



Amnesty International/Toufic Rmeiti

**NEWS**

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## **“More than a million years of waiting and campaigning”: Families of the disappeared mark the International Day for the Disappeared in Beirut**

Representatives of the families of people forcibly disappeared in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen gathered in Beirut today to demand that their governments uphold their rights to truth, justice and reparation, during an event organized by Amnesty International to mark the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances.

Across the Middle East, both state authorities and non-state actors, such as armed opposition groups, abduct and disappear people as a way to crush dissent, cement their power, and spread terror within societies, largely with impunity.

While most governments in the region have not yet investigated disappearances nor provided accurate numbers of those missing or disappeared, civil society organizations and UN bodies have published estimated numbers of people abducted and disappeared in each country. These numbers in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, when multiplied by a conservative estimate of the total years these individuals have been missing, suggest that families have spent more than a million years **waiting for answers** – an agonizing length of time.

“In the face of their governments’ apathy and complicity for the crime of enforced disappearances, the families of the disappeared across the Middle East have led the charge, year after year, in demanding their right to know what happened to their loved ones and to get justice and reparation – often at great personal risk,” said Aya Majzoub, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“Today we honour their perseverance and add our voice to theirs in calling for authorities to take real action to investigate these crimes, hold those suspected of criminal responsibility accountable and ensure these crimes are not committed again.”

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## **Iraq**

In Iraq, the UN **estimates** that between 250,000 to 1,000,000 individuals have been disappeared since 1968 – making it one of the countries with the highest number of disappearances in the world. Disappearances are still being carried out today at hands of militias affiliated with the government. Consecutive Iraqi governments have repeatedly failed to take meaningful steps to investigate disappearances or hold those suspected of criminal responsibility to account. Widad Shammari from Iraqi organization Al Haq Foundation for Human Rights, whose son has been missing since 2006, said: “I was a single protester until I met many others who shared my struggle, and we formed a strong coalition who

fighters for the truth for all the disappeared in the Arab region, not just Iraq.”

## **Lebanon**

In Lebanon, the official estimate of those abducted or missing as a result of the 1975-1990 civil war is **17,415**. Every year, on 13 April – the anniversary of the start of the Lebanese Civil War – the families of the missing and disappeared gather to mark the beginning of the conflict, repeating the mantra, “Let it be remembered, not repeated.”

The Lebanese authorities granted amnesty to the perpetrators of crimes that occurred during the civil war, but after years of campaigning, in 2018, the families of the disappeared successfully pressured the government to acknowledge the disappearances that took place. The government also passed a law that established the National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared with a mandate to investigate individual cases, locate and exhume mass graves and enable a tracing process.

However, Wadad Halawani, whose husband was kidnapped in 1982 and who leads the Committee of the Kidnapped and Missing in Lebanon said: “Today, we raise our voice and shout out loud. The National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared is 3 years old already. Only two years remain in its mandate. The Commission established a clear strategy for its work, but it cannot carry on without the needed financial and logistical support. The government must provide it with all the needed resources immediately.”

## **Syria**

Since 2011, the Syrian authorities have forcibly disappeared **tens of thousands** of its actual or perceived opponents, including political activists, protestors, human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers, doctors, and humanitarian aid workers, as part of a widespread and systematic attack against the civilian population that amounts to crimes against humanity. Thousands have also gone missing after being detained by armed opposition groups and the so-called Islamic State. Given the Syrian government’s role in orchestrating the campaign of enforced disappearances, there has been total impunity for these crimes in Syria. The families have therefore resorted to international justice mechanisms.

In a momentous victory for the families, on 29 June 2023, the UN General Assembly voted to establish an international institution dedicated to shedding light on the fate and whereabouts of those missing and disappeared since the start of the armed conflict in Syria.

Fadwa Mahmoud from Families for Freedom, whose husband and son were disappeared in Syria in 2012 said: “We had big dreams in 2011. But we paid a very heavy price. My husband and son have been disappeared since September 2012... We faced our fears and raised our voice until it reached the United Nations ...this [institution] is the product of our labour as the families of the detained...and this is its strength. We are demanding that we have an instrumental role in the institution.”

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## **Yemen**

In Yemen, human rights organizations have documented **1,547 cases** of disappeared and missing people since 2015. All parties to the conflict, including the Huthi de facto authorities and the internationally recognized government forces, are still committing these crimes with impunity at a time when the world's attention has turned away. Since the Human Rights Council voted in 2021 to end the mandate of the Group of Eminent Experts, following heavy lobbying from Saudi Arabia, efforts to hold all those suspected of criminal responsibility accountable in fair trials and realize victims' rights to reparations have stalled.

The Abductees' Mothers Association in Yemen said: “We were harassed and threatened and beaten-up during demonstrations, but we will not give up and we are determined at ensuring some progress every step of the way. We are not mothers of our own disappeared family members only; we consider ourselves mothers of every single disappeared person in the region and we will continue our fight for the truth for all of them.