria Abierta," *Memoria Abierta*, accessed on: 01/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/jj6S2>
 19. Karen Leeder, "Bohemia in East Germany: Samizdat in the GDR 1980-1990," *Humanities Division*, accessed on: 202/082025, at: <https://shorturl.at/ldCep>; "Samizdat," *Revolution and the Fall of the Wall*, accessed on 02/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/Mck6d> "GDR Repression and Opposition," German History, accessed on 02/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/vgPYm>
 20. "The Stasi - Torture and Total Surveillance - The Center for State Security in East Germany," DW Documentaries, July 5, 2024, accessed August 1, 2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/yaNfj>
 21. Johanna Paul, "White Armband Day: From global social media Campaign to transnational commémoration Day," *Memory Studies* (2021), pp. 1-17. Accessed on: 17/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/8pmyk>; "White Armband Day," Remembering Srebrenica, accessed on 18/08/2025, at: [White Armband Day | Remembering Srebrenica](https://shorturl.at/8pmyk)
 22. "Gallery 11/07/95," accessed on: 18/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/jR3TZ>; "Gallery 11/07/95 (Bosnia and Herzegovina)," International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, accessed on: 18/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/vtOc5>; Do Memory Initiatives Have a Role in Addressing Cultures of Silence that Perpetuate Impunity in Bosnia and Herzegovina?, Impunity Watch, The Netherlands, 2012, accessed on: 20/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/iilQq>
 23. For example, one survivor preserves a piece of wood used in their torture, which resulted in a permanent disability, while others retain photographs, documents, and books associated with their experiences. For further information, see: Sanjib Chaudhary, "A project in Nepal is documenting and sharing testimonials from the 10-year armed conflict," *RisingVoices*, 3/11/2018, accessed on 1/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/DFzUe>; Memory Truth & Justice, accessed on 01/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/XIG2E>; Amrita Pritam Gogoi, "Nepal's posing women guerrillas: memory, subjectivity and war-time photographs," *Varia*, European Bulletin of Himalaya Research, vol. 61 (2023), pp. 1-27. Accessed on 01/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/aMQWG>; Bikkil Sthapit, "Only memories remain," *Nepal Times*, 29 /8/ 2020, accessed on: 01/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/OBnGe>;
 24. The Syrian regime committed numerous violations over several decades in an effort to silence and intimidate opposition groups and erase evidence of its abuses. Nevertheless, various blogs, reports, and prison literature accounts suggest the existence of a largely concealed form of resistance aimed at preserving the memory of these violations in the hope of securing justice and redress for victims. This is reflected in reports documenting prisoners' testimonies following visits to detention sites, in electronic platforms such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and the Syrian Network for Human Rights, as well as in prison literature written by authors such as Ayman Attoum and Mustafa Khalifa, among others.

League for the Defense of Human Rights (LTDH), the Arab Institute for Human Rights (AIHR), the National Council for Liberties (CNLT), the International Association for the Defense of Political Prisoners (AISPP), the October 18 Front for Rights and Freedoms, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch. Alongside newspaper articles²⁵ and digital blogs, these informal initiatives experienced a significant qualitative and quantitative revival following the post-2011 political opening, through the creation of new associations and active participation in the transitional justice process via testimonies, as well as through the provision of specialized archives to the Truth and Dignity Commission documenting the memory of violations. This momentum also extended to narrative forms of recollection, including prison literature, media engagement, and the use of social networks.

These numerous initiatives underscore the need to further highlight the informal, individual, and collective efforts of victims of violations in Tunisia to document and preserve memory—its forms, meanings, and impacts—and the importance of safeguarding it. In this context, prisons in Tunisia constituted a crucial setting from which diverse forms of struggle emerged, including resistance to forgetting and sustained efforts to document and preserve memory. However, this dimension has not received sufficient attention in research and scholarship, nor even in the collective memory of political prisoners, who often reflect on the periods of political activism, torture, and life after release in their testimonies. In this regard, political prisoner Samir Sassi states: “[...] I did not understand why prison is absent from the collective memory as if it were classified outside of it, even though everyone is threatened with imprisonment and strives to avoid such fate [...]”²⁶. Prison is the first space in which prisoners develop practices of resistance and struggle, and attempt to preserve memory by means of archival preservation and evidence smuggling. During their psychological and social trials inside and outside prison, victims in Tunisia resorted to recording their harsh and inhumane experiences through secret writing, singing, drawing, and other strategies adopted as means of mnemonic resistance. This reflects an important area of research that has been marginalized and has not received due attention.

This paper adopts a multidisciplinary approach to memory, drawing on several theoretical frameworks and academic disciplines. It echoes Maurice Halbwachs’s theory of memory, particularly the notions of “collective memory” and “social frameworks of memory”, which posits that memory is constructed within social settings. This is reflected in the Tunisian context of the family, prison, civil society, and various organizations²⁷. The paper also draws on Paul Ricoeur’s concept of the “duty of memory,” which emphasizes that memory is not merely a recovery of the past or mnemonic work, but rather an ethical responsibility aimed at doing justice to victims, uncovering the truth, and ensuring non-recurrence. This perspective is reflected in the activities of the Tunisian civil society since the 1960s²⁸. In

25. Victims and human rights activists documented the violations through newspapers, such as Al-Rai newspaper, which was founded by Hasib Ben Ammar.

26. Samir Sassi, *Burj Al-Rumi, The Gates of Death*, 1st ed. (Tunis: Karim Sharif Publications, 2011), p. 129.

27. Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective* (Paris: PUF, 1950).

28. Paul Ricoeur, *La histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

addition, the analysis is informed by Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory²⁹, as well as Aleida Assmann's concept of "communicative memory," understood as a living form of memory transmitted through everyday interactions and intergenerational storytelling. Communicative memory contributes to the construction of identity and belonging while enabling societies to make sense of their past. Assmann explains the difference between communicative memory and cultural memory, which institutionalizes recollection through books, archives, and official records. In the Tunisian case, victims have often relied on oral testimonies and the transmission of narratives to their children³⁰ as key modes of preserving memory. Finally, the paper is guided by American sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander's concept of trauma, which highlights the psychological and social weight carried by collective experiences of suffering. Trauma, when narrated, documented, and publicly acknowledged, can become a central element in the construction of individual, collective, and even human memory and a part of individual, societal, and universal identity³¹.

Although the history of violations in Tunisia spans more than half a century—reflecting its richness and the diversity of victims in terms of ideological, political, geographical, age, and even gender affiliations, and consequently the diversity of their experiences in documenting and preserving memory—this paper cannot provide a comprehensive inventory of these approaches, as such an effort would require greater logistical preparation and more extensive field methodologies. Instead, it focuses on what is documented in selected blogs, referenced in certain testimonies, and drawn from a small sample of victims who agreed to participate in this study and were selected based on ideological affiliation, historical events, and gender. This study adopts a qualitative approach, allowing for an in-depth understanding of individual and collective experiences in documenting and preserving the memory of violations. We conducted six interviews with victims affiliated with Islamic and leftist leanings (the Communist Worker's Party PCOT), as well as with victims of social events (the Bread Riots of 1984), who recounted their experiences in documenting their memories inside and outside prison. We faced difficulties in persuading others to participate due to fears related to the political context and its fluctuations, as well as confusion between civil and political engagement in connection with transitional justice. Many also prioritize redressing harm while downplaying memory preservation. The sample was selected using the snowball technique ("boule de neige"), with the assistance of intermediaries familiar with memory documentation initiatives. In addition to interviews, we conducted a content analysis of seven novels from Tunisian prison literature—an invaluable source due to the detailed information they provide on documentation and memory preservation strategies—as well as an analysis of personal documents, photographs, and documentary videos related to prison memory. These materials enabled us to identify the various approaches adopted by victims in Tunisia to document and preserve the memory of their suffering and experiences.

29. Zhdanov, Vladimir V, "Theory of "Cultural Memory" by J. Assmann and Reflection of Multiculturalism: Myth, Memory and Remembrance in Cultures of Axial Age," *RUDN Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2023), pp. 421-430, accessed on: 23/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/YzqLD>

30. Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Function, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

31. Jeffery C. Alexander, *Trauma a Social Theory*, UK, Polity Press, 2012, pp. 155-166.

This study is divided into two main parts. The first examines the individual and collective strategies for documenting and preserving memory in prison—a tradition historically transmitted among political prisoners and common to societies that have lived under dictatorial regimes, where censorship and repression extended to prison institutions, which creates a form of resistance and conflict between the prisoner and the prison institution, and between memory and forgetting. The second discusses the forms and methods of documenting and preserving memory, and resisting forgetting in the post-prison phase, where victims continued to resist erasure and preserve their memories even after release.





First:

Resisting Oblivion from Behind Bars

**Individual and Collective
Strategies for Memory
Documentation and
Preservation**





1. The Individual Experience of Remembering and Resisting Oblivion

1.1 Memorizing in Solitary Confinement

No prison experience is complete without solitary confinement. On the one hand, it represents the political prisoner's curse and true punishment; on the other, it becomes an escape and a refuge through which they preserve whatever memory remains—memory that the prison system seeks to steal away by “stripping prisoners of any symbolic and cultural capital.”³² It was said, “In our country, prison has become associated with a terrible place. Its function, in the perception of the majority, is to kill in man everything that is alive, beautiful, sublime, legitimate, progressive, and humane.”³³ In solitary confinement, prisoners resist the reshaping imposed on them by the prison system. They adopt various techniques to safeguard recollection and counter erasure, seeing themselves as part of a political project subject to repression and attempts at dismantlement. This includes recalling what happened to them and their comrades, evaluating and safeguarding those experiences, and memorizing the names and details of specific events, such as participation in protests, clandestine activities, or memories of social and family life, repeating political slogans or shared ideas, memorizing the Quran, etc.

