

Four years after Lokman Slim's murder, investigation suspended indefinitely

The judge investigating the case suspended the probe until "new elements emerge."

L'OLJ / By Claude ASSAF



The poster announcing the 4th commemoration of the assassination of Lokman Slim reads: "The evidence is overwhelming, but it has been decided to close the investigation without further action."

A few days before the commemoration of the fourth anniversary of the assassination of the Shiite intellectual and fierce Hezbollah critic, Lokman Slim, on Feb. 3, 2021, the hopes that the judiciary would identify and punish the criminals have dwindled.

L'Orient-Le Jour learned that Beirut's acting first investigative judge Bilal Halawi, in charge of the case, decided on Dec. 5, 2024 to "temporarily close the file at the court's administration service," which means to suspend the investigation "until new elements emerge."

"It makes no sense to close an investigation when the case contains so much forensic evidence," said Slim's sister and publisher Rasha al-Ameer. According to her, the information that the judicial authorities have in hand provides sufficient answers as to the identity of the criminals, who are "well known in the country."

Slim, the researcher and activist, was shot dead near the Saida-Sour highway, in Addoussieh (Zahrani, southern Lebanon), a Hezbollah stronghold, as he left the

residence of businessman and poet
Mohammad al-Amin, in Niha.

Since then, those close to him have continued to blame Hezbollah, recalling a number of troubling events. A month before his murder, Slim spoke on the Saudi al-Hadath channel about Hezbollah's involvement in the import of ammonium nitrate, which caused the explosion at the Beirut port on Aug. 4, 2020.

In December 2019, 14 months before his assassination, the gardens of his residence in Haret Hreik, in Beirut's southern suburbs, were invaded by militants who had posted death threats at the entrance to the house.

He then issued a statement calling on the army to protect him from any harm that might befall him, for which he blamed former party Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and Amal leader Nabih Berri in advance. According to his family, no arrests were made at the time.

‘Arbitrary classification’

In his Dec. 5 decision, Judge Halawi issued “a permanent search warrant against unnamed,” with the stated aim of identifying the criminal. Once again, Ameer said this is

an implicit admission by the justice system that it “is unwilling or unable to act,” adding that “the murderers have [however] left many traces behind.”

In a tweet on Friday, she referred to “discussions between the assassins, while they were waiting for him [Lokman Slim] the evening of Feb. 3, 2021 to assassinate him.”

“This secret file, which is packed with information and passed from one acting investigative judge to another, will be closed for obscure reasons,” she noted.

Slim’s sister denounced “an arbitrary closure of the investigations” which she attributed to “those who pretend to defend justice while they act in the shadows,” an allusion to the successive judges in charge of the investigation.

Judge Halawi has been in charge of the case since the former Beirut’s acting first investigative Judge Charbel Abou Samra retired in November 2023. The latter had begun his investigations in May 2021, after the country’s former top prosecutor Ghassan Oueidat sought to “protect the investigation and avoid public security instability.”

He instructed that the case file, which was managed immediately after the tragedy by the Southern Lebanon Public Prosecutor at the Court of Appeal Judge Rahif Ramadan, with the cooperation of the army's intelligence service, be withdrawn from Saida and transferred to Beirut.

According to Ameer, who had access to the investigation file conducted by the army's intelligence service, roadside surveillance cameras had pinpointed two addresses in Nabatieh (Southern Lebanon) and Jnah (Beirut) to which the two alleged murderers had traveled after the crime.

Slim's sister also pointed out that the investigation identified the vehicles used by the two perpetrators and revealed that their license plates were falsified.

“Why were no suspects arrested? Why weren't the cars seized?” she asked, and pointed out that “the security services can't act without a political-judicial decision.”

‘Nothing since November’

The victim's family believes that the investigation has made no progress since the army's intelligence service submitted its

findings in 2021. Although Judge Abou Samra subsequently interviewed three witnesses, they do not appear to have provided any significant evidence.

In January 2023, the judge also sent letters rogatory to Germany and UNIFIL (via the Cassation Prosecutor's Office and the Ministries of Justice and Foreign Affairs), entrusting them with investigative actions.

Since the arrival of Halawi to his position in November 2023, however, hearings have been limited to "postponements," according to Slim's relatives, who stated that "hearings were continually postponed before ceasing last November."

However, a senior judicial source said that Judge Halawi held hearings during which Germany and UNIFIL responded to the letters rogatory. According to this source, among other missions, Germany was tasked with taking DNA samples from inside or on Slim's car, to identify the murderers.

In the wake of their work, the German consul and an officer had asked the judge several questions that the judge considered unrelated to their mission, added the judicial source. It noted that the two

German officials had then told him that this mission “was not technically feasible.”

However, Monika Borgman, Slim’s widow, told L’Orient-Le Jour that “Germany has not sent an official reply regarding the DNA collection, or regarding the three other points included in the letter rogatory,” without giving any further details on these points.

As for the letter rogatory sent to UNIFIL, the above-mentioned source said that it aimed to provide the investigative judge with images of the crime allegedly perpetrated near the headquarters of the U.N. force. According to the source, UNIFIL replied in May 2024 that its surveillance cameras only filmed the interior of its barracks.

In the absence of any new information from Germany or UNIFIL, and after taking into account the testimony collected by his predecessor, as well as the reports and clues in the file, Halawi decided that no further measures were required as part of the investigation, the source said.

At a hearing held on Nov. 5, 2024, the judge told Slim’s relatives and lawyers about his decision and asked them if they wished to

request further measures. He gave them a two-week deadline, but none of them showed up for the hearing on Nov. 26, according to the same source.

Unsatisfied with the course of Halawi's investigation, whom they reproached for not taking their grievances into account, Slim's relatives submitted a motion to recuse the judge. However, by the time he was notified, he had already handed down his decision, deeming the motion devoid of purpose.

As a result, the case will stagnate indefinitely in the first investigative judge's clerk's office. As long as the suspects have not been identified in the judicial decision, the case cannot be referred to the Criminal Court.

"There seems to be a desire to close the investigation and bury the case," said Diala Shehadeh, attorney of the Slim family.

The victim's relatives are not giving up. According to our information, they urged acting top prosecutor Jamal Hajjar to take action to resume the investigation. They are also trying to meet with President Joseph Aoun, and Prime Minister-designate Nawaf Salam, especially as they had pledged, as soon as they took up their new positions, to

work to achieve justice. To date, no meeting has been scheduled.

This article was originally published in French in L'Orient-Le Jour. It was translated by Joelle El-Khoury.