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The Committee of the Parents of the Missing and Disappeared: 30 Years of Struggle and Protest

MARWAN G. ROWAYHEB* AND MAKRAM OUAISS*

Introduction

About 25 years have passed since the end of the Lebanese 1975–1990 war and the truth about the fate of the people who went missing or who disappeared during the war remains unknown.¹ Successive Lebanese governments formed since the end of the war, ex-militiamen who were responsible for the disappearance of many Lebanese, political parties and influential leaders continue to show no serious commitment to assist the relatives and parents of the missing people discover what has happened to their beloved ones.

This article investigates the work of a Lebanese non-governmental organization (NGO) called the Committee of the Parents of the Missing and the Disappeared. This organization has been hard at work since the years of the war to pressure successive Lebanese governments, ex-militia leaders and members, political elites and the international community to seriously act to reveal or help reveal the fate of the missing people. This NGO is one of the oldest NGOs working on the issue of the missing people and continues to be one of the most active.² As is the case with the Committee, similar NGOs such as the Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile (SOL-IDE), established in 1989, or the Follow-up Committee for the Support of the Lebanese Detained in Israeli Prisons, established in 1999, have actively campaigned for their causes and are facing similar challenges. Until now, such groups have also been unable to achieve their campaign goals. Thus, studying the Committee gives insights into these similar Lebanese NGOs, the challenges they are facing, the strategies they have developed and the achievements they have accomplished, something the literature on Lebanon has not given sufficient attention to.³

Before the writing of this article, the parents and relatives of the people who were reported missing did not know officially or legally what had happened to their beloved ones. Although successive Lebanese governments, most political leaders, ex-militia leaders and ex-combatants do not want to help in revealing the truth about

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what had happened to the people who went missing during the Lebanese civil war of 1975, the Committee managed to mobilize the families of the missing people under one banner for more than 30 years and was successful in making the Lebanese government and the legal authorities take few but important decisions that favoured their cause. It managed to do so without being deterred by the social, political and economic challenges it faced and due to the ability of its leadership to clearly define the sources of contention it wanted to protest against and by selecting the protests methods that best serve its cause. Nevertheless, the most important factor that allowed it to sustain itself for this long was its ability to modify its protest methods depending on the demographic condition of its members.

The analysis of various cases of missing people in conflicts from around the world, points to the essential role NGOs play in revealing the truth about missing people.⁴ Unfortunately, Lebanese NGOs had always been underestimated for their ability to influence decisions making process in Lebanon if they lack the support of the Lebanese governments, political parties, leaders and religious authorities. Although few articles have addressed the work of the Committee, no study has analysed in depth its work or what had allowed it to remain active for more than 30 years with all the challenges it had faced; something this study attempts to do.⁵ Accordingly studying the committee will reveal how a small group of people who did not receive any support from their communities, political parties and leaders and successive Lebanese governments has managed to remain a pressure group for more than 30 years and achieve few but important accomplishments.

War Years: 1982–1990

The Committee was founded seven years following the outbreak of the war. On 17 November 1982, Wadad Halwani, whose husband was kidnapped during that year and who has not yet been found, called all the Lebanese who had missing loved ones due to the events of the war to gather in Bourj Abou Haidar in Beirut in order to start a campaign to uncover the truth about what happened to them.⁶

A large number of people responded to Halwani's call, most of them were complaining that the government and the militias were doing nothing to reveal the fate of their loved ones.⁷ The number of people who attended surprised Halwani who had expected only a few people to respond to her call and had encouraged her and other parents to found the Committee.⁸ The committee was officially registered that year with the Lebanese state as an NGO. The structure of the Committee was simple: it was composed of a leadership council which included no more than the five members elected by the members of this NGO. Membership was open to all the relatives, parents and families of the missing people.

