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Alex Rowell



The shocking jail sentence issued by Lebanon's military court against journalist Hanin Ghaddar has been called "one of the worst free speech violations in years."

BEIRUT, Lebanon – With no fewer than three movies **banned**, on pretexts including the possibility of “plant[ing] some **ideas** in some people,” 2018 was already off to a less than fully auspicious start on the cultural freedom front in Lebanon. The news that emerged last night, however, was of an altogether graver and more alarming nature.

Lebanon’s military court, it transpires, has issued a six month jail sentence in absentia to the Lebanese journalist and political analyst Hanin Ghaddar for remarks made about the national armed forces at a conference in Washington in 2014. (A proud disclosure: it was Hanin who, as managing editor of the Now Lebanon publication, gave me my first job in journalism, and with whom I had the privilege of working for more than four years until her departure to Washington in mid-2016.) You read that correctly: Lebanon, **described** by its Culture Minister three days ago as “the Switzerland of the East”—in the course of his official condemnation of a work of cinema—sentenced a citizen to jail for the utterance of words. The extraordinarily severe sentence has been **called** “one of the worst free speech violations in Lebanon in years” by Ayman Mhanna, director of Beirut’s SKEyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom.

Indeed, there is so much that is outrageous about it it’s difficult to know where to begin. First, perhaps, the facts of the ‘case.’ Speaking alongside the then-chief of staff of the Syrian Opposition Coalition, Monzer Akbik, on a panel four years ago addressing topics from Syria’s war to the refugee crisis to Iran’s foreign policy, Hanin chanced to opine at a certain point that there was closer cooperation between the Lebanese army and Hezbollah than was healthy; that the latter sometimes acted “through” the former, in her

phrasing; and that this was fueling a sense of “injustice” within Lebanon’s Sunni community that was “not going to end well.” For this, the judiciary would have her tossed behind bars, to cohabit a space with killers and other violent convicts, a formal criminal record attached to her name for the rest of her life.

Except it’s not, of course, the ‘judiciary’ at all, which brings us to the second point of absurdity. A military court, generally speaking, handles offenses committed by military personnel only. Lebanon’s own military court indeed falls under the remit not of the Justice Ministry but the Defense Ministry. Its judges, noted Human Rights Watch in an excellent [report](#) last year, are not even “required to have a law degree or legal training.” The extent of due process may be surmised by Hanin’s revelation that she was not allowed a lawyer present at the hearing, and she has no right of appeal. Her trial under such circumstances would have been a scandal even had she been fully acquitted.

Then there is the obvious matter of proportionality, a cornerstone of functioning justice systems. To reiterate: jail time, for speech? Monetary fines are, sadly, a common punishment meted out to journalists convicted of libel or defamation in Lebanon. Jail is uncommon even for the most vicious of criminals. Consider that the former cabinet minister, Michel Samaha, was initially [sentenced](#) to just four and a half years’ imprisonment for conspiring with the Syrian regime to assassinate senior politicians and religious officials—civilian bystanders be damned—in a series of bombings across the country (the sentence was later upped to thirteen years, but only after furious public uproar). As for the individuals wanted in The Hague for assassinating former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, or those who

subsequently murdered over a dozen other politicians, journalists, and activists opposed to Bashar al-Assad and Hezbollah.. well, I'd better not finish that sentence. I might risk jail if I did.

Jail, though, may not be quite the right term for Hanin's case, for in its most immediate effect it's less a jail sentence than a ban on entering the country; a ban on entering her country. Thus the woman who, on turning 40, had Mahmoud Darwish's poetry tattooed on her arm is now denied her own right of return—and this not by the Israelis who once occupied her south Lebanese hometown, but by her fellow compatriots.

It's been a year and a half since I last saw my former editor (the word 'boss' would feel wholly unnatural for one so instinctively democratic in spirit, and so bored and unimpressed by authority in all forms; political, religious, societal). If I were to guess how she received the news, it would be: first, with a string of expertly-selected Arabic swear words; second, with two consecutive cigarettes (her signature in times of crisis); and, with that done, a return to total unflappability. A person who's lived in Hezbollah's crosshairs for years—a subject of much deranged frothing on Al-Manar, Al-Akhbar, etc.—is not one easy to intimidate. I can testify, not as any kind of flattery, but as a plain statement of fact, that in more than four years of working with her I never saw Hanin afraid to publish her weekly column against the Party of God, or Iran, or Assad, or whoever had done most to infuriate her on the day. To fear someone is, in part, to respect them, whereas it was only ever in sustained and cold contempt that she held such creatures.

And yet, to say she's brave enough to handle them—or that she now lives in a country with a First Amendment, where she can breathe the fresh air of Freedom, etc.—is not quite the point. There is, for example, the matter of her young son, who may now find it harder to see the rest of his family, and who must be wondering what possible future there could be for him in a country that would lock his mother up for voicing an opinion. (Good luck, by the way, persuading all those émigrés of Lebanese origin in the West to pack their bags and **return** to the motherland.)

On a final note, it's worth asking why this has actually happened, almost four years after the ostensible offense took place. It goes without saying Hanin has long embodied Hezbollah's walking, waking nightmare: an unveiled, secular, freethinking, and self-reliant woman from the heart of the Shiite South. But this can only be a general, underlying factor. My guess as to the proximate trigger would be anxiety in Beirut about precisely the allegation of Lebanese army collusion with Hezbollah, which has been the subject of much-heightened scrutiny in Washington ever since the Republicans retook the White House. Earlier this month, the State Department abruptly **suspended** \$900m in security aid to Pakistan, citing insufficient action taken against jihadists. With a president as volatile as Trump, can anyone say with certainty that Lebanon couldn't be next? If this is indeed the rationale behind Hanin's sentence, one can only suggest politely to the authorities here that jailing journalists is rarely a surefire way of ingratiating oneself with democratic governments, and hope that someone in power finds the sense, for Hanin's sake as well as their own, to undo this most nonsensical injustice.

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