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The Peace Building in Lebanon

News Supplement



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Special Edition

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The supplement contains articles by writers, journalists, media professionals, researchers and artists residing in Lebanon. They cover issues related to civil peace in addition to the repercussions of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon and the relations between Lebanese and Syrians, employing objective approaches that are free of hatred and misconceptions.

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© «Being Dead», Sam Atallah, 27, the «Memory of War Through Your Lens» competition



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The Memory of War Through Your Lens



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Lay the Dead to Rest, Put the Minds of their Families at Rest

Wadad Halawani*

«Even if they bring me the remains of my son, I would recognize them. Even if my son turned to bones, I would recognize my son. They can't give me the bones of a dog. There are marks I know. I know if the remains are his or not.» This is an excerpt of Moussa Jadaa's comments in 1997 denouncing the law issued with the title «The rules to be followed to prove the death of missing persons»*.

It seemed that Mr. Jadaa, who died less than a year after those words, had foreseen or, perhaps warned of the State possibly resorting to manipulations regarding the fate of those who were abducted by the war and the feelings of their families. He died before discovering the fate of his son and brother, and before the serial show of mass graves story began to unfold.

In January 2000, succumbing to pressure from the Our Right to Know campaign launched by the Committee of the Families of the Disappeared and Missing and its supporters, an «official committee» was established to investigate victims and determine their fate. Six months later, this committee published a report with the results of its work. The report stated that it had not found any living and that it had found mass graves, naming several ones. According to the report, it was impossible to identify the buried remains, as they had been buried for a long time, and Lebanon lacked the laboratory and techniques required for such tests. It was also impossible to carry out these tests abroad because of the high costs that the State treasury would incur.

What is most painful about the matter is that the Lebanese authorities have not taken any steps since then regarding these graves in accordance with the rules and procedures stipulated in international laws and treaties, particularly the First, Second and Fourth Geneva Conventions. The State assumed that this collective obituary, not based on any concrete evidence, would put an end to the dossier of the missing by declaring them dead. Its evidence is the existence of mass graves across Lebanon.

Following the withdrawal of the Israeli occupation army from Lebanon, the domino effect set off the discovery of mass graves in several areas, especially in Southern Lebanon and the Bekaa. The same happened following Syria's withdrawal. Perhaps shedding light on this matter would contribute to raising public awareness about this inhumane phenomenon, set right the official handling of it to show respect for the missing and their families, and pave the way to closing this dossier. For its closure would be the closure of the last of war dossiers in Lebanon.

Anyone keeping track of the official course of action would note the absence of professionalism and competence, and the disregard for international rules and standards for dealing with graves. Moreover this uncovers the flagrant politicizing of the matter in both shedding light on graves in certain areas, covering them up in others whether to the timing of discoveries or exhumations.

The discovery of the Anjar gravesite in the Bekaa and another discovery in the vicinity of the Ministry of Defense in Baabda in 2005 sparked a war of public statements between the rival parties of the war, most of whose leaders are now in power. This war began with shirking responsibility and finger pointing at each other, then alternately pointing the finger at Israel and Syria, followed by appealing to international courts, to finally turn into hurling the remains of the missing, contemptuous of the dignity of the dead and the feelings of families.

In addition, the subject was raised in Parliament during a Q&A session**. Unfortunately, no answers have been provided to date, while the questions are ever growing. The Government's promise remains unfulfilled, after the Prime Minister and one of his ministers confirmed

that they would discuss the subject of mass graves at the earliest meeting of the cabinet. They also said that they will promptly request an international investigation into the matter as it was found that there was a need for international expertise in forensic medicine and evidence gathering***. The subject has not been put on the agenda of the Council of Ministers to this day. Perhaps it was considered a controversial subject warranting the application of the now customary policy of «disassociation»!

The Human Rights Parliamentary Committee was quick to denounce through its chairman the indiscriminate digging up of mass graves, in violation of human dignity and the international rules applied in such cases, as was the case in Anjar. The Committee promised to hold a meeting in the presence of the relevant ministries and the International Committee of the Red Cross to set standards for the exhumation of graves and the identification of remains using forensic tools and DNA analysis****.

