



Arab Comics Today: Vibrant and Diverse



By [Olivia Snaije](#)

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A rich and varied exhibit on a new generation of Arab comics kicked off the 2018 [International Comics Festival](#) in Angoulême, France, coinciding with the publication of several books on the subject in English and French.



Mohamed El Seth et Haitham El Seth (Twins Cartoon) from Egypt. "Over 30 people dead following successive explosions"

There is a long tradition of cartooning in the Arab world—primarily political—dating back to drawings in the Egyptian [James Sanua](#)'s satirical paper, *Abou Naddara Zarqa*, in the late 19th century, continuing on to the work of Palestinian political cartoonist Naji al-Ali, who was relentlessly critical of despotism and repression from

the 1960s until his assassination in London in 1987. The Syrian cartoonist, Ferzat, drew caricatures for various publications beginning in the late 1960s before founding his own satirical newspaper, *Ad-Domari*, (the Lamplighter) in 2000 that the government closed down in 2003. More recently, the lead-up to the Arab Spring and its subsequent failings has galvanized the comics scene, also giving rise to women cartoonists such as [Nadia Khiari](#), known as Willis from Tunis, and many others, in what was a traditionally male-dominated area.

In 2007 in Lebanon, the non-profit collective [Samandal](#), dedicated to the art of comics, was founded. Its members, Omar Khouri, Hatem Imam, Lena Merhej, the Fdz, and Tarek Naba'a, felt that comics were an underrepresented medium in the Middle East and wanted to create a platform to tell stories from Lebanon and the general region.



Egyptian Magdy El Shafee "Nobody asked whether the migration was legal or not."

Around the same time in Egypt, Magdy El Shafee's graphic novel, [Metro](#), a thriller that addresses corruption, poverty and injustice and presaged the revolution to come, was banned on publication in 2008. It was translated by Chip Rossetti and published in English in 2012 to wide acclaim.

Eleven years later, Samandal has expanded, just barely surviving a lawsuit and a hefty fine by the Lebanese state which accused it of inciting sectarian strife, denigrating religion, publishing false news and defamation and slander (pew), and has published fifteen magazines and two comic anthologies to its name. The founders and artists associated with Samandal are also central to the exhibition in Angoulême entitled [The New Generation, Arab Comics Today](#), accompanied by a handsome catalogue in English and French published by [Alifbata](#), [Tosh Fesh](#), a non-profit for Arab artists, and [The Mu'taz and Rada Sawwaf Arabic Comics initiative](#) at the American University of Beirut.



[The New Generation, Arab Comics Today](#)

The exhibit and catalogue highlight the diverse work of 44 comics artists from over ten countries, who work in Arabic, French and English. Some grew up with war as a backdrop and all have experience with political unrest, corruption, censorship and more. What becomes apparent with this new wave of artists are certain trends: Artistic horizons have been expanded, local Arabic dialects are being used, women

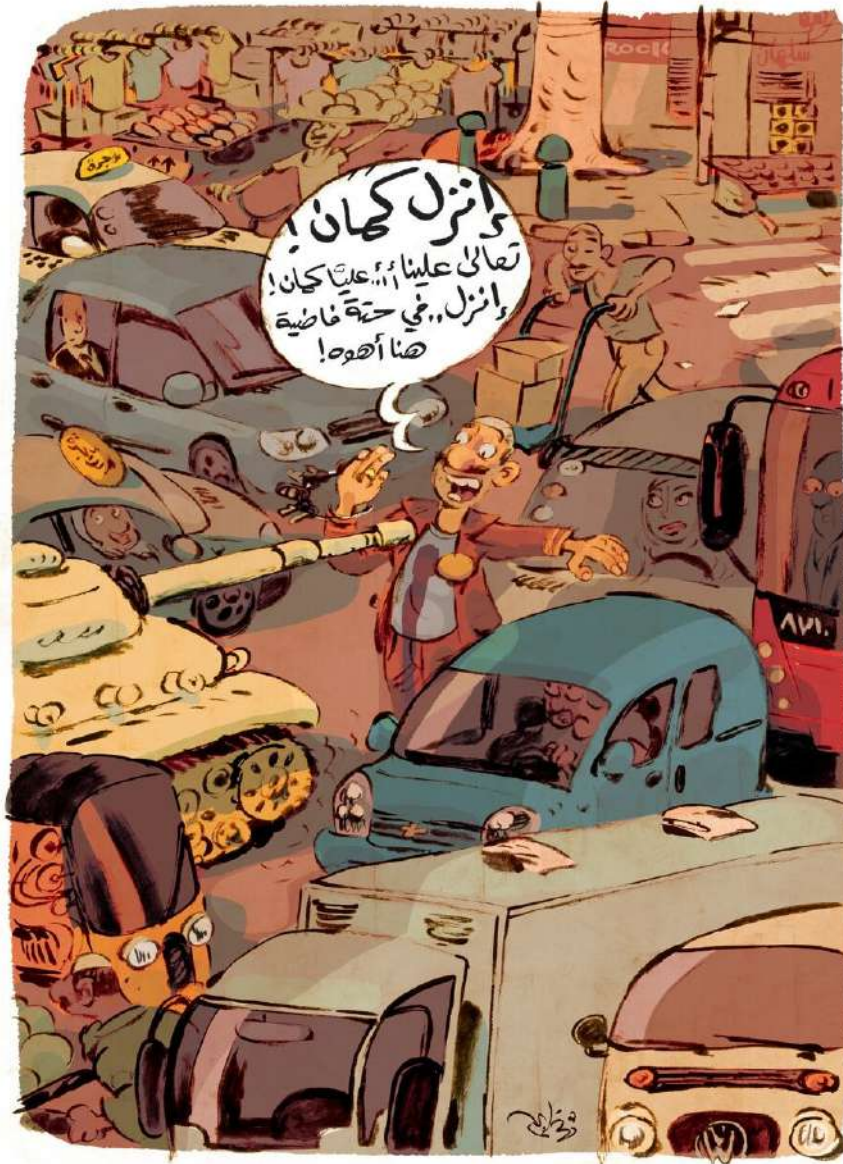
are at the forefront of much of the creation, and the comics don't only reflect the political aspect of life, but also bring up social and cultural issues, such as sexuality, homosexuality, homophobia, sexual harassment, feminism, poverty or the struggles of urban life.

