

The fight to preserve Lebanon's history before it's lost



Tamara Davison

When Monika Borgmann heard about Israel's [evacuation orders](#) for Tyre in June 2026, she decided she couldn't wait any longer.

As the co-founder of [UMAM Documentation and Research](#), one of Lebanon's largest private citizen archives based in Beirut's southern suburbs of Dahiye, she feared the project she had spent decades working on could be at risk.

"I was afraid that if they could call for the whole evacuation of [Tyre](#), they could call for the whole evacuation of Dahiye," she tells *The New Arab*.

Despite withstanding previous wars and near misses, Monika mobilised her network and made the difficult decision to relocate tens of thousands of books, records, photographs, audiovisual materials, and periodicals that chronicle Lebanon's complex modern social, cultural, and political history.

"I'm glad I took this decision because ten days later a building next to us was bombarded without any warning," she continues. "Also, I feel that the war is maybe not finished."

Monika now sits in a small office spanning two floors in Beirut's Badaro neighbourhood, stacked with boxes overflowing with Lebanon's cultural history. It's a temporary home.

Each day, a team of dedicated archivists meticulously sorts through the records, preserving fragments of a past that might otherwise disappear — while the other half of the collection sits elsewhere in a metal container.

Like other private archives in the country, UMAM remains displaced by the risk of war and uncertainty about the future.

It's a poignant reminder of the fragility surrounding Lebanon's relationship with history — and the emotional weight that comes with the responsibility of preserving memory.

"We are going around with our history on our backs in the boxes... waiting until they can go back home," says Chaza Charafeddine, the founder of [Athar](#), an archive containing 2,624 artefacts documenting public life in Tyre that was similarly evacuated from southern Lebanon this year and is now being stored at her home in Beirut.

"It's a difficult situation," she adds.



UMAM Documentation and Research, is one of Lebanon's largest private citizen archives based in Beirut's southern suburbs of Dahiye [Tamara Davison]

Lebanon lacks a complete record of its national history, and private archives play a vital role in filling the gaps — often remaining independent of political influence and powerful actors.

Through decades of instability, archives in Lebanon have been targets of looting, destruction, deliberate erasure, as well as underfunding and age-related deterioration. And this ultimately limits memory itself.

During [Lebanon's civil war](#) — an era of history that still isn't spoken about in some history books — some 1,200 precious manuscripts [reportedly](#) “disappeared” from Lebanon's National Library, while cultural centre Dar el Fan wa-l-Adab was completely [looted](#).

In 1982, Israel also [seized](#) the Palestinian Liberation Organisation archives in Beirut, confiscating crucial photographs and documents.

More recently, in 2023, unknown assailants [stole](#) a server from Lebanon's state-run National News Agency containing historical records dating back to 1961.

"What Lebanon is living today is a war of narratives, and in this sense, archives have a major role to play," Monika adds. "They should be even more present in the public discourse than they are today."

At UMAM, the work is also personal. Monika's husband [Lokman Slim](#) — a prominent activist, publisher, and UMAM co-founder — was assassinated in 2021 in a case that remains unsolved now, five years on.

At the Badaro office, research and archiving continue, even as questions remain about its future home.

Incredible daily discoveries, tiny threads unravelling a moment of Lebanese citizens' history, are deeply exciting for those at the heart of this work.

Ayman Nahle, for example, focuses on audiovisual archives, including decades of moving images and Lebanese cinema from Baalbeck Studios — work full of discoveries. Sometimes the delicate film is impossible to restore, but other times, the results are breathtaking.

He tells *The New Arab* that through his work, which includes reactivating old footage, he encounters ‘wow’ moments "each hour, each minute."

"It's just the role of the archivist," he adds. "It's become a kind of lifestyle. What is so beautiful here about the historical construction, how we construct history from the fragment itself."



Monika Borgmann is a German-Lebanese journalist, award-winning documentary filmmaker, and archivist [Tamara Davison]

Beyond the visuals, countless audio recordings also share intimate portraits of Lebanese life.

"You have this huge Lebanese diaspora, and a lot of families, instead of sending letters, they were sending tapes," Monika says. "I was listening to some, and it really was a beautiful experience."

Marie-Claude Souaid, another member of the team, has been working on a special archive from the [Carlton Hotel](#), a legendary Beirut hub and site of memory with decades of prominent guests and events from the 1960s until the 2000s.

"These archives are confronting me with two contradictory things," the anthropologist tells *The New Arab*. "The prestige of the country in one hand and the collapse of the country in the other."

Such history, in many ways, offers a window not just into the past but into the essence of Lebanese identity itself.

"Lebanon was already prestigious in the Golden Age and now... we are collapsing. But in between, in some qualitative approach, the archives of UMAM... are the citizen archives that can enlighten the citizen story of this country," says Marie-Claude.



Marie-Claude is working on the Carlton Hotel archives [Tamara Davison]



The Carlton Hotel archives [Tamara Davison]

These days, people are [racing to preserve](#) the documents and history, particularly in southern Lebanon, where conflict continues, as a way to remember and learn from the past.

More broadly, efforts are also underway to digitise the archival material at UMAM and in other private archives across Lebanon.

Many feel it's more important than ever to hold on to physical copies — especially given the rise of AI.

"The originals and not only the digital copies are becoming more and more important," Monika says.

Chaza explains that many of the women in her archives from Jaafari College in the south aren't veiled, and physical photos cannot be doctored in the way digital files can.

"This is my only security, my only evidence that this era existed in this way," she says. "These people were doing these things at the time in the 40s, in the 50s. This is the only real, real evidence. So that's why absolutely, it's very, very important."

Efforts and conversations have been underway, most recently involving Lebanon's Ministry of Culture, to try to find a home for some of Lebanon's displaced archives.

But hopes of a collective, creative space remain uncertain for now.

Yet amid another period of uncertainty, the mission to preserve Lebanon's history has become increasingly tied to the meaning of identity.

"There are a thousand Lebanons," Chaza adds. "Shias have their Lebanon, the Sunnis have their Lebanon, the Christians have their Lebanon. And all of a sudden, the idea of unity, the idea of Lebanon, of this one country, was completely blurry."

She adds, "I think that's why many people started to grasp moments in history because they want to understand who they are."

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