It does not matter whether the standards meeting took place, as standards already exist in this field. What matters is that those concerned have not yet begun to apply them. Could it be that the reason is that the subject is outside the scope of the sectarian quota system? Or maybe...

There are many gravesites and the official attitude towards them is intriguing. The topic requires volumes to cover. I will content myself with recounting one incident. In 2011, there was rallying around the news following the discovery of a mass grave in the town of Shabaniyah. Then there was rushing to wrap it up with a baffling statement that deemed the bones packed in plastic bags as belonging to goats and not to humans, without examining them and preventing anyone from reaching the site.

Buck passing followed the release of a report in 2013 on the remains of unidentified bodies, piled up since war years in the Mount Lebanon morgue in the Baabda Government Hospital, saying that their storage was getting in the way of work in the morgue and giving off unpleasant odors. And three ministers pointed the finger at each other for the responsibility of burying them!

Several ministers lined up in the dignitaries' reception room at Rafic Hariri International Airport to see off the coffin of French researcher Michel Seurat in 2006. How unpalatable was the smug smile of the authorities as they returned Seurat's remains to his family!

Two bodies were found in Khallet ez Zaiti in the hills of Aita al-Foukhar. The remains of British journalist Alec Collett were identified and taken to the American University of Beirut hospital. How appalling and cruel was that moment in 2009 when the British journalist was dug out of the grave while the body of an unidentified man found buried next to him was re-buried!

What is even more appalling and stranger is that the Lebanese State has no DNA save except that of Michel Seurat and Alec Collett.

Only Odette Salem, a family member of the missing, got her DNA sample to be stored. Of course, this wouldn't have happened had she not been tragically killed by a speeding car as she crossed the street to the families protest tent. Odette entrusted us to find Richard and Mary Christine, for whom she waited 24 years and passed away before they returned or were buried.

The general hope remains that all mothers will «spit out»***** their painful histories and the identities of their loved ones. With the hope that the saliva samples will be properly stored, for these samples are testimonies to the truth. They are the nation's legacy.

The Lebanese State has still to accept the families' demands and end its dereliction. It must take on its duties. Nothing is lost according to nature's laws. Nature does not lose one human being. It loses nothing and allows nothing to be lost. What happened decades ago was a process of disappearing people. Their families have the right to know their location. Since the State declared the death of the missing in its 2000 report, why not clear the way for burying them?

Identifying human remains is a matter of dignity. Transferring them to their families for burial is a fundamental matter that will put their minds at ease, allowing them to mourn, end this vicious state of waiting and go back to something that resembles a life. Observing the struggle of the Committee of the Families reveals that what it is demanding is no longer confined to learning the fate of the missing – without diminishing from its seriousness – but goes further the pursuit of peace and finding a homeland. The families of the missing are a diverse group of religious communities, denominations, regions and professions, and the missing have no sectarian affiliation. Either the State looks at them as citizens or it neglects them. The missing persons cause has no sectarian solution. It is precisely for this reason that the Committee believes that solving this may be the salvation for the State to rise up and consolidate its institutions, instead of continuing on this path of sinking further while watching the countries around it burn and be torn apart.

This is in hope that the 43th commemoration of the war will be the start of serious work to turn the page by closing the last and most cruel of its dossiers. So that the living can bring peace to the souls of Moussa Jadaa, Odette Salem, the mother of Ali Jabr, the mother of Mohamed Hirbawi, and to all of those who passed away before learning the fate of their loved ones, can rest.

*Law No. 434 of May 15, 1995 was issued under pressure from the Committee of the Families. Instead of meeting the demand for the right to know, it allowed families who wished to declare their missing dead to do so without the need for proof or evidence.

**As-Safir newspaper, December 7, 2005

***As-Safir newspaper, December 8, 2005

****As-Safir newspaper, April 26, 2006

*****As-Safir newspaper, November 20, 2009

*****The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been collecting and preserving biological samples of the families of the missing (saliva) since summer 2016 before they pass away and it becomes impossible to identify the missing persons or their remains. This process shall be handed over to the official authority once the State establishes it.