

Middle East Matters, Episode One: The Murder of Lokman Slim: Justice Delayed in Lebanon

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Watch a special conversation about the murder of Lebanese activist and writer Lokman Slim between veteran Lebanese journalist Hanin Ghaddar and Slim's widow and colleague, Monika Borgmann.

In February 2023, on the second anniversary of the murder of Lebanese activist and writer Lokman Slim, the UN Human Rights Council issued a statement condemning the Lebanese government for failing to bring his killers to justice. Slim, a longtime critic of Hezbollah, had received repeated threats from the group before his assassination in 2021. The Slim case underscores the chronic failure of the Lebanese government to hold accountable the perpetrators of political assassinations and other high-profile crimes. The UN group noted that “a culture of impunity not only emboldens the killers of Mr. Slim, it will also have a chilling effect on civil society as it sends a chilling message to other activists to self-censor.”

Friedmann Fellow Hanin Ghaddar spoke with Lokman Slim’s widow and colleague, Monika Borgmann, as a part of The Washington Institute’s new video series: Middle East Matters. Borgmann is the director of UMAM, a nonprofit cultural organization she founded with her husband. The interview covers the imperative of investigating and convicting the killers of Slim and other activists, the importance of Lebanese democracy to U.S. foreign policy, and the role Washington could play in promoting free speech and other human rights in the country.

Transcript

Hanin Ghaddar: Welcome to this video production from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. I am Hanin Ghaddar, the Friedmann Fellow at the Institute.

February 2023 marked the second anniversary of the assassination of Lebanese writer, filmmaker, and human rights activist Lokman Slim. On the occasion of the anniversary, the United Nations High Commissioner for human rights criticized the Lebanese government for failing to find and prosecute his killers.

The U.S. ambassador to Lebanon, Dorothy Shea, called Lokman a fierce advocate for democracy and for the rights of people to live in peace. She urged Lebanese authorities to bring his killers to justice. Lokman was an outspoken critic of Hezbollah and suffered a constant drumbeat of threats from the Shia terrorist group, which is widely believed responsible for his killing. He kept going—knowing that the threat was getting bigger and bigger—until his assassination in February 2021.

Today we welcome Monika Borgmann, the widow and the colleague of Lokman Slim. Monika is the director of UMAM, and she and Lokman’s sister and family have been working very hard since the moment Lokman was assassinated to reveal the truth and hold the criminals accountable. Welcome Monika, good to see you.

Monika Borgmann: Hello, Hanin, thank you for having me. Yeah it’s already two years and not a lot has been done. Six weeks before Lokman was assassinated, another assassination took place of somebody called Joseph Bejjani, and his file is already closed. So I’m mentioning this just to say there is maybe in Lebanon one positive thing, that our investigation is still ongoing. It has not been closed by the investigative judge. But until today, two years after the assassination of Lokman, nobody has been accused and nobody has been arrested.

This is a question of political will. What we know from the dossier is that somehow the intelligence of the ISF [Internal Security Forces] have been doing to a certain extent their work, and this was also published by a journalist. We know today that when Lokman moved to the south, when he drove to the south, he was followed by five cars. We have the plates of the cars, we know how the perpetrators communicated with each other, so there are many details we know if you want. But the point is that nobody wants to turn it politically, nobody. They have the technical means to do an investigation to a certain extent, but nobody is trying to turn it politically.

I have been questioned for eight hours by the intelligence of the ISF’s Lebanese police and all questions were personal. I’m not saying they shouldn’t ask any personal questions, of course they can ask personal questions, it’s part of the investigation. But at the same time they should have been asking political questions.

This assassination, as you said, came not out of the blue. There is a long story of intimidation. I will only mention two examples. In 2012, eleven years ago and nine years before his assassination, the newspaper that is close to Hezbollah had a whole campaign against the independents, and they called them “the Shia of the American embassy.” There was a call that was published in 2019, and this was in the third month of the uprising here in Lebanon, which started on the 17th of October 2019. Without making a long story, a tent where public discussions were held was burned down, and we were having a lot of threats on Lokman’s home. A lot of threats publicly, I remember. At this moment also Lokman broke his silence. He never liked to answer questions about fear or whatever, but he wrote an open letter saying “if anything is happening, I make Hassan Nasrallah from Hezbollah and [Nabih] Berri from Amal responsible,” and he asked for protection from the state and, of course, his protection didn’t come. So just to mention this.

