

# Lives cut short on display in Union Marks: The Lokman Slim foundation's new political offensive

Five years after the assassination of Lokman Slim, the "*Baqoun*" exhibition at Union Marks probes impunity and turns memory into a political act in the face of violence.

L'OLJ / By Rana Najjar,



A view of "Baqoun" at Union Marks: the portrait of Lokman Slim dominates the exhibition dedicated to the memory of political assassinations. (Credit: Lokman Slim Foundation)

At Union Marks in Burj Hammoud, silence is not an emptiness: it is filled with absences. Five years after the assassination of Lokman Slim, the exhibition "*Baqoun*" ("Remaining" in English and "*Nous restons*" in French) turns this silence into light setting the stubborn persistence of memory against erasure.

Organized by the Lokman Slim Foundation, UMAM Documentation & Research, and Dar al-Jadeed publishing house, it revives through images the haunting questions of impunity in a country where political violence has become entrenched and where justice remains unfinished.

Produced over three years by French photographer Édouard Élias and curated by Katia Jarjoura, the photographs revolve around a powerful intuition: that a presence persists at the very heart of absence. "Baqoun" goes well beyond the framework of a documentary display of small black-and-white prints devoted to lives cut short for daring to speak the truth. The exhibition unfolds as a cultural act of resistance against erasure, an ethical gesture reminding us that memory is neither a luxury nor a nostalgic haven, but a collective responsibility. It's not so much about commemoration as it is restoring meaning: to keep questions open, to allow free speech to live on even after attempts to silence it.

The images summon the faces of those who have fallen to political assassination in Lebanon from 2005 to today. For Monika Borgmann – Lokman Slim's wife and long-time partner in political and archival work, political assassination is "a deeply rooted component of Lebanese political timelines since the founding of the state." Comparing Lokman Slim's murder to other similar crimes, in Lebanon and elsewhere, "shows that it has gone beyond simply eliminating individuals to become a tool for reshaping power dynamics and overhauling political power and governance mechanisms," she notes.



Car set on fire after the explosion: a scene that has become emblematic of the political assassinations that have marked Lebanon over the past two decades. (Credit: Lokman Slim Foundation)

The foundation's executive director notes that "since independence in 1943, Lebanon has suffered more than 200 political assassinations, the overwhelming majority of which remain unaccounted for." The Civil War (1975-1990) weakened institutions and disintegrated the state, while the 1991 general amnesty law entrenched a culture of impunity that continues to shape political life.

Borgmann also insists that "the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005, judged by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, was a major turning point." But it also reveals how "Syrian-Iranian hegemony, together with its local proxies, Hezbollah, is exercised at the expense of the rule of law and Lebanese sovereignty, in a context of extreme regional complexity."

For Katia Jarjoura, "Baqoun" fully aligns with the foundation's mission: to confront the culture of killing and impunity, and to ground political practice once again within the framework of the rule of law. The exhibition thus stands as a call for justice and accountability in a country in perpetual reconstruction.

### **The intimate in the face of brutality**

The images in "Baqoun" reveal the traces left behind by the victims: personal belongings, bedrooms, libraries, workplaces, roads once traveled, up to the final place where fear was confronted. They are not archives in the strict sense; they are a political, peaceful, and deeply sensitive response to violence and attempts at erasure. They restore a presence to those who paid with their lives.



Objects left in limbo — boots, hobbies, plane tickets, camera, toiletry bag — so many fragments of interrupted lives that the exhibition "Baqoun" transforms into tangible traces of absence. (Credit: Lokman Slim Foundation)

Here, photography does not seek shock but an imprint: that minute distance between what was and what was brutally interrupted. Each place stands as a witness, not just a backdrop. The spaces we inhabit are never neutral; they become repositories of material memory, capable of resisting oblivion.

The exhibition brings together twenty-one cases of assassinations and assassination attempts targeting political leaders, senior officials, writers, and journalists. A dedicated space is dedicated to Lokman Slim, marking the fifth anniversary of his death. Focusing on the past two decades, "Baqoun" sheds light on a period during which murder has returned to the heart of Lebanon's political scene, as an instrument of repression and the reshaping of the public sphere.

