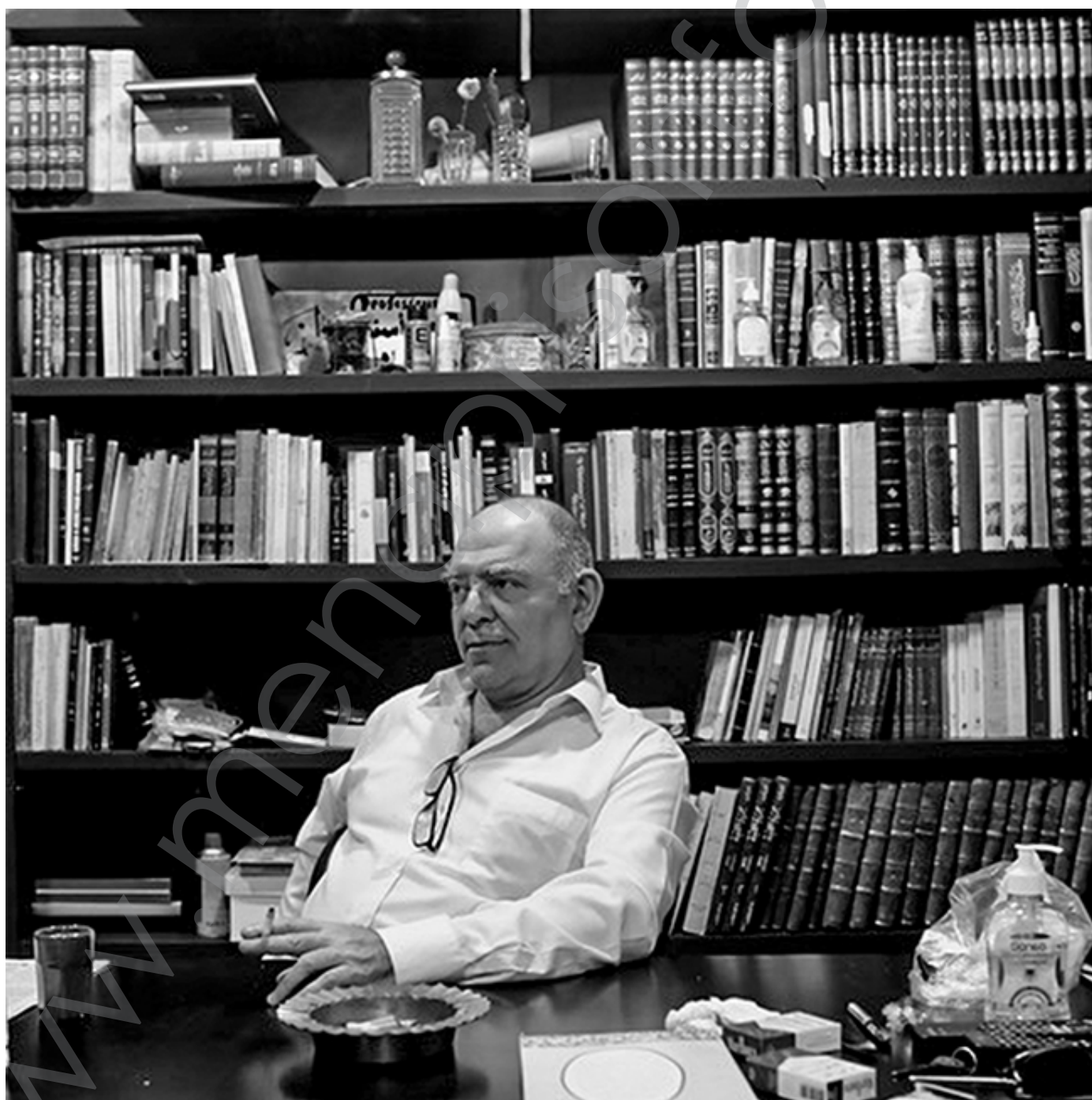


Collecting the evidence

Publisher and activist Lokman Slim, assassinated last month in Lebanon, spent 30 years trying to make sure that the memories of civil conflict were not forgotten.



Lokman Slim in his study at the Slim villa, Haret Hreik, Lebanon

*D*ealing with the disappeared and the aftermath of atrocities following civil conflict raises the stakes of memory politics. As power dynamics shift within a chaotic vacuum, narratives begin to be manipulated to repress a difficult past; to counter this, memory work is brokered over questions of space and place, and in the location of memorials.

There have been debates in Uruguay since the end of the dictatorship in 1985 on the uses and abuses of the Memorial to Disappeared Detainees, which was once covered up to film a fizzy-drink commercial. In Argentina, where the dictatorship ended in 1983, the Monument to the Victims of State Terrorism in the Parque de la Memoria has been subject to disputes about access and meaning (1). In Rwanda, memory work since the 1994 genocide against the Tutsis has focused on cultural heritage to map geographies of memory.

In Lebanon, an amnesty in 1991 that absolved all but the most serious war crimes during 15 years of civil conflict (1975-90) produced state-led amnesia that kept discourse about 'the events' hidden in euphemism. It also facilitated the politically expedient desire for the state to rework history for its own uses, largely by trying to forget about it altogether. No extensive process of truth and reconciliation or restorative justice programme has yet been put in place.