The main objective behind forming this Committee was to bring together and mobilize all families and relatives of the missing people to pressure the Lebanese authorities and all those who were held responsible for the disappearance of many Lebanese, to reveal the truth about what happened to them.⁹ It would have been impossible for the relatives and parents of the missing to advocate their cause individually due to their financial problems, lack of access to the media, and lack of influence over the factions who were responsible for the disappearance of their beloved ones. Other objectives included representing the families of the missing people during

negotiations with local and international authorities, coordinating with other NGOs and following up on all developments related to the issue of the missing and the disappeared.¹⁰

The newly founded Committee saw an opportunity in 1982 to pressure the Lebanese government, political leaders and militias to pay attention to the issue of the missing people. Furthermore and In 1982 Lebanon enjoyed a short period of peace. The Israeli invasion then led to the evacuation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) from Beirut. The PLO had been imposing its militia rule, with the support of its Lebanese allies, over West Beirut and other parts of the country from 1975. Syria was compelled by Israel to withdraw its military units from Beirut. A multinational force that included United States, French, British and Italian troops was formed and stationed in Beirut to assist the Lebanese Army bring law and order back to the areas evacuated by the PLO, Syrian and Israeli troops.

Since the first days of its establishment, the Committee's leadership managed to determine who of the decision makers and power holders to target through campaigns and protests and what methods of protest to employ against them to achieve the needed outcomes. Since then the Committee has continuously met government officials, militia leaders and foreign representatives to advocate their case and ask them for help and assistance.

The Lebanese militias were the first group of power holders it targeted. The breakdown of the Lebanese state in 1975 allowed the Lebanese militias to become the major, de facto, authority in Lebanon until the end of the war in 1990.¹¹ Militiamen used all forms of violence such as assassinations, violent attacks, threats of forced eviction and expulsion, and kidnapping to deter threats to their rule.¹² On the other hand, Syria and Israel, that occupied large parts of the country and who sponsored many of those militias, had their share in the use of violence against the Lebanese people. All this violence created thousands of victims: deaths, injured, handicapped, displaced and missing people.¹³

On 17 January 1983, the committee submitted a petition signed by a hundred women to the President of the Republic, Prime Minister and the President of the Lebanese Parliament asking for their assistance in revealing the truth about the missing people.¹⁴ They requested from the president to mediate with the Lebanese militias to release all those abducted or forcefully detained.¹⁵ Its efforts led the formation of a parliamentarian ad-hoc committee that was expected to look into what had happened to the people reported missing during the war.¹⁶ Soon, however, the Committee members became disappointed with the lack of commitment from the Lebanese government to resolve the issue of the disappeared. Furthermore, it criticized how the Lebanese government and the ad-hoc committee were dealing with the issue of the disappeared.¹⁷

The Committee used different methods of peaceful protests. It organized strikes, demonstrations, blocking roads, sit-ins and symbolic meetings at the demarcation lines that separated the contending factions. Few important events could be mentioned here. In February 1984, following Nayfeh Najjar's suicide after her 13 years old son was kidnapped, the Committee organized a large demonstration and its members blocked few roads in the capital Beirut. In 1984, the Committee also held large demonstrations in front of the Government Palace and the Dar Al Fatwa (the location of the Sunni Religious Authorities) respectively. That same year also

witnessed the organization of a sit-in in front of Dar al Fatwa that lasted two months.¹⁸ It did the same as well in 1987 and held a large demonstration in front of the same locations.¹⁹

The peaceful approach adopted by the Committee surely helped attract many of the parents and relatives of the missing to participate in its protests. Using violent techniques would have likely discouraged many of them from getting involved in the movement. Furthermore, peaceful protest has allowed the Committee to hold its activities without clashing with the militias, the security forces and the Lebanese army. Its reliance on peaceful methods was not only due to strategic considerations not to give the authorities a pretext to use violence against them during its protests, but due as well to its gender composition.²⁰ Although many brothers, sons and fathers, joined the Committee, it was composed mostly of the wives or mothers of the missing people. This gender composition was a limitation by itself precisely in a society that was chauvinistic and patriarchal and where most political parties, political movements and NGOs are dominated by males. Furthermore, the different branches of government and the public sectors were and continue to be dominated by men as well. Nevertheless, in a few cases this gender composition brought few advantages to the Committee.²¹ In most protests or campaigns it organized, the participants were women and children who blocked roads, demonstrated and gathered in sit-ins. This seems to have played an important role in making the Lebanese authorities less inclined to use violence against the protestors. This is supported by the fact that rarely did the demonstrations or the sit-ins witness violent reactions from the Lebanese authorities against the protestors.