Bashir Al-Khalfi recalls: “Tonight, sleep did not touch my eyelids [...] My memory carries me back to one of the nights of the year ninety-one [...] I remembered my dear mother, who used to advise me [...]”³⁴. Mohamed Saleh Fliss, a nationalist/leftist political prisoner during Bourguiba's era, describes his experience in solitary confinement and how he resisted the isolation imposed on him by revisiting his social life and drawing on his intellectual resources: “When you are alone in a closed cell [...], you are in the solitude of your grave, far away [...] and there is nothing before you; your solitude is oppressive, unless you furnish your world with what you have stored in your memory, unleashing the repetition of images [...]”³⁵.

Recalling images, principles, values, and events after the shock of arrest and imprisonment is one of the most important strategies adopted by political prisoners to maintain mental and psychological steadiness. It functions as a psychological defense mechanism that resists oblivion in order to preserve self-cohesion, giving prisoners a sense of control over their memory and inner world—a domain they regard as a source of security and psychological dignity. This falls within a broader framework of resistance aimed at preserving the memory of struggle and identity. Thus, “inner speech” helps protect the victim's identity from the

32. Erving Goffman, *Asile: études sur la condition sociale des malades mentaux et autres reclus* (Paris: Minuit, 1968), pp. 57-58.

33. Mohamed Saleh Fliss, *A Prisoner in My Homeland: Images from the Diary of a Political Prisoner* (Tunis: Arabesques, 2016), p. 428.

34. Bashir Al-Khalfi, *Siloun: Memoirs of April 9 Prison* (Tunis: Mayara, 2018), pp. 142-144.

35. Fliss, p. 424.

prison's attempted corrosion and effort to impose a new identity³⁶ reducing the prisoner to a machine ready to execute orders³⁷, until reaching what Irving Goffman calls "civil death."³⁸ When a prisoner is stripped of social roles and political and civic activities, even after release, they may find it difficult to re-engage and make up for what was lost. This generates an existential form of resistance that confronts isolation and enforced silence through the daily reaffirmation of existence within the solitary cell, achieved by documenting and preserving memory as an expression of the victim's social and civic identity. It becomes a process through which the prisoner regains control over the self in the face of fear and uncertainty and protects against disintegration. The more the prison institution intensifies surveillance, control, and isolation, the more the prisoner turns to the duty of recollection³⁹ and retreats into the shell of individual memory, maintaining a continuous link with the social world from which they were deprived, reassuring themselves that their personality has not been erased and that the meanings they carry remain alive. Leftist prisoner Gilbert Naccache recalls: "In the suffocating, desolate isolation [...] I was trying to recall the feelings of those I knew and who knew me."⁴⁰ Prisoners impose upon themselves the duty of recollection toward fellow strugglers; repetition becomes a moral act and produces what has been described as a "second-rate political act."⁴¹

1.2 Secret Writing and Art

The duty of memory is not confined to acts of recollection; it gradually evolves into the practice of writing, which remained largely clandestine due to the prohibition of both writing and reading under the regimes of Habib Bourguiba and later Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Political prisoners were able to exercise these rights only after strikes and condemnation by national and international human rights organizations. Despite the restrictions and surveillance many nevertheless managed, by various means, to smuggle pens into their cells and document the contents of their memories in an effort to preserve and transmit them to the outside world beyond the scrutiny of prison guards and political authorities—an undertaking in which many ultimately succeeded. Gilbert Naccache, a left-wing political prisoner, recalls: "I do not know how it happened, but one day I discovered that a pencil had bypassed every barrier and mechanism of censorship to find its way into the food basket and become accessible to me within the cell [...] and in a moment, as I was examining the cigarette pack, I discovered a generous source of paper [...], all the politicians were writing their letters in very small letters. And I, in turn, used cigarette rolling paper to write a long letter that was easy to hide and smuggle out of prison [...] Each page could contain seven hundred words."⁴² Secret writing thus became a form of documenting and preserving memory, a means of resistance to maintain political and social identity, and an attempt to break the isolation imposed on

36. Goffman, pp. 95.

37. For more information on the experience of solitary confinement and the mistreatment of victims, ref.: Republic of Tunisia, Presidency of Government, Truth and Dignity Commission, *Comprehensive Final Report*, Vol. 1, (Tunis: 2018), pp. 75-76.

38. Goffman, pp. 57-58.

39. Hermann Ebbinghaus, *Memory a contribution to experimental psychology* (Teachers collège: Colombia University, 1913), p. 4.

40. Gilbert Naccache, *Cristal*, translated by Mohamed Saleh Fliss and others (Tunis: Dar Shama Publishing, 2018), p. 12.

41. *Ibid*, p. 219.

42. *Ibid*, p. 14.

prisoners by transforming their feelings and memories into written texts that helped them endure their psychological ordeal. Similarly, Ezzedine Jemaiel, an Islamist political prisoner, described in an interview on prison and memory documentation⁴³ how solitary confinement became an opportunity for secret writing, using cigarette papers, much like Naccache. He explains: "While I was in solitary confinement, I used cigarette packs to write secret messages. I would smuggle them out of prison in various ways, and I was experienced in that."⁴⁴ Leftist political prisoner Tarek Chamekh recounts: "I wrote small secret notebooks from inside the prison [...] political notebooks and economic notebooks, and I smuggled them out [...] In El Houareb prison, my ex-wife and I had agreed on a certain pair of trousers. If I brought them out to her, they necessarily contained messages [...] I would moisten the paper from Cristal cigarette boxes, separate it from the aluminum, and use it for writing once it was ready. I wrote about the health situation in the prison and about the food. I secretly smuggled some of the notes out in trousers, hidden in the folds of the belt, and wrapped the rest carefully and swallowed them on the day I left the prison. This is a method commonly used by common law prisoners to smuggle drugs."⁴⁵

Writing is usually done in a very small font, and prisoners train themselves to write this way in order to make the best possible use of scarce paper and to make their texts difficult for jailers to read. Political prisoner K.A. explains: "The prisoner is trained to write in a very small font that is sometimes only readable with a magnifying glass."⁴⁶ Secret writing thus becomes a means of preserving memory and identity, and of maintaining contact with the outside world despite the isolation and marginalization imposed on political prisoners. It carries a deeply moral and symbolic dimension through which prisoners seek to document and safeguard their memories by communicating with the world from which they have been cut off. At the same time, they transfer their prison memory beyond the prison walls to preserve their network of relationships, protect their political and social identity, and shield their memories from the erosion of time so they may reclaim them after release. Writing therefore becomes a way of preserving symbolic capital linked to belonging and to the experiences stored in memory. In this sense, writing is one of the most important means of building cultural memory, according to Jan Assmann's concept⁴⁷. It crystallizes individual and collective experiences that can endure for generations and affirms the identity of the victim as part of a political and social group from which they were isolated at the time of writing. Secret writing also functions as a form of resistance and as a unifying force for a fragmented community. Even though the imprisoned victim is isolated from the social frameworks within which collective memory is formed, as described by Halbwachs⁴⁸, prisoners succeed in recalling and reconstructing these frameworks through memory. Through writing, they

43. Ezzedine Jemaiel, telephone interview, 23/08/2025.

44. Ezzedine Jemaiel, telephone interview, 23/08/2025.

45. Tarek Chamekh, live interview, Tunisia.

46. K.A., live interview, August 2025, Tunisia.

47. Richard Meckien, "Cultural Memory: The Link Between Past, Present, and Future," Institute of Advanced Studies of the University of Ao Paula, 03/06/2013, accessed on: 23/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/KGSGE>; Zhdanov, Vladimir V, "Theory of "Cultural Memory" by J. Assmann and Reflection of Multiculturalism: Myth, Memory and Remembrance in Cultures of 'Axial Age,'" *RUDN Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2023), pp. 421-430, accessed on: 23/08/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/YzqLD>

48. Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1925), p. 53.

address the absent and re-establish connections with the group, as well as with broader transnational networks such as international organizations. Abdelhamid Jelassi recalls: “I had a brother in exile. I would seize any opportunity to send him letters to provide a clear picture of what was happening in prison and to supply material that would help mobilize human rights organizations.”⁴⁹

Secret writing was not limited to paper letters; it also extended to writing on fabric in the clothes prisoners returned to their families during visits, particularly on the inner lining. Ezzedine Jemaïel notes: “Many political prisoners and their families abroad used to write messages on the lining of their clothes to convey news about prison conditions, then sew them back together so that, if guards inspected the clothes when they were going out or coming in and felt them, they would not notice anything unusual and the matter would remain undiscovered.”⁵⁰ Former Islamist political prisoner K.A. similarly recalls: “I smuggled a drawing I had made in the lining of my jacket and I still have it.”⁵¹ Prisoners thus resorted to writing and drawing on fabric as an alternative to paper in order to transmit their memories beyond prison walls and away from the watchful eyes of the “guards” as Samir Sassi describes in his novel *Burj Al-Rumi*. This smuggled memory represents the prison experience—one they refuse to let disappear from collective memory—and a way of maintaining social ties with comrades inside the prison, even by sending items back to the same room where they had once stayed, as a form of healing. Some of the smuggling methods used by prisoners were particularly inventive. Ezzedine Jemaïel explains: “I used to write letters in very small print on cigarette pack paper, fold them tightly, tie them with a thin thread, and, on the day of the visit, place them in my nose pocket. Then I would pretend to sneeze so they would come out and I would throw them into the basket when it was returned, without the guards noticing. I would also deliberately send my underwear to the family for washing while still wet and soil it with waste from the cell toilet, placing the folded letter between them so that the jailer would not touch or inspect them, assuming it was urine and feces dirty and wet.”⁵²

Smuggling memories out of prison through letters is not the dominant feature of informal strategies for documenting and preserving individual memory. Rather, we also find the opposite movement: the prisoner’s attempt to preserve memory within the cell itself. In this case, the prisoner documents memory on the walls and doors of the cell, writing, drawing, and engraving using various tools such as small stones, sticks, fingernails, smuggled pens, and tiny pieces of metal, with which they would scratch the walls of solitary confinement to inscribe what is stored in their memory. This practice becomes a form of expressive communication through which prisoners assert their existence in relation to other prisoners, especially since political prisoners are often transferred from one prison to another within what is referred to as “the Kunfa.”⁵³ The prisoner thus seeks

49. Abdelhamid Jelassi, *Delicious Theft: Smuggled Readings on the Prison Experience of Islamists, Tunisia 1991-2002* (Tunis: Cytomedia Publishing, 2017), p. 21.