Ghaddar: Monika, I have a follow-up question on this. So he asked for protection and this is something important that you mentioned...We have been hearing a lot here in Washington that the U.S. has been sending a lot of support, financial and technical support, to the Lebanese Army and recently to the ISF. You’re saying that these people have provided protection for Lebanese figures many times because...they’re very important people, but people like Lokman who have been threatened, they did not protect him in this case. Do you think that the U.S. should pursue this kind of aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Lebanese Internal Forces if they cannot protect activists like Lokman? What should be done here? Should it be conditional? Should another mechanism work for this aid? What do you think should happen in that

case?

Borgmann: Today I would really call for the government of the U.S. to make pressure. I mean, Lokman asked for protection. The ISF and the Lebanese Army are both trained and getting, as you said, support from the U.S., and this gives the U.S. government a real tool to pressure it. I really hope this tool will be used. At least hopefully in the future, maybe to protect other figures if they are in immediate danger or if they are receiving threats. But in the case of Lokman, it should be used to make pressure that we can move forward with the investigation.

Lokman and I, we had been working on political assassinations in the organization UMAM, and I never believed that I would somehow be standing on the other side and directly be implicated. I have been calling for an independent international investigation because political assassinations in Lebanon have never brought the perpetrators to prison and they have never been properly investigated. We are continuing with our local investigation, but at the same time I'm calling for an international fact-finding mission, which would include the [2020 Beirut] port explosion but also the last three political assassinations, including the one of Lokman. I'm asking the international community to widen the mandate of a fact-finding mission for the port explosion to include these three assassinations, and only an investigation can prove if these assassinations are linked to the port explosion or not. Now very importantly, even if they are not linked, I'm asking that they will nevertheless be investigated. Coming back to the support of the U.S. government to the ISF and the Lebanese Army, there is really a tool to pressure them to help us also to move forward with the UN fact-finding mission.

Ghaddar: When you talk about the UN, we know that earlier this month the UN [Human Rights Council] rapporteur...inquired with the Lebanese government about Lokman Slim's investigation....At the same time, we know also that Lokman was taken—not killed, he was killed somewhere else, but taken—from an area that was also under the UNIFIL French mandate...The UN is calling for the investigation so why there hasn't been any cooperation internally within the UN in order to get the UNIFIL French battalion to do something about [it]? We see today that the French excuse is that they have never been asked by the Lebanese government to provide anything. But of course the Lebanese government is not going to ask for anything because they don't want to reveal the truth. So where's the UN's role, between the UNIFIL's passive role [seen so far] and the other people in the UN who are trying to do something?

Borgmann: I have been calling, I have been meeting with those responsible in UNIFIL, those formerly responsible, and those currently responsible, and they are expecting—and this is by law—that they will receive a letter from the Lebanese Justice Ministry or Foreign Ministry informing them that a crime happened in their territory. But of course I know they will never get the letter...So the international community or the UN have to reconsider a little bit their functions, because...they tell me “bring us this letter or make this letter happen,” but they know exactly like I know that I will never get this letter. So the French contingent is there, it's just one kilometer and a half away from the place where Lokman was kidnapped. I have been there. From the towers of the house of his friends you can see the building where [there is] a French contingent, and of course there have been cameras.

Ghaddar: So we haven't seen any of the footage, nobody has seen it?

Borgmann: No, I didn't get the footage...this whole situation is just absurd. I would also like to remind that in December, an Irish UNIFIL soldier was also killed in the same region where Lokman was found, which is outside UNIFIL. In my opinion, Lokman was kidnapped in a UNIFIL area but he was assassinated outside the UNIFIL area.