The renewed outbreak of violence in 1983 did not discourage the Committee to end its campaigns although additional thousands of victims were reported and precisely more missing people were added to the list of the missing. Although the number of its protest activities that were organized by the Committee was reduced in the years that followed due to the difficult situation imposed by the renewed violence, the Committee managed to keep the pressure on the Lebanese successive governments and militia leaders.²² This had allowed its cause not be forgotten and its members mobilized and ready to meet the new political situation that might appear when war will be over.²³

Post War Years: 1990–2005

The end of the civil war in 1990 did not bring any good news to the families of the missing people.²⁴ The Taif Accord that brought an end to the war did not address how to resolve the issue of the missing people or how to deal with massacres, kidnappings and atrocities that took place during the war.²⁵ It did not even acknowledge the issue of the missing or disappeared, something that the Committee strongly condemned. The international community that sponsored the *Taif* Peace Accord through the efforts of the US and Saudi Arabia in 1990, did little to introduce a clause to the agreement that deals with the missing people. The international community, led by the US, was interested in stability and gave Syria a free hand in imposing law and order in Lebanon in return for Syria's support for US foreign policy in liberating Kuwait and its plans for the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Syria brought Lebanon fully under its control from 1990 until 2005, and did not allow truth finding initiatives to take place in Lebanon, fearing that such findings might reveal the implication of its troops in atrocities that had taken place in Lebanon since the beginning of the war or would lead to inter-Lebanese conflicts that may challenge its authority. Repeated demands by certain Lebanese politicians, individuals, and NGOs such as the Committee, were ignored by the Syrian government. On the other hand, the Committee also claimed that Israel could directly contribute to resolving the issue of the missing people since they were directly responsible for the disappearance of many of them.²⁶ Israel had occupied the south of Lebanon from 1978 and 2000 by force. It was directly and often indirectly responsible for many of the killings and kidnappings that were committed at the hands of their troops or those of their Lebanese allies.

Another major challenge that the Committee had to deal with after the war was the position of the successive Lebanese governments from the issue of the missing people. Successive Lebanese governments continued to assert that revealing the truth might revive old animosities that might lead to the outbreak of a new civil war in Lebanon.²⁷ It should be mentioned here that this 'policy of amnesia' was not only the by-product of Syrian influence in Lebanon, but rather a tacit agreement among the majority of Lebanese political leaders, ex-militia leaders and ex-combatants, not to reveal the truth about what happened during the years of the civil war. There is no doubt that the most logical explanation for the lack of interest in revealing the truth about the missing and the kidnapped is the high likelihood that they would be discovered responsible for the killings, massacres, kidnappings and disappearances that took place during 15 years. This would also open the door for judicial pursuits and demands for reparations. Lastly, such confessions would also reveal the identity of other perpetrators, put the spotlight on top leaders today in parliament is seen as potentially tarnishing the reputation of the religious groups to which the person making the confession belongs.

Furthermore, the Lebanese government did not ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court treaty which came into being on 1 July 2002 and that counts as of 2013, 122 countries parties to this treaty and the International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 December 2006 and that counts in 2013, 43 countries that are party. The Committee condemned the position of the Lebanese government here and called it to sign all international agreements relating to the issue of missing and disappeared people.²⁸ The committee claimed that without the cooperation of the Lebanese government with the International Community, the international community will not directly assist in revealing the truth about the missing people as was the case in many other countries in Europe or Africa.²⁹

Another challenge that the Committee faced was the reaction of large sections of the Lebanese society that did not want to re-open the files of the war. It is usual for societies like the Lebanese society that suffered years of wars, destructions and killings, not to be interested in revealing what happened during those years; worried that these discussions might lead to renewed violence. This fact was strongly acknowledged by the Committee and accordingly it tried as much as it could to have a discourse that did not call for revenge or punishment, but emphasized solely the

right to know.³⁰ Nevertheless, according to Halwani, Lebanese society, wanting to forget the painful past, offered no support to the Committee's cause.³¹

Furthermore, the different Lebanese communities did not show any serious interest in pressuring the ex-combatants from their religious communities to reveal the truth about what they did during the war. Many of the ex-militiamen who were active during the years of the civil war were elected by the members of their communities as members of parliament and municipalities in successive national and local elections that took place after the war. Furthermore, the position of the Lebanese clergy in each religious community has represented another obstacle to revealing of the truth. Many clergymen were actually involved during the war and often supported and sponsored ex-militiamen who committed atrocities during the war. They have also tried to provide protection to ex-combatants who were directly responsible for the disappearance of many Lebanese during the war.

