

memory at work [4]

Random Acts of Violence vs. Civil Peace

# Ketermaya: Two Crimes and More

Reading the (Lebanese) Book of Banal Horror

A review by  
Hassan Abbas



Documentation & Research

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Reading the (Lebanese) Book of Banal Horror

A review by

Hassan Abbas

under the direction of

Monika Borgmann and Lokman Slim





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Tel.: 01/553604 | P.O. Box: 11-5222 Beirut Lebanon  
www.umam-dr.org | info@umam-dr.org

memory at work is a UMAM D&R publication project that deals generally with Lebanon's history but focuses particularly on its war-loaded memory.

**English text edited by John McLean, BA (Psych.), MMAS, MFA.**

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## *Banal Horror built on The Great Unknown*

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The fact that most Lebanese have been trying desperately to forget about the sordid “Ketermaya affair” should come as no shock to anyone. Moreover, our decision to focus exclusively on Ketermaya—nothing more, nothing less—helps us avoid assigning a number to the litany of crimes addressed in this report. Still, the title alone evokes a feeling of victimization: “Ketermaya: more than two crimes.”

Of course, it was not difficult to tally the number of people killed in each of Ketermaya’s crimes: four in the first and one in the second. The victims of that first crime included grandparents Abou Merhi and their granddaughters, while the victim in the second was suspected of having committed the first crime. Simple math to be sure, yet it is impossible to quantify the horror these crimes created in terms of what they manifested, what they highlighted and what they spread throughout the country. First, the horror manifested itself by revealing some of the dysfunctional aspects of a rural village, the majority of which had been cloaked effectively by what seemed like unanimity. Second, the crimes highlighted the poor management of this “individual incident,” the responsibility for which lies somewhere between the security forces assigned to investigate the first crime and their judicial reference. Third, the horror spread like a virus throughout the country, particularly after the Lebanese media began to cite “ethical and professional” references.

Based on the foregoing, this second report in our series on “Random Acts of Violence vs. Civil Peace” has humble objectives. First,

we must head back to Ketermaya at breakneck speed, even if doing so seems like twisting the knife still buried in that gaping wound. Alternatively, choosing not to return is rather like having participated, albeit retroactively, in that abysmal behavior. It is indeed fair to say that the atrocities committed in Ketermaya, those immediately visible and those hidden from sight, have all the characteristics of a train wreck that destroyed in an instant all of the political, social and security work done beforehand. Sadly, the Lebanese continue to deny the importance of acknowledging this matter (and many like it) even though such chaos and barbarism still incubate in the environment that surrounds them.

The other objective, to be accomplished by gathering and analyzing the relevant “documentation,” is to ensure that this incident becomes the last in which the timing of the crime and/or the identity of the victims and murderers is disclosed. The horrid actions that occurred that day in Ketermaya can be viewed as the visceral application of repressed violence by the killer responsible for the first crime and the public, who then took matters into their *bare* hands after having documented the details of the murders with mobile phones brought directly to the crime scene. Since then, those grainy images have supplemented the worn out stories about the crime being published in the media outlets. Yet no matter how one views the “Ketermaya crimes,” one, unique fact remains. When the murderer killed the grandparents and grandchildren, he committed his vile act behind closed doors and away from the public eye. In stark contrast, the people of Ketermaya who indulged their pent up savagery by killing a young Egyptian named Muhammad Salim Musallem and desecrating his broken body, committed their heinous act publicly, in broad daylight and before a crowd of “witnesses” who in some instances cheered them on. At the same time, many made the “moral claim” that the killing of the grandparents and their granddaughters had been covered up and was not disclosed until after the bloodshed occurred. In any event, as the killings shifted from the private to the

public sphere, our questions regarding this “individual incident” are justified. Indeed, those atrocious incidents in Katermaya are representative of the universe of violence in Lebanon. Whether implicit or explicit, such violence should be referred to from the uniquely Lebanese perspective as a bona fide threat to civil peace.