There is a spirit of communication and collaboration across the Arabic-speaking Middle East and North Africa, with Moroccan comics artists participating in Egyptian or Lebanese projects, or the [International Comics Festival of Algiers](#) (FIBDA) awarding Lebanese artist Omar Khouri Best Arabic Comic for his socio-political comic strip, *Utopia* in 2010.



Migo from the Egyptian collective Toktok, "The angels sleep in the sea"

Samandal, as a comics collective, provided inspiration to others, such as [Toktok](#) in Egypt. Mohammed Shennawy, of the Toktok collective, in turn co-founded the [CairoComix Festival](#) in 2015 with Twins Cartoon brothers. Talented comics artists created collectives in Morocco, with [Skefkef](#), in Tunisia, with [Lab619](#), in Syria, with the anonymous [Collective4Syria](#) (temporarily on hold), which advocates artistic freedom, or in Iraq, with Masaha, which brings together artists involved in the development of comics, animation and digital art, and organizes workshops and exhibitions.



Egyptian Mohammed Shennawy "Come forward! More... More... Come forward... there's a free space here... yes!"

Comics aficionados will already be familiar with some of the artists, such as the Lebanese Zeina Abirached, who writes in French and whose books, such as *[A Game for Swallows](#)* have been translated into English. Then there is Lena Merhej, one of the co-founders of Samandal, whose graphic novel, *[Laban et confiture ou comment ma mère est devenue libanaise](#)* (*Laban and jam or how my mother became Lebanese*) about her German mother coming to Lebanon was translated into French from Arabic, and Mazen Kerbaj, whose *[Beirut Won't Cry](#)*, a diary of the 2006 33-day war in Lebanon, was published by Fantagraphics in 2017. Palestinian artist, Amer Shomali, known in particular for his hilarious and award-winning animated documentary, *[The Wanted 18](#)* is also exhibiting work that was published in the press. But there are countless other talents to be discovered in the exhibition and catalogue