The Committee has limited ability to influence the Lebanese society and communities convince them to support their cause. NGOs that have demonstrated a strong influence over society in Lebanon have traditionally been NGOs that provide social and public services; they are also those that have been able to secure the largest funding from national and international sources. NGOs that are supported by religious authorities and provide services to their communities; or NGOs that are supported by strong political leaders have also been quite influential but mostly within one group of society. The Committee is at a disadvantage here since it neither provides public services to the Lebanese nor does it receive support from religious authorities or any powerful political leader.

The Committee was not deterred by the indifferent and at times hostile position of Syria, the successive Lebanese governments and ex-militiamen and the lack of interest from the part of Lebanese communities. On a number of occasions, the committee members received direct threat from a number of ex-militiamen and governmental officials related to what they were calling for.³² Nevertheless, these threats did not discourage the committee to continue its protest and activities.³³

The committee has been aware that revealing the truth might endanger peaceful coexistence in Lebanon.³⁴ Accordingly it carefully drafted its demands. The Committee's main demands after the war were as follows: (1) Get the Lebanese authorities to locate and open all mass graves on Lebanese soil according to international standards; (2) The application of DNA tests to identify the remains discovered; (3) The creation of a truth and justice commission whose mandate is to establish the truth about the fate of all kidnapped and missing people; and (4) Have Lebanon ratify the International Convention on Enforced Disappearance.³⁵ Although in few cases it called for the revealing of the identities of people who committed these atrocities, it did not call for their punishment. It wanted just to ban the ones who are identified from occupying any governmental or public positions.³⁶ It was well aware that any radical demand from their part on the way truth should be discovered and any call to punish the perpetrators might discourage many of its members to participate in its activities and protests since it might have put them in direct confrontation with ex-militiamen who occupy powerful positions within their communities and within the Lebanese state.³⁷ This might as well have pushed the successive Lebanese governments that have been dominated by ex-militia leaders to end the Committee's protests by force.³⁸ These strategies played an important role in

not providing an excuse to the political authorities or power holders, and in this case, militiamen, to use violence to disperse protestors.

The Committee, as it did during the war, continued to organize demonstrations that targeted governmental offices, UN headquarters and embassies. They happened on a regular basis and were attended by a large number of people who had relatives or friends who were still missing. They also continued their regular visits to politicians, government officials and ex-militiamen. Although most of the demonstrations organized by the Committee during that period were peaceful most of them were disruptive to public order. In most of them demonstrators blocked roads by burning tires or putting rocks in the middle of the roads. Only one demonstration turned violent, on 4 April 2000, when the security forces used violence against the demonstrators who were targeting the official headquarters of the Lebanese government.³⁹

Although the protest methods it used were disruptive to public order, they all remained non-violent and ended peacefully. The disruptive nature of these protests allowed the Committee to be noticed by the government and the public in the years to come when the Lebanese governments formed a number of commissions to look into the case of the disappeared. The Committee had managed to make the successive Lebanese governments act on the issue of the disappeared. Although some of the decisions or actions were disappointing to the Committee, they could be considered as official recognition by the Lebanese governments of the issue of the missing people and would be used to build upon future actions and campaigns.

One year after the end of the war and as agreed in the Taif Accord, Lebanese militias were dismantled by the Lebanese government with the support of Syria. The Amnesty Law of 1991 (Law 434) that followed pardoned all of them. Not only did the bill grant forgiveness to all militiamen, but many of them were assimilated within the institutions of the Lebanese state, including ministerial positions. Furthermore, the Amnesty Law of 1991 did not impose on those amnestied the need to provide information on the fate of the missing people in return for being pardoned. The Committee strongly opposed and condemned this law.⁴⁰

The only action taken by the Lebanese government against a militia leader was against Samir Geagea, the leader of the Lebanese Forces militia. While the Lebanese Forces committed many atrocities during the war, the reason for his trial was not for the atrocities, kidnappings and killings committed under his leadership. According to the government, the assassinations of political leaders that Geagea was accused of during the civil war were not exempted from in the Amnesty law of 1991. Geagea was also accused of bombing a Church after the end of the civil war. Geagea's criticism of Syria's presence and policies in Lebanon and his attempts to challenge the authority of the new pro-Syrian Lebanese government probably better explains why he was tried and imprisoned for more than 11 years. It should be mentioned here that Geagea's trial did not lead to any revelation of what had happened to many of the people reported missing.

