

Mass Graves in Lebanon: Remnants of the Past or Challenges for the Future?

Salam Wa Kalam

 Trending

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In a country struggling to come out of a civil war and to begin real memory and reconciliation efforts, raising the issue of mass graves is akin to a provocation given the extent to which the wounds of the war are still felt. And yet should we keep quiet and not give thought to the best approach to adopt in any attempt to provide answers to all those affected by this tragedy?

The answer to this question is complicated. It is important to emphasize first that raising the issue of mass graves in no way implies accepting that all the victims of enforced disappearances in Lebanon are dead. The CLDH and SOLIDE have identified and documented around 100 victims who were deported to neighboring Syria and whose families have continuously received proofs of life. Apart from these hundreds of cases, it is essential to ponder the question of how to provide answers to the victims' families who have remained in Lebanon, and to the Lebanese society at large.

To tackle this sensitive issue, it is clear that the approach should be thorough, as it is above all a matter of human remains and the memory of a conflict that still smolders under the ashes of an exceedingly fragile peace. In a statement to AFP on April 13, 2015, Waddad Halawani said, «We only want to know, and offer them a grave to be able to reflect on their memory.» This is not about pitting the opening of mass graves against forgetting their existence. The debate in the Lebanese society is manifold, and the issue of mass graves quickly summons the demons of the past, for acknowledging the existence of mass graves equates to accepting the fact that the war was not a mishap but a succession of organized and planned crimes. Supporting the opening of mass graves without a real strategy is taking a twofold risk. This runs the risk, on the one hand, of opening the wounds of the past while nothing has been undertaken to deal with them and heal them, and, on the other, of losing on account of our incompetence the information nature has so meticulously preserved for us.

When speaking of mass graves today, it is important to keep in mind that we are talking about around 400 sites across Lebanon-the UMAM NGO has documented around twenty as a result of a colossal effort. The organization's work focuses today on identifying mass graves in the vicinity of old detention centers. This work is part of a long struggle and was initiated in the 1980s by the Committee of the Families of Kidnapped and the Disappeared in Lebanon, and which has since obtained the support of numerous civil society organizations. Going beyond efforts to archive and identify, this work has led to filing a number of complaints with the support of lawyers, especially those from the Legal Agenda, an organization that has supported the families in their complaints lodged before the State Council, that resulted in a ruling by the highest administrative court in Lebanon recognizing the families' right to the truth. Earlier, another ruling had allowed legal protection for three mass graves identified in Beirut and its Suburb.

These efforts, combined with those of several other committees of families and NGOs, have kept the issue of the disappeared on the national agenda. They have also made it possible to stand up to any attempts to destroy mass graves-when such attempts came to light.

Protecting mass graves to preserve the buried memory is important for as long as Lebanon has not developed the technical and legal mechanism necessary to investigate them.

It would be catastrophic to embark on a risky opening of mass graves without an identification, archiving and a data management mechanism put in place, similarly to what is taking place in neighboring Cyprus, for example. There, a commission involving all the parties to the conflict has implemented a process for the identification, exhumation, and returning of victims' bodies to their families. Yet Lebanon is not ready to confront its past or still less to investigate the data thus gathered to provide the necessary answers to victims' families, and to ensure that the opening of mass graves would not reopen divides and conflicts of the civil war.

The mass graves in Lebanon represent not only the memory of the war but also the bodies that would allow thousands of Lebanese families to turn the page of that war. To tackle this subject without being aware of either of these dimensions is running the risk of a double injustice with respect to the victims, as having deprived them of a dignified grave in the past, they are now transformed into a divisive actor by the risky exhumation of their bodies.

To tackle the issue of mass graves and exhumation without concern for truth, justice or reconciliation in Lebanon is a danger for the future, as these buried victims are the victims of a conflict that wants nothing more than to be resuscitated and because we owe the victims, out of respect for their pain and the pain suffered by their loved ones, not to make them the trigger of a new conflict.

So are we to do nothing? Certainly not. I believe that it is essential to prepare for the future by demanding that the Lebanese State set up an independent national commission for the victims of enforced disappearances and the missing of the war, and also to initiate the training of security forces on handling mass graves and exhumed bodies, the management of DNA data thus collected, and also collect DNA data from families to be able to compare samples.

Accidental discoveries of mass graves can never be ruled out and the State must be able to handle the remains thus excavated appropriately and to hand them over to their families in dignity.

Finally, mass graves are only the consequences of the barbarity of war criminals in Lebanon. Any approach that would cover up this crime only serves to prepare similar crimes in the future.

Lebanon needs to make peace with its memory to be able to build itself a pacified future. And mass graves are the symbolic passage toward this future, and the way the future treats us depends on the way we treat them today.

1- Lebanese Center for Human Rights (www.cldh-lebanon.org)

2- Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile (www.solidelb.org)

3- Présidente du comité des familles des disparus et des personnes enlevées au Liban

4- <http://www.memoryatwork.org/index.php/subtopic/1/2013/10081>

5- www.legal-agenda.com

6- www.cmp-cyprus.org

Challenges