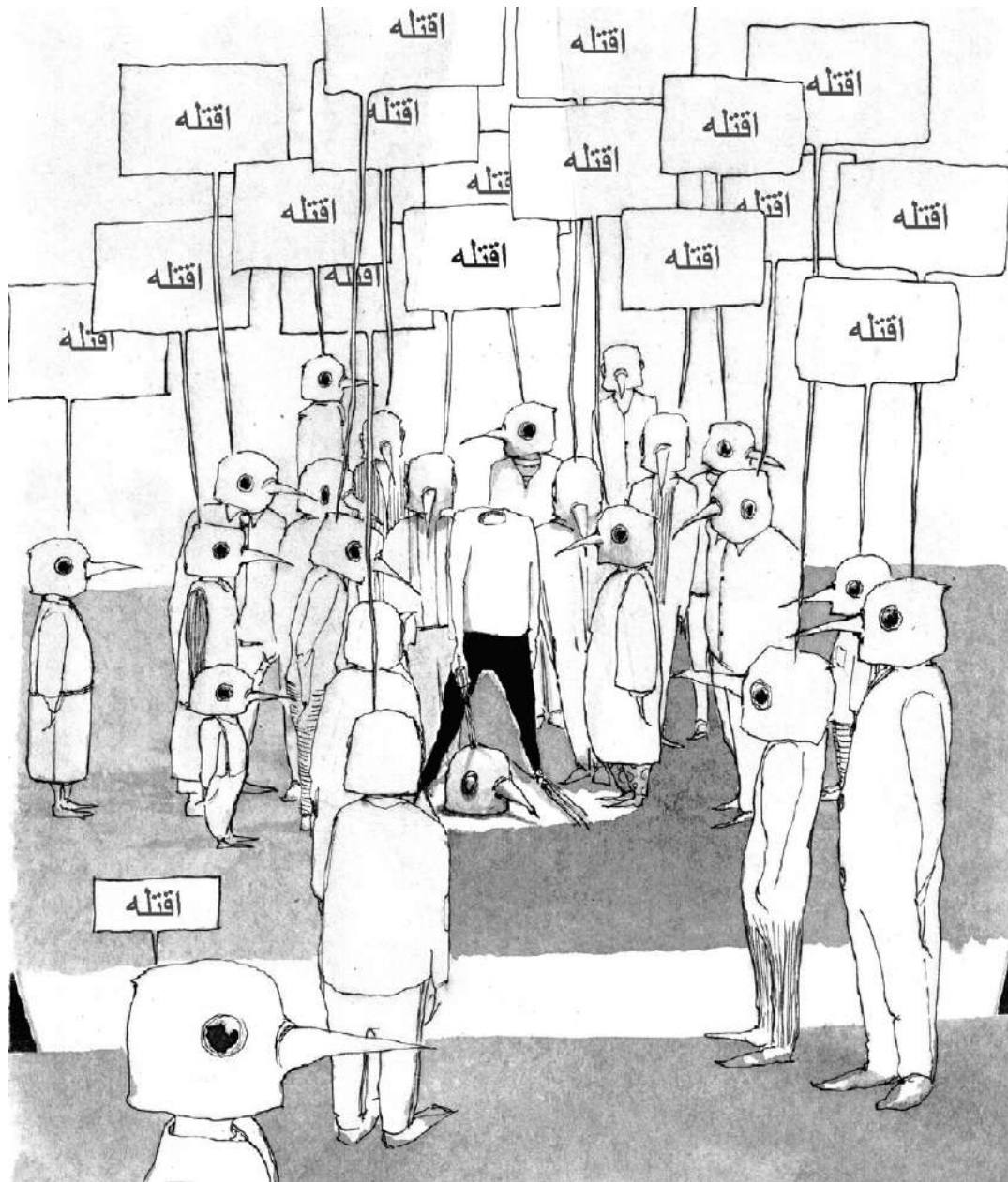
who are involved in projects that are fascinating and deserve to be explored, supported and translated.



The Egyptian *Garage* magazine

Garage is an independent, underground Egyptian comics magazine that includes comics strips and editorials, and has, to date, published three issues. The region's political and social unrest in recent years is evident in the work. The Algerian comics artist and graphic designer Rym Mokhtari founded a comics blog called *12 Tours* with Nawel Louerrad and Kamal Zakour.

And there's the first feminist comics magazine, *Shakmagia*: founded by the NGO Nazra in Egypt in 2014, which features both men and women contributors.



Algerian cartoon artist Nawel Louerrad, "On Violence"

Simona Gabrieli, an Italian Arabist based in Marseille, who runs the Alifbata publishing company and was one of the main experts setting up the exhibit and the publication, said that comics are how the younger generation in the Arab world expresses itself today, and that these representations are “live matter.”

The incredibly dynamic production across this vast territory will be a terrific discovery for those interested in comics. If you can't make it to Angoulême before November 2018, the exhibit will likely travel to Arab countries, and in the meantime the catalogue and books already available are a must.

Banner image from the [10th anniversary issue of Samandal](#) available in Arabic, French and English.

Tags

- samandal
- arab comics today
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Olivia Snaije

Olivia is a journalist and editor and manages the editorial content for Bookwitty in English. She is based in Paris.

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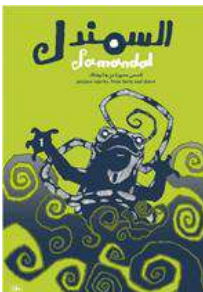
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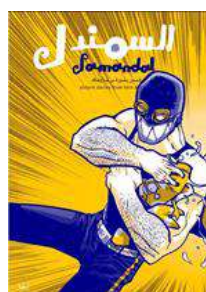
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Samandal issue 2

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