In 1995, the Lebanese government issued the law of 1995 that allowed all Lebanese to consider their relatives or parents who went missing as officially and legally deceased. As claimed by the Lebanese government then, this law was intended to allow the families of the disappeared to resolve legal issues related to the disappearance of their loved ones and facilitate the resolution of practical problems related to their disappearance such as inheritance, re-marriage, pensions, and retirement,

among others. The Committee condemned this law claiming that the law was intended to silence the families and relatives of the missing people by allowing them to legally proceed with their lives even if the fate of their beloved ones was not revealed.⁴¹ This law did not provide any mechanism that might be used to reveal the fate of the missing people. In other words, it totally ignored the fundamental need of families of the disappeared to know what had happened to their relatives.⁴²

In 2000, and in response to the call of the Committee, the Lebanese government decided to form a commission – the commission of 2000 – in order to investigate the status of all Lebanese who were claimed to be missing. The commission finished its work in six months and prepared a report where it claimed that the number of missing people was 2,046 and not 17,000 as claimed by the Committee.⁴³ This report also did not say anything about the methodology that it used to determine the exact number of people who were counted missing and how its conclusions were reached. Although, the commission investigated a number of mass graves that dated back to the years of the civil war, in its report it declared that the DNA test samples taken from remains found there showed that it was impossible to identify the identity of the people buried. Accordingly, the main recommendation made by the commission was that the persons who were declared missing for more than four years be considered dead. It is important to mention here that a detailed account of this report was not published; only a short report was made public where no serious revelations were made. The Committee rejected the conclusions reached by the commission of 2000 accusing it of lack of precision and accuracy in its work. The Committee claimed that the commission was not independent from government control and influence.⁴⁴ The Committee was also critical of the fact that the commission of 2000 did not include representatives from the families and relatives of the missing; it was only composed of security officers, something the Committee condemned.⁴⁵ Furthermore, almost no coordination between the commission and the parents of the relatives of the missing took place.⁴⁶

In 2001, the Lebanese government created another commission, the Commission of 2001, to deal with the issue of the missing people. The membership of the 2001 commission was improved in order to make it independent of government control.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, no representative of the parents and families of the missing was invited to join that Commission either.⁴⁸ The Commission of 2001 was only allowed to investigate cases where there was a clear evidence provided by the parents that their missing relatives might be still alive. It worked for 18 months and looked into 900 cases but failed to produce any report to confirm any of these cases. As was the case with the Commission of 2000, the Committee criticized virulently the work of this commission and claimed that there were no improvements in the way it was formed, worked or the methodology it adopted from its predecessor.⁴⁹

The Committee did face other type challenges coming from within the committee and might not have allowed it to remain active for this long. Nevertheless, the uncontested support of the members of the Committee to its leadership had played a major role in its ability to remain cohesive and unified behind its cause. This support was not only manifested in the large number of people attending its protest activity but by the fact that Halwani since the establishment of the Committee was always elected as the leader of the Committee. This support strongly indicated that the families of the missing fully support the Committee's leadership and the way they were handling the affairs of the Committee.

Sectarian and political divisions that continued to divide the Lebanese after the end of the war and could have easily infiltrated among the members of the committee who came from different political and sectarian backgrounds. The Committee leadership acknowledged this threat and reacted by not taking any stand on sectarian or political issues that were not related to its cause.⁵⁰ Accordingly, the committee did not criticize or oppose the militias, successive Lebanese governments and Syria on issues that were not related to the issue of the missing. It claimed that revealing the truth should be looked at from the legal and social needs of the parents and the relatives of the missing people who have the right to know what happened to their beloved ones.⁵¹ Accordingly they always organized their protest in a way that will keep them away from those divisions.⁵² They never criticized any political group because of its sectarian or political agenda. Furthermore, most of their press releases took place in the headquarters of the Lebanese Press Syndicate, an organization famous of its neutrality. Furthermore, in all their protests they did not use any sectarian or political discourse or display banners in support of any political party or group in Lebanon.⁵³

