

# The Lebanon Human Rights Report: Punting on Accountability?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**The country can't escape its downward spiral without full accountability, so pulling punches in annual U.S. reports serves neither Washington nor the Lebanese people.**

**W**hen the U.S. State Department issued its annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices last week, the document's assessment of [Lebanon's track record in 2022 \(https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/lebanon/\)](https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/lebanon/) stood out for its significant elisions. Although the comprehensive nature of these reports generally makes them a valuable tool for accountability, their diplomatically sensitive content is sometimes colored by an administration's perceived exigencies regarding a given bilateral relationship. The fact that Lebanon's report largely avoids some of the country's more controversial human rights issues therefore seems more than coincidental. Whatever the case, the omissions are a missed opportunity for facilitating just the type of accountability Lebanon needs to pry itself out of its current morass.

## No Progress in Lokman Slim Case

**T**he report has little to say about the Lebanese government's criminal investigation into the assassination of Lokman Slim, an activist and former U.S. grant recipient who was likely killed by Hezbollah. Just one short passage in the forty-five-page report is devoted to his murder, despite Beirut's failure to order a single indictment or arrest after more than two years: "Investigations continued into the 2021 death of Lokman Slim, a prominent political activist and vocal critic of [Hezbollah] who was found dead from multiple bullet wounds in a rental car in the southern village of Addousieh. No findings had been made public by year's end."

The department typically cites open-source reporting on such incidents to emphasize accountability. Yet the Lebanon report does not mention the extensive documentation of Hezbollah threats against Slim, which ranges from warnings delivered by the U.S. embassy in Beirut to [public interviews](#)

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/middle-east-matters-episode-one-murder-lokman-slim-justice-delayed-lebanon>) with Slim’s widow, fellow activist Monika Borgmann. In one such conversation, Borgmann credibly recounts how Internal Security Forces (ISF) investigators made the absurd suggestion that Slim—who was shot five times in the head—may have committed suicide. Other notable omissions include a [Human Rights Watch article \(https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/03/lebanon-flawed-investigations-politically-sensitive-murders\)](https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/03/lebanon-flawed-investigations-politically-sensitive-murders) describing “multiple failures, gross negligence, and procedural violations” in the investigation, as well as [repeated calls \(https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/02/lebanon-un-experts-concerned-slow-progress-investigation-and-continued\)](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/02/lebanon-un-experts-concerned-slow-progress-investigation-and-continued) by UN human rights experts for “effective, credible, and transparent” inquiries into the killing—implying that the ISF’s efforts since February 2021 have shown none of these traits.

To be sure, Slim’s killing is not the only unsolved political murder in Lebanon . The ISF has not successfully brought any high-profile assassinations up for prosecution in decades, undoubtedly because they were perpetrated by “untouchable” elements in the Syrian regime and/or Hezbollah. Ignoring the ISF’s apparent obstruction of such cases is particularly unseemly given that the U.S. government is currently paying the salaries of the organization’s personnel via the UN and providing \$10 million per year to Lebanon from the Bureau of International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE), some of which supports the ISF.

## Stalled Port Blast Investigation

**T**he August 2020 Beirut port explosion is likewise given short shrift relative to its major consequences, which included more than 200 people killed, over 6,000 injured, and an estimated 300,000 displaced. Just one passage in the report is devoted to the status of an investigation that lies at the intersection of numerous pressing human rights issues, including corruption, criminal negligence, mismanagement, and willful endangerment.

The document briefly refers to media reports on machinations within the court system that have prevented progress. It does not, however, cite other sources that specifically mention Hezbollah’s request to remove Judge Tarek Bitar from the case, nor the various members of parliament, the cabinet, and other institutions **who have prevented him** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/washington-should-sanction-officials-obstructing-beirut-port-investigation>) from prosecuting senior security officials and politicians. Here, too, the ISF is culpable, with Director-General Imad Osman refusing to execute senior-level arrest warrants issued by Bitar—another point unmentioned in the report.

Also omitted are reports indicating that the ammonium nitrate involved in the 2020 explosion was only one-fifth of the amount unloaded at the port in 2013. During a television interview prior to his murder, Lokman Slim argued that Hezbollah had siphoned off much of this combustible fertilizer for use in the barrel bombs that the Assad regime repeatedly deployed against Syrian civilians during the civil war—another egregious human rights violation.