Confronting the past and breaking taboos of silence where memory and forgetting are related to political power is bold work

Lokman Slim, the Lebanese publisher and activist whose murder on 4 February on his way to Beirut by car shocked the Middle East and peace activists across the world, was central to the challenge to deferring restorative justice, through documentary films, exhibitions and policy reports, publishing censored literature and archival projects in the absence of an

official national record; these were organised under the auspices of the NGO Umam: Documentation and Research, which he founded in 2004 with his partner Monika Borgmann.

Forthright secular champion

His death is the latest cataclysmic event to have shaken the country since the thwarted revolution of 17 October 2019. They include a disastrous financial crash, the devastating port explosion that destroyed Beirut's surrounding historic districts and three hospitals, and the rise in Covid cases, which have pushed medical provision far beyond any safe limit.

Lokman Slim was born into a well-known Shia family, the son of Mohsen Slim, a politician and fierce defender of Lebanese independence, and Salma Merchak Slim, a Protestant Christian from Egypt. His own secular conviction, as well as his and his project's rootedness in Haret Hreik, in Dahiyeh, the southern suburbs of Beirut largely under the control of Hizbullah, were acts of defiance. Sectarian affiliation is not a precondition of Lebanon's modernity but a major factor in its development and remains the determining element of the hybrid sovereignties beneath the politics (2). Lokman, a forthright champion for a secular, progressive, functioning Lebanon and a true believer in reconciliation, sought dialogue with those who wanted help in this mission (3).

He had been working on a large-scale multi-site project on prisons across the Middle East and North Africa (4). The MENA Prison Forum collates testimony, research and reports from across the region, investigates cases in Europe and produces resources. This includes a prison slang dictionary as well as an index of literature, film and academic work on incarceration. The project also concentrates on outreach and advocacy, including improving conditions for current prisoners.

Holding the guilty to account

Slim was beginning to work with US groups such as the ArabLit collective to translate the dictionary into English. Mina Ibrahim, lead researcher of the Forum, told me that besides curating archives, Slim was keen to create cartographies of prison sites across the region to link the different aspects of their work.

Confronting the past and breaking taboos of silence where memory and forgetting are related to political power is bold work. Many projects were designed to hold perpetrators to account. In their documentary *Massaker* (2004), Slim and Borgmann interview six perpetrators of the Sabra and Chatila massacre of Palestinian civilians in those refugee camps, and show them graphic documentary footage and photos of the dead. *Massaker* focuses on the bodies of the perpetrators, their torsos adorned with tattoos, while keeping their faces hidden as they talk of their actions, some with regret, some with vestigial violence.

The 2019 documentary *Tadmor* does more than bear witness to the humiliation and torture of prisoners at the notorious Syrian jail. Some former prisoners recreate everyday scenes of their incarceration; this evolved from interviews where they started to act out their testimony if words were not enough (5).

In 2007 Slim and his colleagues began a project to trace and document the missing of the civil war, many 'disappeared' in Syrian jails or buried in mass graves under Beirut yet to be officially recognised (6). They worked with independent associations of relatives of the missing; researchers interviewed families to create a database of 1,250 names. A photographic exhibition of its portraits toured the country, expanding and encouraging new cases to be disclosed. Multiple portraits of the missing broke the silence and gave physical shape to the scale of the issue.

Trudy Huskamp Peterson of the International Council of Archives said that these archives were so sensitive that Slim sought to have copies stored in the National Archives of Finland to protect them from destruction in Beirut. He

later became a founding member of the group that developed the international guiding principles for safe havens for archives at risk, and advised on archival sites across the globe in danger because of their human rights content.

On 13 April 2010, the 35th anniversary of the start of civil war, the photo exhibition was displayed at the bullet-scarred, unfinished cinema in central Beirut known as The Egg. The exhibition formed the background for a scene in Eliane Raheb's 2012 documentary *Sleepless Nights*. Maryam Saiidi, whose son Maher, 15, disappeared during a battle between Phalangists and the Lebanese Communist Party in June 1982, is filmed in a confrontation with Assaad Shaftari, a former intelligence officer in the Forces Libanaises (then a Christian militia, now a political party); Shaftari has since atoned for his role in the war. You can see Maher's portrait over Shaftari's shoulder as a silent witness. This highlights the dynamic nature of what is at stake when memory is put to work (7).

'For the peace yet to come'

There is also the international crisis of hospitality, in which Lebanon has a central role with an estimated 1.5 million refugees who have fled Syria's civil war (8). Affronted by the hostility to those seeking safety, Slim organised an exhibition *And Lebanese...*, based on archival work at Umam, in which he explored the roots of some of the most avowedly 'Lebanese' public figures, through portraits of people of renown from St Maroun, the monk venerated by the Maronite sect, to the singer Fairouz. He demonstrated that none could be understood as fully Lebanese (9).

Unresolved issues of the civil war have festered in a fragile negative peace; fighting has stopped, yet nothing has been resolved and the constant threat of renewed fighting persists. Political geographer Sara Fregonese observes that 'Slim and Borgmann created not only a physical archive, but an incubator for the peace yet to come. Peace as social justice might not be within reach in

Lebanon, but what matters is to ensure its anticipation ... to gather, preserve and protect, and ultimately make publicly accessible the evidence that will shape responsibility and justice.'

Slim understood that in making people face up to reasons for violence, its possibility could be vanquished, allowing peace, as a form of social justice, to permeate every level of life. These projects communicate with other post-conflict societies, and are a model of archiving practice to shed light on oppression and atrocity. This contrarian who sought reform through dissent was driven, as the best people are, by cynicism, and by love.