50. Ezzedine Jemaïel, telephone interview, 23/08/2025.

51. K.A., live interview, August 2025, Tunisia.

52. Ezzedine Jemaïel, telephone interview, 23/08/2025.

53. The “Kunfa” is a campaign to transfer a prisoner from one civilian prison to another. It is usually in the form of a punishment following strikes or disobedience. The prison system then resorts to transferring him to prisons in other, distant states.

to create forms of cross-prison communication, carving their name, writing phrases of curses or insults, slogans, important dates, names, Quranic verses, or sayings about the mother. Ezzedine Jemaïel notes: "Prisoners in solitary confinement make a point of writing words on the walls, such as carving their name and writing 'Passed through here,' or talking about the mother, the heart, betrayal, treachery, or political slogans or slogans about Palestine... For example, when I was recently arrested, I found Salafist slogans on the walls, whereas previously there were different slogans, as I mentioned to you. Every era has its own slogans inside prison."⁵⁴

Gilbert Naccache notes: "Most prisoners have a desire to leave a personal mark or permanent trace in their cell to let those who come after them know they passed through here [...] Political prisoners' signatures are often accompanied by slogans and symbols, mostly consisting of verses or lines of poetry [...] We record our names and a glimpse into our journey as victims of oppression and tyranny, and we strive to choose an expressive phrase that reflects the dimension of our situation, including the psychological one..." He adds that it sometimes happens that one meets a former cellmate in another prison, and he is told that he once occupied a specific cell and discovered your signature there, so he wrote his name beneath it... and the sequence continues⁵⁵. Ezzedine Jemaïel also says: "I once found a very small wristwatch battery in my cell, and I used it to write Quranic verses on the cell walls about patience."⁵⁶ This dual oscillation between the inside and outside reflects the prisoners' continued connection to memory and their desire to preserve it, as it represents a part of their lived human experience. Prison constitutes a form of social life, albeit one different from what the prisoner is accustomed to, and it becomes part of an existential experience that cannot be forgotten or overcome, as it is deeply embedded in identity.

Preserving memory was not limited to memorization and secret writing; it also extended to personal artistic practices, particularly drawing—whether on walls, paper letters, or fabric—as well as singing, poetry, and Quranic recitation. Drawing represents a form of prison art and serves as a means of documenting and preserving memory within the prison, as well as a form of resistance against forgetting. Political prisoners adopt it, unlike common law prisoners who tend to resort to tattooing (body painting)⁵⁷. Prisoners also used this form of prison art as a strategy to smuggle messages with the help of prison guards. Ezzedine Jemaïel notes: "Before the great strike in 1996, drawing was done with primitive tools such as matchsticks or smuggled pens, but after the great strike we were able to get pens, and I used to creatively draw in the letters that I sent to my family. In order to get the letters out, I would win over the prison guards and draw pictures for their children, and in return they would help me get the letters out."⁵⁸

54. Ezzedine Jemaïel, telephone interview, 23/08/2025.

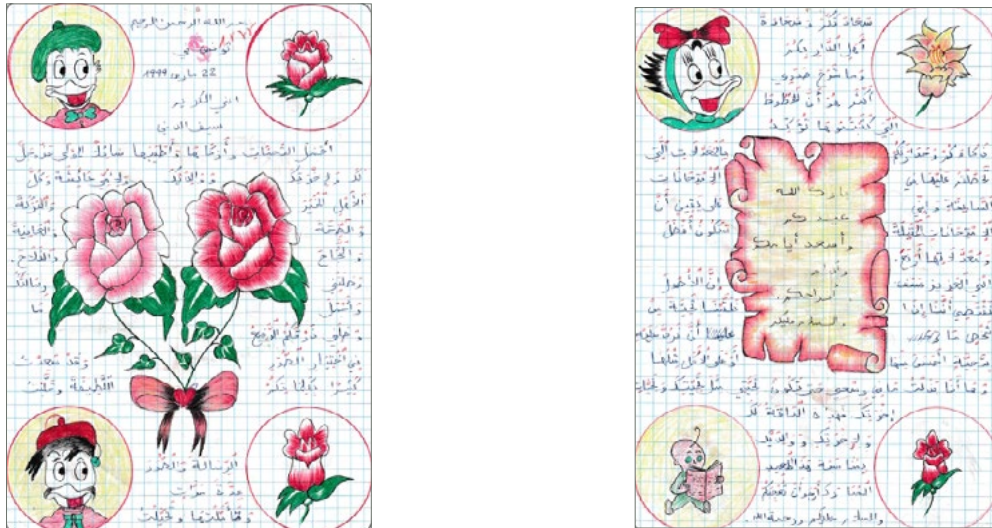
55. Naccache, pp. 37-38.

56. Ezzedine Jemaïel, telephone interview, 23/08/2025.

57. Mohsen Bouazizi, "Justice in the Eyes of Prisoners: A Study of Social Representations from Inside Tunisian Prisons," in: A Collection of Authors, *What is Justice? Treatments in the Arab Context*, 1st ed. (Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2014), pp. 431-474.

58. Ezzedine Jemaïel, telephone interview, 23/08/2025.

Illustration 1: A Letter from Prison



Source: Ezzedine Jemaïel Al-Gharrað.

Prisoners use drawing to retrieve the images stored in their memory and to regain the taste of a life that has been taken from them. This can be understood as a form of infrapolitical hidden political practice, in line with the concept of James C. Scott⁵⁹. Political prisoners would draw flowers, children's faces, vases, greeting cards, pets, the house, and the neighborhood. These images reflect the social life they were deprived of and which is threatened with oblivion inside prison, especially given the institution's attempts to replace it with another social alien life into which they are forcibly immersed over the years.

A collection of hand-drawn images created inside the prison

Illustration 2



Illustration 3



59. James C. Scott, *Domination and The Arts of Resistance, Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven/ London: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 183- 201.

Illustration 4



Illustration 5



Source: Ezzedine Jemaïel Al-Gharraḍ.

Through the act of drawing, prisoners seek to externalize the prison memory and safeguard recollection. At the same time, they seek to remain part of collective memory by maintaining a connection with those outside the prison, thereby producing a form of clandestine political and cultural resistance. K.A. states: "Isolation can lead to even one's own facial features fading from memory. Prisoners would therefore ask one another to sketch their faces in order to preserve their self-image. I drew my own face on a piece of cloth and smuggled it out of the prison."⁶⁰ Drawing thus reveals another dimension of documenting and preserving memory: its existential and bodily dimension. Due to the length of detention, prisoners may even forget the features of their body and face and how they change over time. They would therefore seek to cement the memory of their body and face by drawing them on walls, paper, or fabric. These strategies are not limited to the individual dimension of memory preservation but extend to the collective dimension, which will be discussed in the next section. Singing, reciting poetry, and chanting the Quran are also individual practices that develop within solitary confinement. Mohamed Saleh Fliss states: "When lonely in isolation, you are immediately confronted with a feeling of suffocation, and questions begin to gnaw at you from within, making you feel as small as a fingertip in the universe [...] The confining prison cell makes you long for human things, like hearing your own voice, and from here you begin to sing alone or read poetry [...] Singing in the cell imposes itself to confirm to yourself that your humanity still exists, that memory is still alive, and that you are still alive [...]"⁶¹. Prisoner Adel Mabrouk, imprisoned for his student activism in the Gouvernorat of Mahdia, says: "Solitary confinement reminded me of the grave, and I tried to recall the Quran or some of the poetic verses of Hāshim al-Rifā'ī that I had memorized in childhood when I was a student, as well as verses from ancient Arabic poetry, including the Mu'allaqāt (the Seven Odes)."⁶² As Bashir Al-Khalfi mentions: "This night sleep did not touch my eyelids [...] I spent the night recalling some songs."⁶³

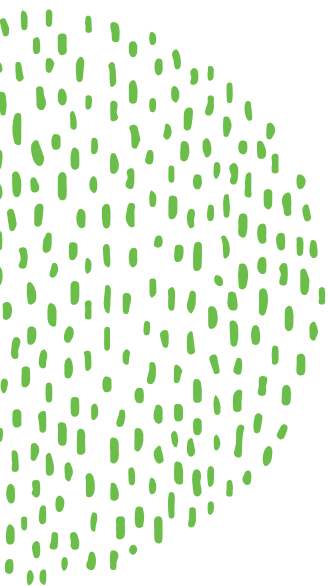
60. K.A., live interview, August 2025, Tunisia.