The Committee's leadership managed to win the trust of the parents and families of the missing people. In all activities or protest organized by the committee, they were present with other members in the front lines without exception. With no doubt Halwani with the few committee's leaders have continuously played a major role in the ability of the Committee to sustain itself that long. Through direct day-to-day contact the committee's leadership was successful in building a strong relationship with the families of the disappeared based on trust.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the committee's leadership was successful to develop personal relationships with all those families. They regularly visited them on important social occasions.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the committee always showed support for these families and tried to help them when they faced financial or health problems.⁵⁶ In other words, they managed to create a sense of family bonding between them and the families of the missing people.

The common identity that the leadership managed to develop among the Committee's members made them overcome their class and sectarian differences and feel as one community who shares similar sufferings and has a common objective regardless of their sectarian backgrounds. The Committee always emphasized in its protests that it is a movement led by wives, mothers and children of the people who were missing and who only wants to know what happened to their loved ones.⁵⁷ The common social and economic effects of the disappearance of their loved ones on their lives has assisted the members to create a sense among the members.⁵⁸ The leadership of the Committee highlighted the fact that the families of the missing should know the truth about the crimes that happened and ways to achieve justice, understand the motives of the perpetrators, and most importantly the fate of their loved ones.⁵⁹ Forgetting without knowing what happened is against human nature something that the Committee was always emphasizing in its discourse.⁶⁰ As advocated by the committee to the members, this stems from the need to address a psychological state of mind that torments parents and relatives of the missing as long as the truth is not revealed and they have not experienced closure.⁶¹ The Committee always voiced to the parents of the missing that what they were looking for is very personal and knowing what happened to their loved ones will surely affect their day to day lives.⁶² Accordingly, the Committee's leadership repeatedly emphasized to the families and relatives

that they are victims on their own that they need to act collectively to reach the truth about what happened to their beloved ones.⁶³

Post-Civil War Years: 2005 to the present

The withdrawal of Syria following the assassination of Prime Minister Rafic Hariri raised the hopes of Committee members regarding advancing their cause and demands. Furthermore, 2005 witnessed an important development in terms of dealing with political killings in Lebanon namely with the establishment of the International Tribunal for Lebanon by the United Nations' Security Council. Nevertheless, these two developments did not lead to any major development on the issue of missing people. This tribunal was only tasked with finding the truth about the assassinations of Lebanon's Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and a few other leaders that took place after 2005. Its mandate did not extend to crimes that happened during the 1975-1990 war.

Furthermore, since the Syrian withdrawal, the Lebanese government has not seriously attempted to pressure the Syrian government to reveal the truth about those who disappeared and are believed to be held by the Syrian regime. The only attempt that was made took place in 2005, following the work of the official commission, the joint Lebanese-Syrian Commission, established to look into the cases of the Lebanese people reported to be missing in Syria. This commission met more than 30 times, yet no official report was produced on the issue of the missing people. The way it was formed and how it operated were highly criticized by the parents and relatives of the missing people. The committee was critical of the Commission since it believed it was not going to look into all the cases of people who disappeared due to the interference of Lebanese politicians.⁶⁴

Another source of contention that the Committee continued to target was the continued lack of interest of ex-militiamen to reveal the truth about what had happened to many of the people who were reported missing during the years of the civil war. Since the end of the war few combatants showed interest to publicly discuss what they did during the war. The first one to apologize and claim his responsibility was Walid Jumblat, the Druze leader. Jumblat in 1993 admitted publicly that he was directly and indirectly responsible for killings and mass destructions that were committed by his militia during the war. After the withdrawal of the Syrian troops from Lebanon, the willingness of more combatants to give their testimonies gave hope to the committee that some of these testimonies might give them clues about to the whereabouts of their beloved one.⁶⁵ Around 25 former combatants have written their testimonies of the war, since Syrian troops left Lebanon.⁶⁶ Furthermore, a large number of former combatants have spoken to the press about their personal experience during the war.⁶⁷ On the other hand, only very few have apologized publicly after Syria's withdrawal for what they did during the war. In 2008, following his release from prison, Geagea apologized for what he and his militia did during the war. Most of these accounts did not give specific information about the killings and the kidnappings by the former combatants.⁶⁸

