

## Meet the researchers helping rewrite Lebanon's Shiite history



SHADI ALAA ALDIN

Hezbollah's rise to power in Lebanon in the 1980s was accompanied by a clampdown on dissent. Groups who had different readings and views on the history of Shiism—particularly Lebanon's Shiites—were sidelined or

silenced. As a result, many myths and untruths have proliferated, making it difficult to get an objective read on a key denomination of the religion of Islam.

With pre-Hezbollah Shiite history in Lebanon in very real danger of being completely erased, a project to safeguard was launched. Run by Umam Documentation & Research in Beirut, it meticulously documents and vets information, aggregating it into what it calls a 'Shiite encyclopaedia'. It helps Shiites reconnect with a history that Hezbollah has actively tried to stifle.

To this end, Hezbollah has aggressively targeted the project. In 2021, its founder, Lokman Slim, was assassinated, proving just how risky such an endeavour can be in Lebanon. To get a better understanding of the project, *Al Majalla* met with its key researchers to learn more about their work, why they took it on, and the dangers they faced.

## **A search for identity**

"Our project isn't aimed at actively challenging prevailing views on Shiite affairs. Instead, it uncovers key components that shape (Lebanese) Shiite identity," Jad Yatim, project coordinator and communication officer, says.

The group explores a wide array of topics, such as politics, demographics, education, women's issues, and more. One example is the challenges faced by Shiite women under religious institutional dominance. Other topics range from the emergence of complicated religious courts to the unique relationship between Shiites and football.

For his part, researcher Abbas Hudla said the group simply seeks a clear and unfiltered reading on Lebanese Shiite history while also exploring issues of political jurisprudence in Shiism.



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RESEARCHER

"We also examine the exportation of Shiite militancy, looking at Hezbollah's role in the Syrian civil war, which broke out in 2011, specifically the Battle of al-Qusayr, as well as Shiite-Palestinian relations," he explained.

# Encountering challenges

Researcher Mahmoud Hamada says the need for an encyclopaedia in the first place is because no such comprehensive body of work exists due to the "dominance of a single narrative"—i.e. Hezbollah's.

"When Lokman Slim began documenting the southern suburbs of Beirut, he realised the history of the country was limited to the state, its inception, and development, with little information about the communities that founded it," Ali Mansour, project director and research supervisor of Umam Documentation & Research, explains.

"The information we *did* find was scattered and sometimes contradictory. So, we had to vet, compare and organise the information before including it in the encyclopedia. As such, we cannot claim this body of work is final or conclusive," he adds.

Gathering information has been extremely challenging due to Hezbollah's security dominance, which hinders fieldwork and makes it difficult to compile geographic and demographic information, Hamada explained, adding: "but monitoring changes in neighbourhoods was a good way to form a comprehensive and transparent picture of the group's (Hezbollah) political aims."

"We relied on open-source information such as property transfer deeds, construction projects, and land purchases to circumvent this roadblock," he explained, adding that this allowed them to detect "sharp shifts in orientations, ambitions, and goals," he added. The data shows the evolution of the Shiite community from a group seeking to be *part* of the state to becoming a locally and internationally *isolated* group.



The Encyclopedia of Shiite History.

## Greater aspirations

"Slim believed that a comprehensive understanding of all groups in Lebanon was necessary to move from coexistence to what he called "unified living", says Hamada.

Although Slim was assassinated, his work ethic lives on through the group's dedicated researchers. Hamada says Slim's research of Beirut's southern suburbs has helped him in his own research of Lebanon's demography.

"The logic he used became a focal point in our research. It helped us uncover information that had been obscured or not previously spotted," he added.

Yatim says Slim's research brought down the iron curtain that stood between the Shiite community and its own history and between the Shiite community and greater Lebanese society.

"People were able to get a more nuanced understanding of Shiites and their history instead of viewing them as a homogenous bloc that blindly follows Hezbollah," he added.

While Lokman's research also allowed for a deeper understanding of Shiites in Lebanon, it also exposed political agendas, which ultimately led to his assassination. On 3 February 2021, he was found dead in his car after being shot multiple times. The public prosecutor closed his case a few months later, and no arrests or charges were made. In February 2024, Human Rights Watch renewed its appeal for prosecutorial and investigative authorities in Lebanon to ensure justice for Slim. Despite the lack of accountability for his murder, Slim's legacy lives on through the work of the researchers who say they are determined to finish what he started.

"We feel his presence through the work we do, and we are determined to finish what he started," says Mansour. ♦