61. "Al-Zandali..." "The Anthem of Tunisian Prisons," *Al-Arabi*, 23/04/2023. Viewed on: 01/09/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/5ztVq>

62. Adel Mabrouk, telephone interview / 08/31/2025.

63. Bashir Al-Khalfi, *Siloun: Memoirs of April 9 Prison* (Tunis: Mayara, 2018), pp. 142-144.

Here, singing becomes a means of preserving individual social memory and a bridge for rebuilding the prisoner's relationship with himself. It helps reshape their social identity and constitutes an act of internal resistance against an authority that seeks to monitor, punish, and subdue their body, mind, and memory."⁶⁴



64. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), pp. 151-156.



2. Building a Collective Memory within the Prison

2.1 Ritualized Recollection and Collective Memory Reconstruction

Once political prisoners enter the cell, they usually find themselves with comrades in activism and struggle, which helps them regain psychological stability after the experience of torture. The prisoners immediately get to know one another, ask questions about the names of those detained and what they were subjected to, and attempt to memorize names. At the beginning, however, they often avoid discussing torture during interrogation due to the psychological trauma they have endured. Gradually, they begin to share their harrowing experiences, the places of detention, and the identities of the perpetrators of abuse. This process enables them to reconstruct a collective memory within the prison regarding experiences of torture, detention, and imprisonment itself. In this sense, the prison becomes a microcosm of public space that contributes to shaping a collective identity in the aftermath of trauma, and builds a collective memory that is not merely an archive of pain and suffering, but also a resource for intellectual and political renewal⁶⁵. The transfer from one prison to another further contributes to the spatial extension and consolidation of this memory. The collective recollection of dates, names, places, and prison wings, as well as the transmission of stories about torture and the experiences of other prisoners, serves not only to document and preserve memory but also reveals a form of solidarity, as Paul Connerton suggests. Groups remember and preserve their memory through repeated collective rituals, which produce and reinforce solidarity among them. Thus, recollection becomes a ritual of reconstructing collective memory within the prison framework, through communication, identity reshaping, and the recollection of images, events, and ideas. Mohamed Saleh Fliss recalls: “We started exchanging news about what happened at university before and after the arrests [...] I explained to him the campaign of intimidation [...] and he would interrupt my speech with questions about the names of his comrades, most of whom I knew [...] and neither of us kept quiet: news interspersed with analyses and speculations.”⁶⁶

Adel Mabrouk says: “There is a kind of collective feeling and collective cohesion, and it was the collective consciousness that governed the prisoners, considering the group as something quasi-sacred. This contributed to creating this dynamic, so we ask about who is being arrested, how it happened, what torture they were subjected to, where they were tortured, with whom, and by whom, who was tried, how many years will be spent

65. C. Alexander, *Ibid.*

66. Fliss, pp. 150-151.

in prison, and who was released [...] After the shock, we took a step back and began to evaluate the experience and conduct intellectual reviews.”⁶⁷ In her testimony following her imprisonment, prisoner Salwa Bejaoui recounts that inmates only contacted her after news of her and her family circulated, and after they confirmed her identity as Salwa, the underage prisoner and sister of Hadi and Abdelkader—who were subjected to arrest and elimination attempts because of their religious and political activity. Likewise for political prisoner Mahrezia Belabed, whose story preceded her into prison; it was said: “The voices whispered quickly: Mahrezia Belabed, friend of the girls Sabiha, Hadia and Fadhila. Poor Mahrezia, she and her husband were both arrested, they arrested her with her young son in her arms before returning him to his grandfather, they took her while she was pregnant, she left two other sons at home at the time of her arrest [...] She was in the clinic, they hit her on her stomach until she miscarried [...]”⁶⁸.

Every prisoner who enters prison carries not only their own lived experience in memory, but also the memories of comrades, friends, and family. This facilitates communication and the construction of a collective memory within the prison, as prisoners work to transmit these memories to others in the cell, where they are gradually shared, stored, and collectively accumulated. Little by little, a collective memory is formed inside the prison. This confirms that collective memory is not built in isolation, but rather within a shared social framework, where prisoners live through the experiences of their comrades and participate in a network of interactions. In this way, memory becomes a repository of the experiences of others. This process contributes to the formation of a specific prisoner subculture that preserves the names of victims and events, forms of resistance and resilience, moments of collapse and fear, and the effects of psychological, physical, and social violations such as divorce. It thereby strengthens a shared identity and deepens feelings of solidarity. Salwa recalls: “After a group iftar, a prisoner animated the evening [...] Prisoners began sharing accounts of their experiences. (S) and (H) talked about the horror of having their breasts sucked with a milking machine, and another talked about the ugliness of attempted sexual assaults using pens, and another cried from the horror of shame and fear of a monster who clung to her while she was naked and handcuffed to his colleagues and passed his genitals threateningly over her. Another had a torturer pinch her in a very painful and agonizing way in sensitive areas, and another had an assistant torturer threaten to violate her chastity with a screwdriver [...] Almost from that night, each prisoner’s name became closely associated with the specific experience she narrated.”⁶⁹

The process of recollection does not end with experiences of torture and detention; it also extends to periods of political struggle, ideas, strategies, and ideological references that were discussed. These elements contributed, within the Tunisian context, to the reconfiguration of party structures and political groups inside prison. Political prisoners thus continue their intellectual and political engagement in detention through forms of collective resistance, including discussion and daily interaction with fellow detainees. This

67. Adel Mabrouk, telephone interview, 08/31/2025.

68. Ezzedine Jemaïel, *Khansaa in the Women's Prison* (Tunis: Yass Publishing, 2024), p. 103.

69. *Ibid*, pp. 88-89.

underscores the central role of memory in sustaining and preserving political identity. Mohamed Saleh Fliss says: “The discussions started under the doors; each detainee laying down behind the door.”⁷⁰ He adds: “Our discussions developed through writing via the Ho Chi Minh Channel [...] We reviewed the entire situation, critically examined our choice, and engaged in self-criticism. In a collective four-way decision, we resolved to announce our separation from the Baath Party and to organize within a new structure that we called ‘The Tunisian Marxist-Leninist Gathering’. This announcement was made on 1 August 1969, from the Burj al-Rumi detention camp.”⁷¹ Gilbert Naccache tells us: “We used to exchange information obtained from visitors, from convicted prisoners, or even from the guards themselves [...] Nouredine and I formed a reception committee for new inmates [...] I would quickly communicate with these prisoners and provide them with information about the prison conditions and the trials.”⁷² Jelassi says: “[...] We would break down barriers and walls to exchange news, information, analyses, suggestions, or even simple greetings. [...] During this period, I formed strong friendships that I continue to cherish. I remember almost all the discussions that took place between us—they were numerous—and I often revisit them in my mind so that we do not lose a precious treasure.”⁷³

Collective cooperation serves as a means of remembering, exchanging narratives and experiences, and recounting events, with the aim of reshaping collective memory and reconstituting the group, party, or movement within the prison. In this perspective, it remains connected to a broader national project. The group is thus perceived as an extension of the homeland itself, which leads prisoners toward collective mental documentation as a historical responsibility and a moral duty of memory that cannot be neglected. Collective recollection and mnemonic resistance become a shared resource and a strategy through which news and information are circulated and transmitted among prisoners, thereby strengthening relationships within the prison and sustaining group unity. Political prisoner Adel Mabrouk says: “When we entered prison, in the first few days we avoided speaking about torture and what we had been subjected to. Later, however, we would meet and exchange conversations, recollecting about the arrest, the torture, names, and other details.”⁷⁴ He adds: “Personally, the practice to which I devoted the greatest effort was the recitation of the Quran, lest I forget it.”⁷⁵

The preservation of memory emerges as a collective ritual through which prisoners mobilize the cultural capital shaped by their political affiliations, while simultaneously retaining and reconstructing the experiences of incarceration—names, facts, ideas, events, and other mnemonic traces—in an effort to resist oblivion and counter the institutional erasure of the self-enacted by the penal system. This process further strengthens solidarity among them and extends beyond a single cell to include other prisons. It contributes to anchoring

70. Fliss, p. 153.

71. *Ibid*, p. 227.

72. Naccache, p. 40.

73. Jelassi, p. 44.

74. Adel Mabrouk, telephone interview, 08/31/2025.

75. Adel Mabrouk, telephone interview, 08/31/2025.

memory in the temporality of imprisonment, so that collective memory within the prison becomes a living archive transmitted by prisoners and linked to the broader narrative of the group. This archive remains flexible, continually reshaping the past within the present.⁷⁶

Memory work within prison is not limited to recalling and attempting to reconstruct a collective memory that is flexible and transcends the geographical boundaries of the cell; it also includes other practices such as writing, drawing, and producing certain handicrafts.

2.2 Prison Culture: Between Art and Writing

Writing in prison, in addition to its individual dimension, carries a collective dimension, as it involves cooperation between political prisoners and common law prisoners. Political prisoners, after writing their letters, often add drawings to them. This task is usually carried out by prisoners experienced in drawing, whether political prisoners or common law inmates (for example, students of fine arts). Although the act of writing is individual, it nevertheless involves other prisoners, reflecting the collective dimension of writing and art and giving a cooperative character to the documentation and preservation of memory—what is known as cooperative memory (*transactive memory*), where roles are distributed among prisoners: some write, some draw, and others make sure the message reaches its recipients⁷⁷. This form of collective memory helped strengthen psychological, intellectual, and cultural bonds of solidarity among prisoners, serving as a form of resistance against the attempt by the penal institution to erase collective identity and dissolve it into an institutional one⁷⁸. Adel Mabrouk recalls: “Some prisoners taught me how to make prayer beads from olive pits and other fruit seeds. We would carve and polish them on the prison floor [...] I also learned from prisoners how to use clothing threads to weave covers for objects such as a toothbrush cover or a pen cover with my fiancée’s name, or a gift for my brother.”⁷⁹

Handicrafts from inside the prison

Illustration 6



Illustration 7



76. Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Function, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge, University Press, 2011).