The preceding does not differ dramatically from the information published by the Lebanese media and in particular, the written articles we examined for this report. Indeed, the press did not begin insisting that the murders of the grandparents and grandchildren be followed up until Muhammad Salim Musallem lost his life at the hands of a bloodthirsty crowd. Although some of the journalists invoked the decidedly cynical label “comparative killing” to introduce their comments on the bloodshed in Katermaya, the notion of establishing any valid comparison between these crimes is impossible since there are no viable precedents to consult. In fact, the only comparison that might be made is that Musallam’s brutal murder and the desecration of his lifeless body by the crazed Katermaya crowd was similar, as some of the op-eds noted, to a “war crime” that took place in a Lebanese village during the armed conflict of 2008, or that “crime number two” seemed hauntingly reminiscent of the terrible end suffered by the late Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri as-Said in the streets of Bagdad in 1958.



This report begins by collecting the facts surrounding the horrific events in Katermaya as published in the newspapers. These facts are reviewed in order to capture the editorial position adopted by each of the newspapers and shed light on these different positions. For instance, why did some of those periodicals choose to address the two crimes as a single event? In contrast, why did other newspapers focus on the first rather than second crime (Musallem’s piteously violent death) even though that second one was the

raison d'être for those stories, and the first crime had already been covered at length?

After having asked these questions, this report would be inexcusably sketchy if it did not evaluate the linguistics adopted by the different newspapers, whether in their coverage of the crimes or in their stories about the victims. This is particularly interesting since the victim in that horrific second crime was suspected of having committed the one that preceded it.

The report then shifts away from language and terminology to assess the characteristics of the obligatory statements made by politicians and officials who were compelled to offer their thoughts based on the charged and accelerated nature of the facts being disclosed. In reality, the type of public speech these individuals utilized may be considered the most honest from the perspective of those doing the speaking since the obligation they shared did not allow them much room to maneuver. The fact that the Ketermaya killings occurred shortly before the municipal elections were held makes it unsurprising that the politicians uniformly mentioned those horrific events.

As Muhammad Salim Musallem, the victim in the second crime was Egyptian, and since a crime of that nature should not be ignored at the State level between the two countries involved, we thought it necessary to review the incident from a Lebanese-Egyptian dimension. We discovered—without having invested much effort—that the atrocity did not disturb relations between the two countries, particularly when their respective governments were just then coming to agreement on a list of important matters of national interest.

Amidst these considerations, it becomes clear that Ketermaya witnessed a complex and particularly reprehensible set of crimes.



Thus, it became essential to retrace the security and judicial processes, especially since the second crime—according to purported admissions by the security and judicial authorities—would not have happened had the field investigation of the first crime not been so amateurishly deficient.

Unfortunately, the eventual end achieved by both crimes was that they were “built on the unknown,” an expression we did not select to convey a mere rhetorical image. One may certainly accept the fact that the path which should have led to the truth about the murder of a pair of grandparents and their granddaughters was indeed permanently obstructed by the brutal murder of the suspect in that first crime. Collaterally, however, one must also accept the notion that the path which leads to the truth about the lynching of Muhammad Salim Musallem was not only laid clear but for all intents and purposes was paved by the innumerable smart and stupid mobile phones that recorded his killers performing that vile act.

After its observation of the security and judicial processes, the report focuses on the patterns that evolved from the “opinion articles” and other material written by intellectuals and researchers. Essentially, that conclusion offers consecration of the culture that exists within the Lebanese media regarding the impact of a well-chosen photograph. It arrives at this conclusion after sampling and evaluating a collection of photographs published by the newspapers involved, above and beyond those used to add impact to the news stories and related articles. As expected, those photographs correspond to the editorial positions taken by each media outlet in the ways they express the newspapers’ markedly different and contrasting positions not only with respect to the two (or more) crimes that occurred in Katermaya, but also by offering lurid samples of that “banal horror.”

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This report was prepared by our colleague Hassan Abbas. As well, credit must be given to the efforts made by others—who already know who they are. UMAM D&R must also lavish substantial thanks on our fellow researcher and colleague Ms. Marie-Claude Said. Ms. Said conceived the idea for the project that underlies this publication and was the first person on our staff to recognize the need to study the horrific events that took place in Ketermaya in April 2010 because they represented more than yet another “individual incident.” Marie-Claude also initiated the organization’s efforts to document this tragedy.

