

“Like an ant that digs into the rock:” Wadad Halwani and the struggle of the families of the missing and the forcefully disappeared

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Wadad Halwani, whose husband was abducted and disappeared in 1982, gives flowers to families of other missing people during a demonstration in Beirut (Credit Changiz M Varzi, image source: <http://www.aljazeera.com>)

“This not about my personal story. This is a story that affected many people, and I am just one example of it. Of course we all had some kind of background, a life before. For example, I was always rebellious and active in fighting for my rights, at home, in school, in university, it was as if life was somehow preparing me for what happened afterwards. And in 1982 I got dragged into this cause that was bigger than me and bigger than anything I have ever lived. From that moment on, it occupied me completely. But it was an imposed cause, not anything that I or anyone else have chosen to fight for.”

Wadad Halwani’s struggle for this imposed cause started in autumn 1982 in the midst of the Lebanese civil war. Her husband Adnan, a member of the Organisation of Communist Action, was kidnapped from his own house in Ras al-Naba’a in Beirut. After approximately a month of asking around among

different people and points of contact, Wadad Halwani had still not found anything about her husband's fate. Instead, she learned that many others shared a similar story:

“Everyone I went to see told me ‘there are people like you, the same story, you are not alone in this.’ So I decided to publish an announcement on the radio that I am looking for other people, who also have someone who got kidnapped and is missing. I thought of three to four other people to accompany me when I am visiting authority figures. It leaves more impact when I am not alone. So, in the announcement I set a meeting point and a day when I could finish work early. I chose time and place for the meeting so that it would suit me. It was a Wednesday, I remember, I finished work and went to the meeting point, the Abdel Nasser mosque in Corniche al-Mazra’a. I went there to meet the three or four women who share the same story as I do. I went there and instead of three or four women I had a crowd in front of me.”

The struggle of the families of the missing and the forcefully disappeared had started on the day of Wadad's called meeting in Corniche al-Mazra'a in Beirut[1]. Wadad remembered how the group started their days of activism in the following years despite the ongoing civil war. They organised demonstrations, sit-ins, and grew together as a group fighting for a common cause. From the beginning, their struggle was met by a lot of challenges from the inside and the outside. On the one hand, it was not easy to carry on with activism in the midst of a civil war, fighting for accountability within a cause that was directly linked to and aggravated by that war. On the other hand, political and often confessional differences – resembling the civil war divisions – also determined the work of the group of people that Wadad had gathered in 1982:

“The first years, we felt very much alone, there was also the war still going on in the first years, so we started doing demonstrations, sit-ins, and marches. While bombs were falling and militias were fighting. And militias also threatened us, the state also did but it was the weakest actor at that time. Still, I have no idea why, but it seems this matter was so important to us that we did not care about fear and danger etc. I have no idea where we got all this strength from. And there were so many differences among us, we all had a complete different background, each one of us had her own opinion, thinking this opinion is right, her region is the right one, her confession, her political attitude etc. And this caused problems of course. It took time to overcome this. And it took some effort until we were unified, one can say, until we had one demand, were one movement, etc.”

The group of the families of the missing and forcefully disappeared had unified its struggle by demanding the investigation of the forceful disappearance of their relatives. The struggle for this common objective accompanied them during the days of the civil war and continued in its aftermath in the 1990s. The period of the 1990s, the so-called “civil peace” that was agreed on in Ta'ef in 1990 is often characterised as a heyday of civil and political activism in different realms. Still, the struggle of Wadad and her like-minded peers remained an isolated one:

“There is no doubt that we are victims in, both, times of war and peace. In war, because it was war and people were still being kidnapped, but in peacetime, we remained victims because we never had peace. [...] When the Ta'ef agreement was concluded and the period of civil peace started, we at first became a bit quiet, we thought, now it is peace so we will know the truth. Then, directly, they announced the amnesty, and people started not wanting to see us, we were threatening the civil peace. People told us, forget about it, put everything behind yourself, the state changed, you can start looking ahead. [...] So during peace, we faced different challenges, we were ignored, threatened. It is not that people didn't care about us, they didn't want us, didn't want to see us, didn't want anything that reminded them of the war. We made a campaign; the media would not cover us, or it wrote about it as if we are acting at the other end of the world. But slowly, we returned, got up, and continued our struggle.”

In 1998, the families of the missing and forcefully disappeared made a first attempt to overcome their marginalisation: at a press conference in December they expressed their isolation and called on people to stand with them: “We said whoever sympathises with us should come and support us, so we created something like the friends of the cause, we started to gather people around us.” This led to the first

large scale campaign in November 1999 under the slogan “*min haqina na’ref*” (“it is our right to know”):

“So we made a campaign and we moved in regions, we planned activities, and a media campaign, posters, stickers, etc. and this campaign brought new supporters, journalists, artists and academics, we started to have a lot of supporters and friends, we became bigger and bigger. And one of the results was the formation and registration of the first official committee of the families of the missing and forcefully disappeared, in January 2000.”