77. Daniel M. Wegner, “Transactive Memory: A Contemporary Analysis of the Group Mind,” in: Brian Mullen & George R. Goethals, *Theories of Group Behavior* (New York: Springer Series in Social Psychology, 1987), pp. 185-208.

78. Foucault, *Ibid.*

79. Adel Mabrouk, telephone interview, 08/31/2025. Tunisia.

Illustration 8



Illustration 9



Source: Adel Mabrouk.

Ezzedine Jemaïel says: “Drawing in prison helped me solve many problems with both the guards and common law prisoners, as I would assist them by drawing pictures for them and their children.”⁸⁰ As leftist political prisoner Tarek Chamekh recalls: “In prison, I used to write letters for common law prisoners and draw for them, using pens that were smuggled in through the basket. These were not complete or intact pencils, but rather the inner cores of colored pencils removed from their wooden casings, leaving thin sticks of different colors. I would hide them inside the mattress I slept on [...] The guards helped me smuggle them in. I would draw flowers and hearts on letters addressed to their loved ones [...] I also made toys for my children from empty cheese tins, using toothpaste as glue. I even made a simple calculator device for them, and wrote short stories that ended with questions [...]”⁸¹ He adds: “I was in El Kef prison drawing tattoo designs for common law prisoners. The barber in El Houareb prison was my friend, and he was also a common law prisoner. I had previously drawn an image of an Indian woman for tattoos for inmates, and on the day of the haircut I went to him. When it was my turn, I said to him: ‘Is the Indian woman beautiful?’ He had drawn her on his leg, so he recognized me and said: ‘Are you Tarek?’ [...] He added that in prison it was in one’s interest to have a good haircut, because if families saw prisoners with a bad haircut during visits, it would negatively affect their morale. The prison administration, he explained, used to impose this as a form of psychological pressure on both prisoners and their families [...]”⁸²

This collective cultural memory is often met with heightened censorship and efforts to muzzle it inside prison. Mahrezia Belabed recalls: “We had a woman from the state of Bizerte with us in prison who was studying fine arts and had a talent for drawing. We discovered that she drew some pictures on her private letters: flowers, birds, and an eagle carrying a flower. We asked her to draw images on our private letters to our families and children, and the circle expanded to include female prisoners of common law. But the prison administration sought to interpret these drawings in ways that impinged on state security, as if they were related to former President Ben Ali (an eagle carrying a flower). There was also increasing censorship of the content of messages and what we wrote. For example, one of the female prisoners, whose family situation was fragile, would often ask her mother to cook ‘mhamssa with cured

80. Ezzedine Jemaïel, telephone interview, 23/08/2025.

81. Tarek Chamekh, live interview, Tunisia.

82. Tarek Chamekh, live interview, Tunisia.

meat.”⁸³ There was even a pregnant guard who sometimes asked to taste it. However, the prison director began questioning the inmate about what she meant by the word ‘cured meat’. In another case, a prisoner asked her family in a letter for ‘a roasted sheep’s head without ears,’ which led to her being interrogated by the prison administration for an entire week.”⁸⁴

Although letter writing is primarily an individual act, its collective dimension becomes clearly visible within the prison through mutual support, solidarity, and the persistence of writing despite hardships. Some prisoners would post letters for others to read—despite their private nature—in order to raise collective morale, maintain cohesion, and contribute to documenting and preserving collective memory. Mahrezia Belabed recalls: “In prison, when I would send a letter to my husband, who was also imprisoned at the time in Burj al-Rumi, his fellow political prisoners would publicly display my letter for everyone to read.”⁸⁵ This form of collective cooperation constitutes part of broader efforts to preserve shared memory within the prison space, whereby each prisoner carries fragments of others’ experiences, thereby contributing to the formation of an interconnected network of collective recollection. Such solidarity also serves to render the carceral experience more bearable by transforming it into a communal condition, thus alleviating the burden of trauma⁸⁶. This dynamic was further reinforced through the circulation of messages and the distribution of roles related to writing and drawing.

Cultural practices aimed at preserving memory were not limited to drawing; they also included singing, particularly *Al-Zendali*⁸⁷, the lyrical genre specific to Tunisian prisons that narrates the prisoner’s experience, suffering, and sense of alienation. One of the most well-known songs inside prisons is “*Forgive us, Mother*,”⁸⁸ which recounts the experience of being pursued and detained in the basements of the Ministry of Interior and in prison. Political prisoners did not merely circulate these songs—often accompanied by rhythmic banging on pots and pans, dancing, and collective clapping in a festive ritual of recollection. Over time, this practice evolved into composing new songs rooted in shared prison experiences, thereby strengthening the documentation of collective memory from within the prison itself. Gilbert Naccache recalls, in reference to daily life in Cell 17, the largest room in the isolation wing, which housed thirty leftist political prisoners following the arrests of the February 1972 movement: “At that time, one of us wondered what would happen if we composed a song that did not focus on our cause or our good intentions, but instead took Cell 17 itself as its subject. We asked the comrades composing the song to avoid heroic slogans and to focus on our daily life in Cell 17. The lyrics, set to the music of the fourth movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, reflect this intention: “If I die, lay me to rest in Cell 17, among

83. A dish from Tunisian cuisine, such as soup.

84. Mahrezia Belabed, live interview, 08/08/2025, Tunisia.

85. Mahrezia Belabed, live interview, 08/08/2025, Tunisia.

86. Bernard Rimé, *Le partage social des émotions* (Paris: PUF/Quadrige, 2005), pp. 345-356.

87. Named after the Zendal prison in the Bardo area of Tunisia, which is an old Ottoman prison. Singing inside Tunisian prisons has been called “Zendali” after the Zendal prison and the Ottoman Turkish word Zendan, which means prison.

88. The song’s lyrics state: “Forgive us, Mother—we prisoners. We have been waiting for the pardon since 76. Forgive us, Mother—we are only children still. The police pursue us to our very doors. Behind the Africa Hotel, stands a new building they call “the Interrogation Department”—woe to the one taken there, woe to the night that swallows him whole. We went out, O gentle one, to Palestine Street with leaflets in our hands—they fell upon us. They locked us away until our hair grew gray. The Brigade chased us still, all the way to Jean Jaurès Street. Forgive us, Mother—we remain your children. O Tunisia, cherished and enduring—may God turn back the eyes that begrudge you.”

those who pass and vanish, the supervisors, the Levites, the murmur of great and small politics. Even Zeineb was brought there. Bury me in the corner where (Salem) Ben Yahya sits. The country of (Gilbert) Naccache and (Noureddine) Ben Khedher lives stubborn and unbroken in the chambers of my mind. As for (Fadhel) Jaziri, grant him, I ask, that he goes alone for the morning yard break.”⁸⁹ Salwa similarly recounts the emotional impact of these musical practices in her testimony: “They took me into the room for female prisoners of conscience [...] None of them approached me [...] I sat on one of the beds and woke up to the sound of girls chanting familiar songs and hymns.”⁹⁰

Prison songs, alongside testimonies of detention and everyday prison life, also served to document the names of those involved in abuses against prisoners, particularly members of the security apparatus. Some verses from the song “*Forgive us, Mother*,” composed in the 1970s by the popular artist Saleh Farzit while he was detained with political prisoners, recall this experience: “Forgive us, Mother— we are only children still. The police pursue us to our very doors. Behind the Africa Hotel, stands a new building they call “*the Interrogation Department*”— woe to the one taken there, woe to the night that swallows him whole. We went out, O gentle one, to Palestine Street with leaflets in our hands— they fell upon us. They locked us away until our hair grew gray. The Brigade chased us still, all the way to Jean Jaurès Street”. Similarly, the song “*They Said Majda*” preserves the memory of political trials during the rule of Bourguiba and sheds light on the hidden dynamics involving investigating judges, especially the public prosecutor Mohamed Farhat, whom many political prisoners regarded as having betrayed the principle of justice. The lyrics recount: “O Nadhour Prison, I came to visit you— God willing, I will not stay. [...] And God willing, those who lie to the people will not remain; the revolution will come. [...] A prisoner was sentenced to five years [...] after his father lost his money to the public prosecutor, Mohamed Farhat, and to all who judged unjustly. The hearing is adjourned. [...] Give my greetings to my mother— tell her, her sapphire cheeks still shine— and say: Majda is imprisoned, suffering near death, and he asks: come visit me.”⁹¹



89. "Al-Zandali..." "The Anthem of Tunisian Prisons," *Al-Arabi*, 23/04/2023. Viewed on: 01/09/2025, at: <https://bit.ly/47O8CTJ>

90. Jemaïel, pp. 84-85.

91. "Al-Zandali..." "The Anthem of Tunisian Prisons," same reference.

Singing reflects the prisoner's ability to transform lived experiences into a creative act that preserves both dignity and memory. These songs were not merely a form of entertainment; they functioned as a means of communication, consolation, and the expression of suffering, while also reminding prisoners of their shared experiences inside the cell. In this sense, singing became a form of oral memory and a shared narrative that documented daily hardships, the paradoxes of prison life, and abuses of power. Through song, prisoners resisted policies of erasure, exclusion, and isolation, turning music into a tool against oblivion, a breath of dignity, and a bridge between prison memory and the outside world. Singing also served as a means of documenting and preserving memory for future generations, as prisoners deliberately mentioned names, places, security teams, and the names of friends and comrades.