The images confront visitors directly — journalists, activists, political leaders, decision-makers — and force them to grapple with essential questions: what does it mean to be a witness? Is testimony a silent act or a stance? How can justice be rendered to people of flesh and blood, as well as their families and loved ones?

### **The continuity of an idea**

The title "Baqoun" carries a simple meaning, but one deeply rooted in the Lebanese context. Remaining is not limited to physical presence: it is about affirming the continuity of an idea, a position, and the right to difference. The images do not reduce Slim and other victims to their assassinations; they situate them within an intellectual and cultural trajectory that opposed violence with archival work, sectarianism with criticism, fear with public speech, and chaos with the relentless demand for truth — a driving force for Slim.

Drawing on a long experience in the Middle East, Édouard Élias offers a visual narrative of individuals, places, and indelible traces in a country used to losing its voices without justice ever being served. The image is not a mute witness: it becomes a space of confrontation with absence, but also with what remains of the human after assassination: pain, bitterness, a sense of oppression.

In "Baqoun", the victims are not cast as martyrs without contradiction. They are portrayed as human beings who chose intellectual confrontation in a country where militias sanction

opinion, justice is politicized, and the rule of law remains fragile, despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression. This restraint is what gives the exhibition its accuracy: it does not sensationalize pain, nor turn absence into spectacular tragedy. It modestly renders the experience of families who are often left with only a few objects, imbued with the smell and presence of the departed. Bodies and faces are never displayed; only the names appear, placed at the head of image sequences that convey the weight of emptiness in homes from which warmth has withdrawn.

The exhibition is not meant to resolve anything. On the contrary, it opens a space for reflection on the price of speech and on the fragility of freedoms when they are not protected by an independent judiciary and effective accountability mechanisms, in a country where public decision-making remains captured by parties, armed groups, and networks of influence.



**View of the "Baqoun" exhibition at Union Marks in Bourj Hammoud, where the images interact with the space. (Credit: Lokman Slim Foundation)**

## **Unfinished mourning**

Édouard Élias told L'Orient-Le Jour: "Ordinarily, I work on war itself, not on its aftermath. It's rare for me to focus on what remains of people. But I am a photographer of memory. I've lost many family members, and I also photograph to remember those who have died. That's why I have been taking photos since childhood. The 'Baqoun' project affected me deeply: it's about the memory of people who are no longer here. It's not easy, because they are no longer present."

About his approach, he adds: "I wanted to free the names from

their confinement in a narrow Lebanese framework, dominated by major political families, often highlighted at the expense of more isolated or working-class families. It was essential to place all the victims on equal footing, in the same circle of attention, without distinction." This explains the choice of black and white: "A color common to all, which gives a form of permanence." He also favored older photographic techniques, "which impose slowness and calm, because we are not dealing here with the immediacy of the event."



Silhouette facing the horizon: a figure of watchfulness and waiting, by photographer Edouard Elias. (Credit: Lokman Slim Foundation)

Entering the intimacy of these places required the utmost delicacy: "Families needed to be reassured, their spaces respected, and it had to be made clear that these images were a tribute to the memory of their loved ones, recently killed, whose wounds are still fresh. This serenity had to come through the camera."

How do you reconcile harshness and poetry? "As soon as you cross the threshold of a home, you feel the weight of absence and the lack of justice. Mourning is not over. The objects left in place — a hat still hanging — become evidence, traces that people refuse to see disappear."

This experience, as grueling as it was necessary, taught him that although the forms of political violence vary by context, their underlying mechanisms remain the same: "It is neither a question of religion nor ideology, but of power dynamics. The result is always the same: fear. We must not give in to fear. That is the message of Lokman Slim and the exhibition: to speak frankly, to unite in truth-telling, so as not to be picked off one by one, like birds."

"Baqoun" is not an exhibition oriented toward the past, but toward the present we are living and the future we are shaping. It invites us to refuse the normalization of violence and believe that culture can, even slowly, resist impunity. Five years after Slim's assassination, it states that the attempt to silence him has failed: ideas, when carried with consistency, endure.

The exhibition is open daily until March 3, from 2 p.m. to 8 p.m. at Union Marks, Bourj Hammoud.