In the following years, Wadad and the newly registered committee[2] became more and more present on the public stage of activism. They made different campaigns over the years demanding the investigation into the files of the missing and forcefully disappeared. Within the course of their action, they gathered more and more support from society and, additionally, accomplished certain successes in their struggle. For Wadad, it is a decade long struggle in its small steps and accomplishments which, despite its defeats and obstacles, keeps rising to new challenges that matter in her personal struggle and the struggle of the committee:

*“In 2003 we did a second campaign, to proclaim April 13th a national day of remembrance. Sure, April 13th never became a national day of remembrance but many people, intellectuals, politicians, parties, NGOs, for all of them, they remembered April 13th and the slogan we had ‘to remember so that it does not repeat itself’ (*tenzaker la ma ten’ad*). It became the slogan of the committee of the families of the disappeared. I think that the efforts of the families, their patience, their energy, is like the ant that digs in the rock, every couple of years, you only make one step ahead, because there are so many obstacles and rules, politically, confessionally, in the war, during peace, from the media, from society and politics. I think that because of the way the families stuck to their cause, the patience, the efforts, with which they fought, at some point people sympathised with them. So even if we did not bring back the missing, we still accomplished something, and we also moved another generation. There is a generation that did not know what happened, we got them to mobilise, we told them about our cause. I think the next generation is more aware about the cause, and this is the result of our work, of our effort. We made a difference and we still do. I think the biggest difference we made was in 2014, the historical decision that was taken by the Constitutional Council, this was a big achievement, when the judiciary stood against the political power, giving us the right to know.”*

Wadad sees her struggle and that of the committee embedded in a national political struggle. It is an imposed struggle that still puts her and the committee at the centre of many movements, questions, and challenges that Lebanon has faced and is still facing.[3] In this vein, she refuses to be looked at as a mere victim whose fate can be mourned and who has to be comforted. Instead, she rather reverses her status as a victim to call for political action and responsibility:

“There is no doubt that we are victims. It is not acceptable that you wait during three quarters of your life for someone to come back and he does not come. I don’t want to talk about how the kidnapping affects everything in life, not just for the mother if it is her son, or the wife if it is her husband, there are children and the rest of the family, and there are catastrophes that I was living, not only in my family but in the families of the missing. So yes, we are victims but whoever feels we are victims should put in all the effort so that we give up our victim status. Our victim status is due to injustice that we suffered so we have to get out of this. We were not born as families of the missing, nor are our children born as children of the missing, but still many like to look at us like this, pity us and turn away. The media plays a big role, they come to an event, they film, it is as if the camera enters the eye of the women to take out her tears, so that those emotions that are inside come out, the media wants tears, shouting, crying, they don’t want reasonable political action. The media keep portraying us as victims, politics does, society as well... I always tell people, yes, the story makes you sad, it makes you cry. If one has suffered so much injustice, it makes you sad, you are right, but in the end, this sadness, the crying etc. does not solve anything. Whoever feels with us, has to act. We don’t want to be victims. We the families of the disappeared, what we

want to do, all our effort is to find the missing, and we want to know where they are. But we also work for society. We work to build a country. The questions we ask are at the centre of this undertaking.”

The reversal of the victim status^[4] is reinforced by the fact that the majority of the committee's members are women; women who suffered injustice and who face a lot of challenges in seeking justice. In this sense, Wadad sees their battle as a double reversal of a socially and politically imposed victimisation, a struggle that she compares to that of many women in Lebanese society suffering from different kinds of injustice.

The struggle of Wadad Halwani is a constant one, that, in 2016, is still not over. This is not only due to the fate of the missing and forcefully disappeared not being solved yet, but also because the questions surrounding it remain unanswered. The movement of Wadad and the other committee members touches on the very basic question of how a country deals with its conflictual past, with war crimes, and with the process of memory, remembrance and mourning. In short, it also deals with the question of how a state, a country, and a society deal with its citizens, especially if these citizens are denied from basic rights, such as the right to know the truth about a crime affecting them. In this undertaking, the committee faced a lot of obstacles, hindrances, and rejections.

Currently, Wadad and the committee work on the establishment of an archive on the history of their work and activism, showing their decade-long struggle during different periods of Lebanese history. Likewise, they still lobby for the state's responsibility to organise DNA collection and identification among the relatives of the missing and forcefully disappeared. When asked if she ever thought about abandoning her activism, Wadad conceded that she had considered this many times but did not, because she still thought her work was as important as ever. Similar to the ant that digs in the rock, Wadad entered many side corridors in the rock, touching on many other issues relevant to her own, while she never lost track of the once set objective to find out about the fate of the missing and forcefully disappeared in Lebanon.