Art and writing similarly represent some of the most prominent cultural practices among political prisoners, regardless of ideological affiliation. These practices were not simply fleeting recreational activities; rather, they evolved into acts of resistance against absence and oblivion and into mechanisms for documenting and preserving collective memory, particularly as this memory was threatened with erasure within the narrow confines of prison walls. Despite the closed and tightly controlled nature of the prison space, prisoners succeeded in creating an alternative space of memory from within. This memory carried their experiences and suffering outward—first to their families, then to civil society through associations and organizations, and eventually into the public sphere after 2011 through processes of transitional justice, as well as through prison literature, artistic production, and cultural initiatives that revived and sustained this memory within collective consciousness.





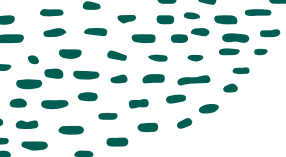
Second:

**Resisting Oblivion in
the Post-Prison Phase**

**The Duty to Document
Wounded Memory**







1. Individual Strategies for Preserving Memory Outside Prison

1.1 The Prison Archive and Its Role in Resisting Oblivion

When a prisoner is released, prison does not truly leave them; rather, it persists as a shadow that haunts their daily life and shapes their relationships with family and community. The wounded memory carried from the prison experience counters erasure and instead becomes an integral part of personal identity, turning recollection into a deeply moral commitment. This experience becomes a foundational element of the former prisoner's identity, reshaping their understanding of both self and world. Life after prison thus extends an experience whose effects do not end with the completion of the sentence; rather, it continues to manifest in actions, choices, thoughts, and interactions with others.

This enduring attachment to the memory of imprisonment is reflected in former prisoners' determination to preserve everything collected or produced during incarceration, as well as official documents associated with that experience, including court records, release papers, exchanged letters, clothing, handicrafts, songs, photographs, and handmade objects. These items become living symbols of the prison experience, accompanying the individual and shaping the trajectory of recollection. Far from being transient artifacts, they constitute a personal archive that bears witness to a painful experience that profoundly shaped the individual's life. At the same time, they provide a means through which the past may be revisited and memories reorganized in ways that allow for renewed understanding and narration. Each symbolic object carries the weight of both suffering and resilience, transforming an experience once confined to the temporal and spatial boundaries of the prison into a memory that can continually be revisited and reinterpreted. In this sense, such objects function as mirrors reflecting a self profoundly transformed by the experience of imprisonment.

These symbols and documents carry profound psychological and epistemic significance. By transforming lived experience into tangible objects, pain is framed and rendered manageable rather than remaining suspended as unresolved trauma. The organization of documents, photographs, letters, and handicrafts enables the former prisoner to situate events within time and place, to structure memory coherently, and to confer meaning on experiences that might otherwise remain fragmented or diffuse. Each material trace thus operates as a bridge between past and present, and between individual and collective memory, creating a shared space through which the political prisoner's narrative can be articulated and transmitted. In this way, suffering becomes an experience that can be contemplated, interpreted, and reconstructed. The preservation of these symbols extends beyond emotional

attachment; it represents a deliberate commitment to safeguarding the memory and lived truth. Documenting the experience and conserving its material traces constitutes a moral act that confronts attempts by authorities to erase, marginalize, or silence this memory. Such objects function as living testimonies that protect recollection from disappearance and preserve its significance over time. The preservation of prison memory thus emerges as a moral duty through which the former prisoner asserts the right to remember and resists the forces of forgetting beyond the prison walls. Through this process, symbolic objects come to embody the power relations that shape memory and the political and social events it contains, shielding them from distortion⁹². Over time, these handicrafts and documents acquire archival value, becoming material traces that bear the imprint of prison experience and allow its continual reactivation whenever they are revisited. In this sense, they may be understood as “*lieux de mémoire*”, as proposed by Pierre Nora⁹³: physical or symbolic sites in which collective experience is stored and through which memory is safeguarded.

This memory ultimately transcends the individual to become a legacy for future generations—a testament to resilience, resistance, and to those who sacrificed silently during periods of fear and oppression. In this sense, recollection becomes a moral act that affirms the existence of truth. It confers upon it a value that transcends individual experience, transforming it into a message capable of enduring beyond place and time through intergenerational transmission and oral narration. Among many political prisoners, whether affiliated with leftist or Islamist movements, there exists a strong tradition of passing memories on to children through storytelling. This practice sustains a communicative memory that is transmitted across generations and contributes to processes of collective recovery. Adel Mabrouk explains: “[...] Right now, as I’m talking to you, my daughter has come over to listen to our conversation. She’s interested in knowing what happened in the past.”⁹⁴ The daughter’s curiosity and engagement ensure the continuity of memory from one generation to the next. Children often show interest in the experiences of their parents either by listening to their stories or by engaging with the objects and documents connected to the prison experience over the years. Leftist political activist Tarek Chamekh similarly notes that “[...] despite the years all the documents and handicrafts are still in the house.”⁹⁵ In this way, suffering does not remain confined to those who directly experienced it. Rather, it is socially reshaped and transmitted through narratives and symbolic objects, becoming part of a broader collective consciousness⁹⁶.

Oral narration, the preservation of symbolic artifacts, and documentation together enable the transmission of individual memory to children, often through the mother, who mediates and frames the father’s prison experience, or sometimes her own. Adel Mabrouk explains: “My wife was the one who told my children about my experience in prison... sometimes they would ask me for more details.”⁹⁷ This testimony highlights the central role of women in

92. C. Scott, pp. 183- 190.

93. Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Représentations*, no. 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory. (Spring, 1989), pp. 7-24. Accessed on: 17/09/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/3evmasrc>

94. Adel Mabrouk, telephone interview, 08/31/2025.

95. Tarek Chamekh, live interview, Tunisia.

96. Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux*, *Ibid.*

97. Adel Mabrouk, telephone interview, 08/31/2025.

intergenerational memory transmission and shows that preserving memory is a collective family process in which women frequently act as key guardians of recollection. Memory is thus shaped through family and intergenerational interactions, ensuring its continual reconstruction while linking past and present, so that both the experience and its symbols become a familial legacy transmitted across time. This process can be understood as a continued reconstruction of the past within the present, echoing Paul Ricoeur's reflections on memory⁹⁸. Intergenerational transmission thus constitutes a form of shared and guided memory that often moves from the former prisoner to the spouse and subsequently to the children. It is shaped in accordance with the family's emotional equilibrium and its need for continuity—frequently emphasizing themes of struggle, resistance, patience, and commitment to a cause. In this way, memory transmission can also function as a form of collective healing and family therapy, helping to ease the burden of wounded memory.

Political prisoners in Tunisia frequently invoke the expression, “We went from the small prison to the big prison.” Although this phrase is commonly associated with post-release administrative surveillance and restrictions on livelihoods, it may also be interpreted as referring to the enduring presence of prison memory through the preservation of writings and symbolic objects produced during incarceration. Safeguarding documents, letters, photographs, and handicrafts is therefore not merely nostalgic; it is the creation of a personal archive that preserves the experience, renders it retrievable, and makes it open to reflection. These symbolic objects also carry a moral function by countering erasure, thereby becoming sites of memory that continually re-emerge within the broader narrative of imprisonment. The impact of this memory does not remain confined to the former prisoner; it extends to the family. The latter plays a fundamental role in transmitting it to subsequent generations, often through narratives shared by the spouse and through the objects and documents preserved within the home. In this way, individual memory gradually evolves into a shared family memory transmitted across generations. The preservation of memory after imprisonment thus becomes an ongoing reconstruction of the past within the present, granting continuity to the experience and transforming it into a human and social testimony with a collective dimension⁹⁹.

98. Ricoeur, pp. 647-649.

99. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 38.

1.2 Prison Literature and Digital Documentation

Prison literature in Tunisia developed significantly after 2011, when writing and publishing flourished following decades of censorship imposed by the political regime. Ever since, more than thirty prison novels have been published by former male and female political prisoners. This body of work can be classified as prison literature or autobiographical writing, since it recounts experiences of torture, imprisonment, and the hardships faced after release. Writing thus became a strategy of memory documentation through which victims sought to preserve their experiences and the suffering endured over decades. It also functioned as a means of expression and communication with generations who did not witness the violations committed during the rule of Bourguiba and Ben Ali, and came to be understood as both a moral duty and a form of struggle. Several factors contributed to the revival and expansion of this literary production, including psychological motivations as well as contextual and experiential factors. In the introductions to many of these works, authors explicitly reflect on the motivations behind their writing. Gilbert Naccache recalls: “You don’t need books to read, Gilbert; you can perfectly write your own books – a remark made in June 1973 by Paul. Prisoners would write letters in tiny script, while I used cigarette rolling paper to write a long letter that could be hidden and smuggled out of prison. The entire writing process was profuse. I was finally released on August 3, 1979. Upon rereading the manuscript, memories and emotions resurfaced, prompting me to publish the novel and recount the circumstances of its creation.”¹⁰⁰ Prison literature contributes to the reintegration of the self into social space. It does not merely document individual experience but seeks to transform it into a testimony of collective value, enabling the victim to reclaim a position as a social actor after the prison institution attempted to strip him of that role. Through writing, the victim relives suffering within a network of relationships—friends, family, readers, and historians. Abdelhamid Jelassi explains: “This writing is a personal attempt... I am not a professional historian, but I am presenting material that may benefit historians... I recorded what I saw and heard... Perhaps this testimony will inspire the silent ones to speak, so they may add, modify, or correct.”¹⁰¹ This type of writing therefore constitutes a form of resistance through narrative and represents a continuation of struggle beyond prison walls. Political prisoner Ezzedine Jemaïel describes writing as another stage of struggle: “What made me write? First, fate has placed me in exceptional circumstances. Second, I have capabilities, a network of relationships, and courage, in addition to the magnitude of the experience I have gone through, which has made me ready to write [...] Silence is a shield for the executioner; it allows violations to continue unaccounted for... I tried to find someone to write my story, then decided to write it myself after friends encouraged me.”¹⁰² He justifies his writing experience in his novel, which he published about his personal experience: “In this contribution, there is an attempt to shed light on other aspects [...] but the picture remains, otherwise incomplete, and it is a work