UMAM D&R

## *Random Acts of Violence vs. Civil Peace*

### *It's Not Just about the Past...*

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#### **Archiving the Past and Tracing the Present**

UMAM Documentation & Research (UMAM D&R) is a non-profit Lebanese NGO founded in 2004. It aims to promote public debate about national memory by archiving Lebanon's past; researching, documenting and making accessible knowledge of Lebanon's civil wars, transitional (justice) initiatives and human rights issues; organizing cultural activities and fostering international arts exchanges.

The organization's archival collection includes hundreds of hours of oral histories and interviews of ex-perpetrators and victims of the Lebanese civil wars. It also contains grey literature, citizens' private archives, posters, rare manuscripts and photographs. UMAM D&R's previous projects, such as "Collecting Dahiyeh," "Missing," "The 'War' through its Memorials," "What is to Be Done? Lebanon's War-Loaded Memory" and "Books From The Battlefield" are just a few examples of the intersection of archives, research and the arts. These efforts have stimulated public participation and research into memory and identity, and spurred prospects for transitioning from a lingering "state of (cold) war" to one of "normalcy." These archival and research activities are complemented by The Hangar, a multi-layered, multifaceted artistic and cultural space adjacent to UMAM's headquarters. The facility is an ideal venue for exchanges of local, regional and international expertise on issues of common concern in post-conflict societies such as Lebanon. More specifically, The Hangar hosts events such as exhibitions, film screenings, workshops, performances, roundtables and numerous other pursuits of artistic and social import. In fact, since 2004 UMAM D&R has organized well over 100 exhibits, workshops, film screenings and public events focused on a number of issues relevant to Lebanon's recent history and abiding concerns. UMAM D&R has always been guided by the belief that acknowledging

Lebanon's tumultuous past demands the careful and deliberate collection, protection and public promotion of related evidence and artifacts. Maintaining that focus is essential to Lebanon since to date, no official policy has ever sought to address the Byzantine factors that have impacted and continue to affect the memory of Lebanon's violent past. Moreover, no national archive exists to provide such information to the public. Unfortunately, since there is nothing on Lebanon's national agenda that encourages an acknowledgement of its history, no successful official accounting of the country's past has ever been conducted. Because of that distressing fact, UMAM D&R remains at the forefront of all efforts to recover and document historical artifacts and memories. It does so by engaging in a diverse set of activities ranging from archival projects to cultural exhibits to technical workshops.

Yet dealing concurrently with the country's past and present led UMAM D&R to the conclusion that from the Lebanese perspective, those periods are not mutually exclusive. In fact, a great many of today's events serve as reminders of the past or stated otherwise, dire warnings about returning to that chaos. It is therefore obvious that UMAM D&R would be ignoring its comprehensive mandate if it chose to turn a blind eye to the present.

At the end of the day, Lebanon's present and future pose real and particularly difficult challenges. Similar to the approach UMAM D&R takes to serving as a custodian for Lebanon's past, such as addressing it in detail, discussions about the present cannot be conducted effectively when those involved rely on vagaries and broad, tongue-in-cheek references. Rather, the process demands well-considered and well-informed management. To implement an approach that will be truly successful, we must address specifically those troublesome and/or worrisome current events as opposed to complaining mindlessly and cursing vociferously about them. Fortunately, there are several ways to achieve that outcome.



