

# Lebanon civil war's forgotten victims: Wadad Halwani's fight for the disappeared

*More than 30 years after Lebanon's civil war ended, Wadad Halawani continues to lead the fight for truth and justice for the thousands who disappeared.*

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As the founder of the Committee of Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared, Halawani has become the face of one of Lebanon's most enduring justice movements [Getty]

More than three decades after the end of Lebanon's civil war, the fate of thousands of missing persons remains unresolved - a national wound that refuses to heal. At the heart of this long and painful struggle is Wadad Halawani, whose husband was abducted in 1982 and never seen again.

As the founder of the Committee of Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared, Halawani has become the face of one of Lebanon's most enduring justice movements.

In an interview with *The New Arab's* Arabic language edition, *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, Halawani reflects on the hard-won progress achieved by victims' families, the obstacles that continue to cripple the search for truth, and the political forces that, decades later, are still blocking accountability.

After more than four decades of tireless campaigning, the committee she co-founded succeeded in pushing through Law 105, passed in 2018, which recognises the rights of families to know the fate of their loved ones.

"We didn't receive this law as a gift," Halawani said. "We extracted it from a parliament led by many of the same political forces responsible for the war."

The law also established the National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared, Lebanon's first independent body tasked with uncovering mass graves and collecting data on the missing. Yet since its formation, the commission has faced major hurdles, from an inadequate budget and lack of office space to delayed judicial appointments and repeated political indifference. Its five-year mandate expires in July 2024.

"The biggest obstacle is the absence of political will," Halawani said. "The commission has the tools it needs, but not the support."

She noted that until recently, two vacant judicial seats on the commission had gone unfilled for months - a violation of the law itself.

Despite the lack of state cooperation, Halawani says the commission managed to make some progress, including overseeing an excavation at a suspected mass grave in the village of Mdoukhah in 2023, where the remains of three Palestinian fighters killed in 1983 were found.

"But more needs to be done - and urgently," she said, warning against a gap in the commission's work once its term ends.

The stakes remain high; the issue of the missing is not only one of grief and closure, but one that touches on Lebanon's unresolved past.

"The war ended in 1990 without any reckoning," Halawani said. "That's why we're in the crises we are today. The civil war's wounds were left open."

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Official estimates once placed the number of disappeared at 17,000, but the International Committee of the Red Cross lists just over 3,000 names. Halawani's committee has documented 2,158 cases.

"The numbers are not final," she said, "and I believe they're higher. But we only count those who came to us and registered their missing relatives."

Last year, activists suspected the discovery of a mass grave in Karantina, a Beirut district that witnessed fierce fighting during the civil war. Excavation was halted after the Directorate General of Antiquities said no grave was found, though Halawani believes more graves exist in the area.

The challenge of uncovering the truth stretches beyond Lebanon's borders. Many Lebanese detainees were taken to Syria and never returned.

"We don't expect to find anyone alive," Halawani said, "but we want their remains". She called on the Lebanese government to send an official delegation to Damascus with names and records.

To galvanise public pressure, civil society groups have launched a national petition to demand the enforcement of Law 105.

"The petition is more than a legal tool - it's a message," Halawani explained. "It tells people why this law matters, especially young people who didn't live through the war. It's about memory, and ensuring we don't repeat the past."

Still, Halawani remains clear-eyed about the nature of the struggle. "We're asking the same people - before and after the war - to give us answers they've denied us for decades.