Ghaddar: No, UNIFIL at least will have footage of who was there when he was taken, that is more than enough for us to know. I want to ask you a question about accountability here. You're working at the UMAM foundation and the Lokman Slim Foundation, and there's been a lot of work actually on collective memory and the memory of the war, but also on accountability, especially when it comes to the civil war in Lebanon. Now, after Lokman's assassination and the port explosion, the question of accountability is a big question because we know that...no one was held accountable for political assassinations in Lebanon [even] before the civil war. We're talking before the '70s, so this is a big deal. Without accountability, this kind of culture of violence will continue.

So my question here is with your general work on accountability, we know that there was one situation when the case of the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri was taken to The Hague and there was a special tribunal in Lebanon, which took around twenty years...Finally, the special tribunal revealed the killers. So would that be enough for you knowing that [in] the current situation in Lebanon, the killers will not be arrested, but at least people will know who did it? Would that be enough for you?

Borgmann: No, I want real justice. I'm not saying now we need another tribunal, we will see what we need. What we need for the moment is a UN fact-finding mission, which is not replacing the local investigation but is adding to the local investigation, and is able to produce evidence. My goal of course is to have real justice.

Ghaddar: What is real justice?

Borgmann: Perpetrators in prison. For me it was not enough to know who pulled the trigger. I want to know why and I want to know who gave the order.

Ghaddar: They want both to be held accountable and punished for their crimes. Absolutely. Why do you think finding the killer of Lokman Slim and holding them accountable is important for Lebanon, the U.S, and the international community?

Borgmann: Why is it important? It's important to stop this culture of impunity. Not rendering justice to Lokman is just giving the green light to the perpetrators to continue with their crimes. For years no justice has been done, and... assassinations have been continuing. I know also the international community is seeking... stability for different reasons, maybe Europe not to have more refugees. But the fact is that allowing the culture of impunity to continue has brought no stability to the whole region, not only to Lebanon. So there must be a stop, a full stop. Lokman was an international, well-known person. But here we really need to make a stop... For a long time, making compromises with the people who are governing this country in the name of stability...has been proven not to work. We have never been in such a catastrophic situation like we are today.

Ghaddar: It's always this formula that everybody gives you in Lebanon: it's either justice or stability. The problem today, when you always choose stability over justice, it leads to instability.

Borgmann: Yes, and I think justice could lead to stability. Let me just say this: I know there are also a lot of efforts done to help the Lebanese judiciary [become] independent. But personally I don't have the time to wait until a failed state becomes a non-failed state and we have an independent justice system here. I just don't have the time. I think also all the victims of the port explosion or the families of the victims also don't have the time. We need justice now, and justice is a way to stability.

Ghaddar: Definitely. This is a perfect closure for this. Thank you very much, Monika, this was very touching. Very important topics we covered today. Definitely your voice will reach many, many people in Washington through this video.

Policy Recommendations

Ghaddar: There are a number of policy recommendations that come up from this conversation. One is how the U.S. can pressure the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF) and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to actually protect the innocent people and the victims, not the perpetrators and the aggressors. The U.S. has been financially and technically [helping] the LAF and recently the ISF with aid, and this is... a big leverage that the U.S. has in Lebanon. Besides security and military assistance, the U.S has helped Lebanon with humanitarian assistance after the Beirut port explosion and after the financial collapse.

Lokman Slim asked for protection before he was assassinated from the LAF and ISF, both institutions that the U.S. funds. Lokman did not get any protection. No one responded to his pleas. For example, this crime could have been avoided if U.S. leverage was used in order to push the LAF and ISF to protect Lokman and other activists. There are other activists today in Lebanon that need to be protected. There are other activists who have stopped talking after Lokman was assassinated because they know that no one is held accountable and... they are not protected. The U.S. should use this leverage in order to push the LAF and ISF... to protect these people so they would be able to have a bigger margin of maneuver.

Also, the U.S. can use this leverage in order to pressure the Lebanese government and security forces to move on with Lokman Slim's investigation. We need to know the truth, and this leverage should not be wasted. It is in the [U.S.] interest...to protect these activists who are working day and night [and] risking their lives in order to protect the values of democracy and free speech, the core values of American democracy.

Transcript prepared by Sarah Cahn, a research assistant in The Washington Institute's Jeanette and Eli Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. ❖

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