100. Naccache, pp. 11, 14-15.

101. Jelassi, p. 24.

102. Ezzedine Jemaïel, telephone interview, 23/08/2025.

no less valuable than the traditional chapters of struggle, so I consider this work another chapter of struggle and duty.”¹⁰³

Prison and autobiographical literature thus represent a symbolic capital through which victims resist official narratives of power. It becomes a counter-power—the power of memory confronting the power of enforced forgetting. Mohamed Saleh Fliss affirms: “The duty of truth and the right of memory remain a strong motivation for embodying the act of writing and representing a complete testimony in the public sphere [...] There is no purpose behind undertaking the publication of this work other than the love of giving the duty of naked testimony [...] This work is not out of a desire to take revenge on anyone, nor to settle a score [...] What the reader will see is the actual truth that I lived.”¹⁰⁴ In this way, prison literature contributes to a shared memory that transcends the individual dimension and opens a window through which readers can access lived experiences of repression. It functions as a documentary strategy aimed at preserving memory for future generations.

Some examples from Tunisian prison literature

Illustration 10



Illustration 11



Illustration 12

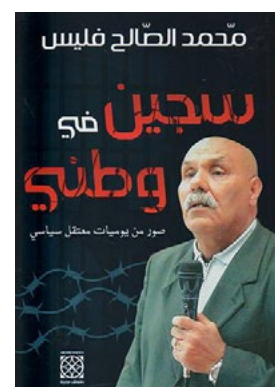


Illustration 13



Illustration 14



Source: Researcher's photos.

103. Ezzedine Jemaïel, *Walls and Moons*, 2nd ed. (Tunis: Dar Yass Publishing, 2020), pp. 19-20.

104. Fliss, pp. 12-13.

Memory documentation has extended beyond prison literature to include social media platforms, most notably Facebook, which has become one of the most significant digital spaces for political and activist expression in Tunisia. Former political prisoners have increasingly used Facebook to share their experiences and transmit their memories, thereby transforming them into a form of digital memory. In this sense, memory transcends its material and spatial boundaries and is reconfigured within a virtual sphere. Facebook thus functions as a “memory community,” insofar as it enables the preservation of testimonies and the documentation of lived experiences within an open and seemingly boundless collective archive. Users interact with this archive reactivating suppressed or fragmented narratives of the past.

For example, on his personal page, political prisoner Karim Abdel Salam continues to document memories and events that remain deeply engraved in his mind. He writes: *“My sister used to watch the movies I loved and describe them to me in letters sent to prison. I saw in her eyes all the beauty of the world, while she saw through mine the farthest reaches of the hell that had confined me. Images would hastily encircle me, and I would keep fleeing from them, carrying the smells of fire and burning, the fragrance of beautiful memories, police raids, and siege upon siege [...]”*¹⁰⁵ He also notes: *“Greetings to all my friends... These days, Abdelhamid Jelassi has cautiously acknowledged the Ennahda movement’s responsibility for some of the violence of the 1990s and has apologized to all the victims, including my generation, which he described as ‘the generation of the Holocaust’. This recognition is very important to me and to many others, because Abdelhamid was a leader and one of those who planned and managed the confrontation. I am therefore very happy, and many people like me are as well, despite the barking voices insulting man and his courage, and despite the fact that the policies of ‘liberating the initiative’ still persist on Facebook...”*¹⁰⁶ Through such posts, Karim turns to writing on virtual walls to share memories with others. He opens his private sphere—family and political life—to an unlimited virtual public space in order to digitally document and safeguard his memory¹⁰⁷. This process liberates memory from all forms of authority (state, society, group, and family) and frees the prisoner from the authority of their own memory, enabling them to resist marginalization and oblivion, particularly from political authorities that seek to control memory and narratives¹⁰⁸. In this way, a digital memory emerges—one that is shaped and controlled by prisoners themselves. The virtual realm opens the possibility of a collective dimension of documentation and preservation, in which the individual does not stand apart from the collective but converges with it to form a shared memory.

105. Karim Abdel Salam's Facebook page, seen on 14/09/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/4tjafudt>

106. *Ibid.*

107. Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

108. Ricoeur, pp. 579-584.





2. From Preserving Individual Memory to Documenting Collective Memory in the Public Sphere

2.1 Establishing Associations and Civil Activity

After 2011 and Decree 88 of 2011 regulating associations, Tunisia's civil space experienced a major revival. Numerous human rights organizations were established, totaling 428 associations by June 2025¹⁰⁹. Human rights activism witnessed a qualitative leap alongside the transitional justice process, particularly in relation to cases involving victims of human rights violations. However, this momentum gradually subsided following the exceptional measures taken by President Kais Saied on July 25, 2021. Many survivors attribute this decline to fear of arrest and the possibility of reliving the prison experience, especially after a significant number of former victims were arrested last year for social activism. Although they were later released, the specter of prison and the memory of suffering continue to haunt them.

Since 2011, survivors' engagement in civil activism has represented a strategic field for uncovering the truth, documenting harsh experiences, and preserving the memory of violations. What began as individual efforts directed toward the public sphere gradually evolved into structured collective action within that sphere. This transformation has contributed to rebuilding and reshaping the public sphere in ways compatible with the philosophy of democratic transition. In this sense, civic engagement becomes a symbolic social practice aimed at resisting forgetting and constructing alternative narratives to official accounts, thereby contributing to justice and fairness. This collective trend of documenting memory through structured and legally framed activities echoes past international experiences, such as those of Argentina and Guatemala. Such documentation seeks to achieve social recognition and restore a coherent sense of identity. Associations provide survivors with a collective space through which they can demand symbolic and social justice while transforming wounded memory into a healed collective memory¹¹⁰ or even, at advanced stages, into an association – why not? Associational activity may serve as a means of reconstructing the self in the aftermath of violations or imprisonment, while simultaneously functioning as an act of resistance to the official narratives advanced by ruling political authorities. Many victims' associations, with the support of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the International Center for Transitional Justice, have participated in projects addressing the memory of violations, including but not limited to: the **Tunisian Women's Association**, **TOUNISSIET Association**, and **the Tunisian Network for Transitional Justice**

109. "Total as of June 6, 2025," Ifeda website, accessed on 09/15/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/23xd76dr>

110. Ricoeur, pp. 536-537.

(RTJT in French). By sharing their memories with civil society organizations, the victims have contributed to raising awareness of their experience and refuting the narrative adopted by the former political regime. Memory has thus come to be conceived as a collective duty oriented toward establishing safeguards against the recurrence of past violations. In this perspective, civil society's engagement with memory transcends individual responsibility and is reframed as a broader moral obligation, extending from the group to society at large, and ultimately underpinning the pursuit of justice and accountability.

The activities of numerous victims' associations have persisted and become increasingly structured through federations and networks established to support and accompany the transitional justice process in Tunisia, particularly the work of the Truth and Dignity Commission, officially launched in 2015. They organized several memory-related initiatives, including the "Memory Preservation Festival – Against Forgetting," supervised by the International Association for the Support of Political Prisoners (IASPP) and the Tunisian Network for Transitional Justice held on Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis on April 30–May 1, 2016. The event featured a documentary exhibition showcasing key creative works by political prisoners, as well as the screening of a short documentary film titled *Against Forgetting*¹¹¹. This collective experience reflects a form of symbolic conflict within the public sphere, where civil actors—particularly victims—compete to assert legitimacy and meaning by reclaiming spaces historically controlled by political power. By transferring their activities to this central avenue, Avenue Habib Bourguiba, which was once controlled by the political authorities, survivors sought to challenge and dismantle the symbolic capital accumulated by the authorities. Their activism thus became a mechanism for rewriting history and integrating their memories into the broader collective narrative.

Adel Mabrouk explains: *"I participated alongside several political prisoners' associations in transitional justice activities in Tunisia, including the Sit-in of Steadfastness. We demanded that the April 9 Prison be transformed into a museum to preserve memory. I always took my children to some of these activities to explain to them what had happened in the past. I also followed the work of the Commission despite its shortcomings, mistakes, and negligence."*¹¹² The civic engagement of survivors therefore extends to their children. By bringing younger generations to commemorative activities, survivors share their own experiences as well as the memories of other prisoners, contributing to the formation of a new network of civil actors across generations and encouraging their involvement in memory work. For survivors, collective action also represents a form of recovery that requires transforming painful experiences into a kind of "social drama," in the sense developed by Jeffrey Alexander¹¹³. By staging memory in the public sphere, individual trauma is transferred into a social experience that touches collective identity. This "drama" is therefore not merely the documentation of memory but a process of social and political theatricality in which public space becomes a symbolic stage. Memory is displayed as a public issue, placing society as a whole before a moral and political responsibility, further reinforced by the private and public testimonies that survivors have shared through the media.