## A Pass for the LAF?

**A**ccording to the State Department, “impunity was a significant problem” for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and other security branches in 2022, with investigations of their reported human rights abuses lacking “transparency and urgency.” Beyond this general critique, however, the report does not say enough about the LAF’s specific abuses or its failure to protect civilians and UN personnel—a troubling approach given that Washington has a close and supportive relationship with the military, providing it with \$236 million in funding in fiscal 2021 alone.

For example, the report cites one case of a military court trying a civilian on charges of harming the ISF’s reputation, yet several more of these cases require attention: in November 2021, a military court sentenced journalist Radwan Mortada to thirteen months in prison for criticizing the port blast investigation; last year, a military court ordered the arrest and interrogation of Maronite Archbishop Musa al-Hajj, allegedly for helping economically vulnerable Lebanese migrate; also in 2022, a military court charged politician Samir Geagea for his reported involvement in the

deadly 2021 Tayouneh violence. Putting aside the facts of these cases, Washington needs to press Beirut on why civilians are being processed in military rather than civil courts.

In contrast, military courts have proven indolent on cases involving [violence against UN peacekeepers \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/expect-more-violence-if-hezbollah-isnt-held-accountable-murdering-irish-soldier\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/expect-more-violence-if-hezbollah-isnt-held-accountable-murdering-irish-soldier). In 2022, then-president Michel Aoun apologized for the endemic attacks on the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Yet previous presidents have offered similarly toothless statements regarding the dozens of such crimes committed in the past four decades, while only one assailant has ever been convicted. In 2022, the UN noted that Lebanese military courts were still holding (fruitless) hearings related to attacks that occurred as far back as 2007 and 2011, while no action at all was taken in the criminal proceedings related to a 2018 assault against UNIFIL personnel.

## Economic Abuses

Another topic omitted from the State Department's report is what UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights Olivier de Schutter [described last May \(https://lebanon.un.org/en/181582-report-special-rapporteur-extreme-poverty-and-human-rights-olivier-de-schutter\)](https://lebanon.un.org/en/181582-report-special-rapporteur-extreme-poverty-and-human-rights-olivier-de-schutter) as “the unnecessary immiseration of the population”—that is, the mass impoverishment resulting from the country's “man-made” economic crisis. Specifically, he highlighted the government's role in creating the crisis and blamed the banking sector for “sway[ing] negotiations with the IMF to the detriment of the most vulnerable in society.” In his assessment, the actions of the financial sector and Banque du Liban have made Lebanon default on its obligations—including “the obligation to guarantee an adequate standard of living to its population,” which he categorized as a human rights violation.

## Conclusion

State Department human rights reports are read carefully by foreign embassies in Washington and country experts in the United States and abroad, in part to glean an administration's sentiments and policy toward a given nation. This year's report on Saudi Arabia, for example, was particularly tough, perhaps reflecting the Biden administration's frequent tensions with Riyadh. Lebanon is obviously going through a difficult time, so the administration may have been reticent to pile on this year. Or perhaps it was concerned that a tougher report would give congressional critics fodder for cutting some of Washington's copious assistance to Lebanon, which includes an unprecedented \$72 million in salary payments to the LAF and ISF.

Even so, there are several compelling ethical and policy reasons why these reports need to be brutally honest. Lebanon desperately needs accountability, and credible U.S. government reports are essential in both shining a spotlight on human rights abuses and helping citizens hold the relevant authorities responsible. On March 24, the UN marked its annual “International Day for the Right to the Truth Concerning Gross Human Rights Violations and for the Dignity of Victims,” but the Lebanese people are still being denied this right year after year. From political assassinations, to the negligence that led to the port blast, to the impunity of the state security apparatus, to [tragic failures \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/symptom-and-disease-cholera-and-state-collapse-syria-and-lebanon\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/symptom-and-disease-cholera-and-state-collapse-syria-and-lebanon) by public health institutions, the list of human rights abuses suffered by victims in Lebanon is long and growing. Regrettably, accountability remains a crucial but still-distant element in reversing the tragic trajectory of this failing state.

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