### **Genealogy of this Project**

On April 10, 2008, the eve of the 33rd anniversary of Lebanon's "civil" war that erupted on April 13, 1975, UMAM D&R organized the first of eight workshops. It was convened in a Beirut hotel and followed the general theme selected for the "What is to Be Done? Lebanon's War-Loaded Memory" initiative. Civil society activists, politicians, government officials and experts from Lebanon

and beyond participated in the closed sessions, the first of which focused on the deceptively simple question, “How did the war end?” The seven subsequent sessions dealt with questions that were more specific, such as the issue of war-related missing persons, the prospects for legal prosecution of war crimes, methods of recollection (memory mining efforts) and others. At this point, it is inappropriate to elaborate on the proceedings or ruminate about what might have added to the discussions about the war. Rather, it is sufficient to observe that the sessions produced opportunities for new and improved interaction between individuals and organizations. Indeed, unity prevailed among those involved simply because of their eagerness to consider collectively how to cope with the legacy of Lebanon’s past without ignoring the need to confront its contemporary challenges. Notably, that personal and programmatic harmony occurred despite individual characteristics that may have militated otherwise.

Understandably, the necessity to categorize history in this manner was driven solely by the need to communicate effectively. Owing to the attendees’ active participation during the eight workshops, the members closed the distance between each other and followed up on their initial progress by meeting periodically for several more months. These subsequent engagements resulted in a number of suggestions regarding activities and practice-bound research projects intended to address jointly the necessity to comprehend the past and take appropriate actions in the present.

In light of the events that have taken place in Lebanon, especially since 2005, the suggestion was made to prepare a series of reports that focus on “current” or “recent” random events that might somehow be construed as potentially detrimental to the civil peace. Engaging in such an analysis might help shed some light on the political, media and judicial actions taken to manage those events. Once finalized, the reports could be used to broaden the discussion that centers on the hazards that occur daily and which demonstrably threaten the somewhat timorous peace enjoyed by the Lebanese people.

Curiously, Lebanon’s postwar civil society has been especially reluctant to shoulder any responsibility for public matters. Rather, it seems content to spread cost-free words of comfort on issues as weighty as life and death. Yet it also views the many incidents of Lebanese-on-Lebanese violence to be deserving of deliberate and informed evaluation rather than being ignored due to shame or disgust. From this perspective, the idea for “Random Acts of Violence vs. Civil Peace” took shape, was discussed and was put in motion programmatically.

## Random Acts of Violence vs. Civil Peace

It is indeed a rare occasion when a *hadeth fardi* (random event) fails to occur somewhere in Lebanon, regardless of the location or political influence surrounding the incident.

These disruptive skirmishes are referred to frequently in the Lebanese vernacular as anomalies or random events, yet they are uniformly violent in nature. Moreover, responsibility for the event as well as its consequences and repercussions lie strictly with those directly involved. As well, these *hawadeth fardiyya* (random events) are not usually associated with the confession, party or regional group with which the participants are affiliated—whether the connection exists fortuitously by birth or through free will. Yet while these random events may be distinct in terms of connotation and impact, they remain intrinsically arbitrary and unpredictable. As a result, such episodes are categorized emblematically and nearly immediately as random events to counter any assertion that they are connected to a wider framework, such as a confrontation between any of Lebanon's myriad, bloodstained groups. Thus, regardless of the antecedents or background of these events, despite the number of casualties produced or the degree of martial organization involved (such as the types of weapons used, the structure of the organization present or the willingness of those involved to comply with orders), *hawadeth fardiyya* are characterized uniformly as random events.

Interestingly, the converse is sometimes true as well. For instance, at least theoretically, episodes like these need not be warlike to surpass the eligibility criteria established for random events. Today, when someone experienced with the Lebanese situation (and its literature) learns not only that another random event has occurred, but also the identity of its victims, the person typically doubts the accuracy of that overused characterization and fears the worst: a Lebanese melt down. Curiously, however, that kind of apprehension can be justified and refuted simultaneously. On one hand, it may be correct to downplay the chance nature of a given random event, but doing so is tantamount to ascribing to some degree of deliberateness. On the other hand, overestimating the political meaning and implications of such an event may be ill advised as well.

Despite the fear these occurrences create, however, not every random event is substantial enough to become the harbinger of a large-scale confrontation. With that in mind, it becomes impossible to connect a single event to any major altercation without first considering the chain of minor and entirely random events that preceded it. Likewise, random events should

not be viewed as a discrete category of incidents. Instead, they represent a particular classification that was fashioned, modified and applied according to longstanding Lebanese practices. We might add that those who use the phrase random event most often typically have the opinion that a specific episode must relate to some larger incident. By extension, a similar observation can be made regarding people who eschew the phrase altogether, use it very seldom or employ different jargon when making casual observations or touting an event's significance soon after its occurrence.