111. The Tunisian Network for Transitional Justice page, Facebook, viewed on 15/09/2025, at: <https://tinyurl.com/33nwc5kb>

112. Adel Mabrouk, telephone interview, 08/31/2025.

113. C. Alexander, *Ibid.*

Civil activism also took the form of organized groups mobilized around specific causes, such as the victims of the 1984 Bread Riots and the families of the wounded and martyrs of the revolution. Through protests, sit-ins, and the public display of photographs of their martyred sons, these groups sought to document the memory of revolutionary events while demanding justice and fairness. Carrying images in public spaces and demonstrating contributes to preserving the memory of the martyrs and the wounded from being forgotten, especially since these events remain relatively recent. The families' field actions helped place their children's case at the forefront of successive governments' agendas from 2011 onward, culminating in the announcement that they would benefit from allowances from the Fidaa Foundation. In contrast, the association Bread Riots 184 continues to face marginalization. Mahrez Chargui, one of the survivors of the 1984 Bread Riots, explains: *"The Bread Riots are called the orphaned case because they have no political or union backing. The number of victims in this case is 1,230. Our goal has been to preserve the memory of these events and ensure that Tunisians know what happened in 1984. That year, many people were killed or wounded, and innocent people, including children and young people, were imprisoned in acts of vindictiveness and revenge. Every year on January 3, we hold a vigil in front of the Municipal Theatre of Tunis on Avenue Habib Bourguiba, with the participation of survivors from different regions. We asked the President of the Republic to declare January 3 a symbolic 'National Day for a Decent Living,' to no avail [...] We also pressured the Truth and Dignity Commission to participate in public hearings and present our testimony. We contacted all members of the Commission's board and submitted a written request on behalf of the victims of the Bread Riots. We agreed that if our request were to be rejected, we would close the secret hearing center on Rue de Syrie and stage a sit-in inside. However, the Commission responded positively and scheduled public hearings¹¹⁴. We simply demanded our right to uncover the truth. There are approximately 85 dead; some were castrated, others had their fingernails pulled out, and some were burned with cigarettes [...]"¹¹⁵*

Illustration :11 :A vigil by the survivors of the 1984 bread riots in front of the Municipal Theater in Tunis.



Source: The official Facebook page of the Bread Riots 1984 group: <https://bit.ly/48kCLtP>

114. For further information, see: "Hisham Hosni's Testimony at the Public Hearing on the Bread Riots - January 4, 2018," accessed on 09/16/2025, at: <https://shorturl.at/Fjv18>

115. Mahrez Chargui, live interview, 28/08/2025, Tunisia.

Civil activism plays a pivotal role in the documentation and preservation of memory. It can be understood as the outcome of a gradual evolution in documentation practices. Initially it emerged as individual efforts within prison, later developed into collective initiatives under varying degrees of institutional supervision and control, and, after 2011, evolved into organized action through civil associations that sought to reintroduce these experiences into the public sphere, alongside individual testimonies circulated in digital spaces. This trajectory reflects a growing awareness among survivors and the increasing sophistication of their strategies for safeguarding recollection. It also underscores their capacity to transform individual experiences of suffering into a shared collective memory oriented toward healing and reconciliation. In this context, civic activism extends beyond documentation to become a form of symbolic resistance, enabling survivors to reclaim social visibility, secure recognition of their experiences, and pursue justice. Accordingly, the documentation of memory acquires an interwoven ethical and social dimension.





Conclusion:

**From Documenting
and Preserving
Memory to
Achieving Genuine
Reconciliation and
Healing**



Fifty-eight years of violations conceal a wounded memory that resists erasure in the absence of genuine reconciliation and state recognition, particularly in light of the continued disregard for the recommendations of the final report of the Truth and Dignity Commission regarding the preservation of memory. This wound is not mitigated by the passage of time nor by the death of the victims; otherwise, the files of resistance fighters killed in the Agri Mountains would not remain unresolved, nor would their deaths persist as omissions within civil registry records. The same applies to the trials of Lazhar Chraïti and his group, the Perspectives movement case, the Tunisian Worker case, the Baathists and Islamists, as well as the Gafsa events of 1980, the Bread Riots of 1984, the Mining Basin uprising of 2008, and numerous other episodes. Memory cannot be effaced insofar as it is transmitted across generations. Its psychological and symbolic effects persist and are continually reproduced in both physical and virtual spaces, repeatedly reactivating demands for recognition and accountability within society. Ultimately, the political system has no recourse in the face of memory except confrontation with it.

Under the control of the political system and its regulatory and punitive institutions, most notably the prison system, survivors have sought to safeguard recollection through the documentation of memory across multiple forms of expression, including writing, drawing, engraving, and singing. At every stage of their experience, they have recorded what they endured, whether individually or collectively, and within diverse structured settings such as prison, family, associations, and digital spaces, in an effort to communicate lived realities and preserve their meaning. In this sense, documentation emerges as an act of resistance against the politics of forgetting imposed by political systems and their institutions. Despite the apparent decline of civil society engagement in Tunisia in memory work and documentation aimed at justice, accountability, and healing, survivors continue—through their productions, testimonies, and archival practices—to resist erasure. These initiatives require sustained institutional encouragement and support from the state, as well as robust national and international backing, in order to be further strengthened, developed, and systematically structured. They constitute an essential pathway toward healing and the consolidation of meaningful reconciliation between the various components of Tunisian society, as well as between the state and its citizens. Absent such engagement, Tunisia risks remaining caught in recurrent cycles of historical repetition and mnemonic return, whereby unresolved issues continually resurface, generating renewed tensions and crises, exacerbating political, social, and economic instability, and further undermining development trajectories.

Supporting survivors of violations and empowering them through memory-preservation initiatives goes beyond merely documenting the past. It serves as a critical tool for psychological and social healing, enabling survivors to reclaim their dignity, articulate their suffering, and collectively process their experiences through cultural and creative practices. In this way, such initiatives help bridge the gap between past and present, foster reconciliation, and contribute to rebuilding trust between the state and civil society. Ultimately, these efforts stand as a clear indicator of a state's commitment to

comprehensive national reconciliation. By promoting justice and equity, they also help cultivate a democratic environment capable of confronting historical grievances and transforming collective memory into a catalyst for social, political, and cultural development.

The role of female survivors in memory work is no less significant than that of other actors; rather, it calls for greater support and recognition. In Tunisia, female survivors have played a pivotal role in transmitting memory beyond prison walls, conveying it to new generations, and safeguarding prison archives, documents, and material cultural symbols associated with their experiences. This reality highlights the need to strengthen initiatives that bring visibility to the qualitative dimension of women's contributions to documenting and preserving memory. It also underscores their active role in safeguarding both individual and collective histories of victims of violations.





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"Memory"

By Karim Abdel Salam, Tunisian human rights activist, president of the Dignity and Rehabilitation Association, and a founding member of the International Network of Victims and Survivors of Serious Human Rights Abuses (INOVAS).

Memory is not a mere collection of emotionally charged events; it is a constitutive element of the present and a guiding vision for the future. It is not a static representation of the past, but a continually renewed construction shaped by collective imagination and individual emotions, grounded in a system of material and immaterial discourses and symbols. It emerges from and circulates within society, at individual and collective levels.

Collective memory often leaves a legacy of pain and fear that extends across generations. Ignoring this legacy can turn it into a reservoir of revenge or fertile ground for new conflicts—especially when each group seeks to impose its own narrative in a context marked by a lack of recognition and weakened protection of narrative pluralism. In such circumstances, memory once again becomes a deeply contested issue.

Memory is often distorted by the deliberate denial embedded in official policies and by the control of narratives designed to sustain political legitimacy. The deeper the denial, the greater the need for remembrance as a mechanism of resistance and a form of justice. Yet the manipulation of memory obscures facts and hinders the assignment of responsibility, ultimately distorting the course of justice.

Using memory as a political weapon, by assigning victims political labels or trying to control the narrative of the past, strips justice of its meaning. The situation becomes even more complex when genuine efforts to critically examine history fade, replaced by vague political discourses on social peace that fail to address the root causes of past abuses.

Writing history becomes even more challenging during periods of political transition, particularly when remnants of former systems and powerful actors remain active in public life and there is no clear institutional break with the past. The absence of accessible archives, or their concealment and use for political maneuvering, further disrupts the process of uncovering the truth.

However, memory—if engaged properly—can be an effective tool for reconstruction. To have memory is to hold part of one's identity. A wounded identity may give rise to extremism and resentment, but it can also become a force for coexistence if it is acknowledged, contained, and reworked in relation to oneself and others, allowing painful experiences to be transformed into lessons that help prevent the recurrence of violations.

Several tools, such as confession, storytelling, writing, dialogue, and artistic expression, help transform painful memories into a path toward human justice. Recognition opens the way for tolerant, constructive dialogue, gives those who suffered the chance to move beyond the label of "victim" and regain their agency, and enables society to learn lessons and prevent the repetition of the past.

Establishing true justice begins by giving painful memories the space to be expressed, for there is no justice without recognition. Ethical and principled responsibility becomes a commitment to building a fair historical narrative—even if only through oral testimony—and to fostering a culture of non-impunity while resisting the reproduction of "laws of silence."

The documentation process remains a test of integrity and an effort to protect oral memory from fading, especially in the face of attempts at collective forgetting which, though understandable on an individual level, constitute a form of systematic long-term harm at the societal level.

Reconstructing, understanding, and living with the past—without denying the facts—is one of the most important tools for both individual and collective recovery. Memory is not merely a repository of harsh emotions such as pain, loss, torture, or displacement; it is a dynamic force that shapes consciousness and whose influence extends into the future. Despite differences in individual experiences of suffering, their collective impact is shared in loss and violation.

Ultimately, whoever controls the past can influence the future, and whoever controls the present can reshape the past. Engaging with memory responsibly therefore becomes a moral and political necessity to prevent the repetition of violations and to build a society capable of coexistence and justice.



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