In fact, such hasty remarks should simply encourage us to reassess the very notion of these random events, especially since they have become a "station" at which Lebanon's train of daily life makes regular stops. That station, symbolic though it may be, is situated at the intersection of three dimensions: security, politics and history. Notably, those constructs are italicized to stress the idea that the appearance and meaning of each term used to describe a random event is not *prima facie*. Security, for instance, may relate to the assorted tensions that prevail in certain areas or saturate the entire country. Politics may indicate the willingness of a given faction to capitalize on a random event by squeezing as much life from it as possible. Finally, history may refer to the conceptualization, real or imagined that some relationship exists between an event and its antecedent. It may even convey symbolic elements of a specific or general nature.

Of course, it may be that no such random event could compel any competent authority—political, religious or otherwise—to rush into characterizing an event as random even if it really was so. In other words, when a responsible individual or organization decides not to pursue the *de facto* categorization of an event, that inactivity distances the incident even farther from its supposed random nature. Thus, in the absence of other corroborating evaluations—accurate or not—a given incident might not win the *pro forma* "random" categorization by those typically predisposed to do so.

Clearly, not every random event is capable of igniting a war, but regardless of how self-evident that observation may seem, it certainly prompts one to ask meaningful questions. For example, is it accurate to state that for the Lebanese, random events always echo the wartime violence that tore their country apart? Might the converse be even closer to truth? In such a case, a random event would likely be counted among the many hypothetical institutions that populate Lebanon's "cold" civil peace. Here, its job would be to sieve out the violent facts and confrontational fault lines etched into the collective memory

of the Lebanese wars. It would minimize the number of annotations and footnotes added to those recollections, and to the general responsibility and implications that attend them, which would allow them to be viewed for what they really are: individual criminal acts that should be dealt with according to State law.

Based on this reading of the importance of *taking seriously* the events classified rhetorically as “random acts of violence” (despite their pre- or postwar gravity), UMAM D&R began by identifying and shortlisting a series of events so categorized, and then initiated documentation and research projects focused on each of them. The initial outcome of this effort was published in a report titled “Considerations and Narratives on the Killing of G. Abou Madi.” That précis investigated the fallout of a crime that while assuredly horrible and senseless, exerted a national-level impact because of the coverage it received in the media. In that case, the murder was committed in Ain ar-Rummaneh (October 6, 2009), a Beirut suburb that has the unenviable honor of hosting the bloodletting event (April 13, 1975) that started Lebanon’s seemingly endless series of “civil wars.” That coincidence heaped uncertainty and fear onto the crime and led Lebanese to wonder if was just a “random event” or the tip of the iceberg. Notably, that report was followed by another that focused on a combined abduction-assassination. The crime, which came to be known as the “Ziyadayn case” (the two victims were named Ziyad, which in Arabic becomes pluralized as “Ziyadayn”), mixed politics with elements of traditional vendetta. When it occurred in April 2007, it immediately became a notorious landmark in the episodes of violence that have persisted in Lebanon since Rafik Hariri was assassinated in February 2005.

A common denominator of these two reports is the tone adopted by the Lebanese media relative to the events concerned. That tone, which reflects (and perhaps imposes) general public opinion, demonstrates that Lebanon’s predilection for “closing the files” on challenging issues is not restricted to past events. Instead, that categorically unsuccessful approach is used routinely in the country’s management of its current events. By focusing on these potentially cataclysmic random events, UMAM D&R seeks again to clarify and underscore the urgent need in Lebanon to commit unequivocally to the painful yet essential process of seeking—and telling—the truth. This process can only be engaged if the idea of truth seeking and its corollary, accountability, finds legitimacy within and becomes embedded in Lebanon’s political culture. In that sense, seeking the truth about the “past” simply cannot happen if we fail to deal decisively and courageously with both the present and the past.