Two former combatants went little a further than Jumblat and other ex-combatants in 2000: Assaad Chaftari and Muhieddine Chehab. Both were high ranking militia members fighting against each other during the war and in their own admission

committed many atrocities.⁶⁹ Although Chaftari admits to possessing information regarding mass graves as many other ex-combatants did, none are yet to ready reveal the information they have to an official side that can pursue these revelations in order to uncover the plight of the missing and kidnapped.⁷⁰ The fear of being considered a traitor by their community, if they were to reveal the location of mass-graves, or of retributions is a strong factor pushing them to hide the truth.⁷¹ So far the government, community leaders and ex-militia leaders have not taken the needed steps to provide ex-combatants with assurances that they will be protected if they reveal valuable information about the crimes they committed, the fate of the disappeared or the location of mass graves.

The committee did respond to the initiative of Chaftari and Muhiedine. They have since been coordinating with the Committee to help find a mechanism to enable former-militia members to reveal the truth regarding those who went missing during the war. This work has been taking place as part of joint initiatives they are working on with the Committee as both are members of a gathering of NGOs working to strengthen civil peace in Lebanon called 'Unity is Our Salvation' or *Wahdatuna Khalasuna*. One of the Gathering's goals is to address the unresolved issues of the 1975–1990 war. Furthermore, most of the work of Chaftari and many others like him have been focusing their efforts on raising awareness about the destructive nature of the war and on the need for alternatives to war to solve national conflicts.

During that period, the committee was not discouraged by the lack of responsiveness for the part of the Lebanese government and ex-militiamen. The committee then held a series of demonstrations in front of the UN house in Beirut and other public offices.⁷² It also organized many gatherings in public places all over Lebanon.⁷³ Nevertheless, these activities did not lead anywhere, as no changes occurred for the next several years. The reaction of the Lebanese authorities to the discovery of the Anjar mass grave that same year revealed that there was no major changes in the Lebanese government's policies towards revealing the truth about the missing people.⁷⁴

Adaptation: 2000 to the Present

The main challenge that the committee has faced since 2000 in addition to other challenges tackled by this article has been the demographic conditions of its members. The majority of the parents of the missing are now old and many others have died since it was established in 1982. Out of 130 representatives of the 130 families who constituted the core of the committee only 30 are still active or are fit enough to continue to be active.⁷⁵ This has affected to a certain extent the committee's organizational and mobilization capacity in the last few years.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the Committee managed to overcome this challenge by adapting its strategies of protest. It started to rely less on strikes and demonstrations and has focused its activities in areas that require less physical efforts from its members.⁷⁷

Since the end of the 1990s, the Committee has intensified its meetings with Lebanese political leaders. On 29 August 1999 the Committee met with Prime Minister Salim El Hoss and gave him a proposal to establish a committee that was expected to search for the truth on the missing people.⁷⁸ On 10 November 1999 the committee through the US ambassador in Lebanon sent a message to the US president Bill Clinton requesting his help to assist them in revealing the truth about their loved one.⁷⁹

The Committee also sent letters to Lebanon's main political parties like Hezbollah, the Lebanese Forces, the Kataeb and others, asking them to assist in revealing the truth.⁸⁰ On 5 May 2008 and shortly after his election as Lebanon's President, the Committee sent the new president an official letter requesting him to work to reveal the truth about the missing people. In addition, committee representatives met repeatedly with United Nations (UN) officials in Beirut to discuss the issue of the missing.⁸¹

Since 2007, the committee began to hold regular meetings with one of the most organized NGO working on the issue of the forced disappeared, SOLIDE that aimed at pressuring the Lebanese government to use its influence and relationship with Syria to reveal the truth about the Lebanese who are still in its prisons.⁸² The committee participated in the sit-in organized by SOLIDE in front of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) building in downtown Beirut in 2005. SOLIDE and the Committee pitched a tent in front of ESCWA which has been continually occupied by members of the two committees until the writing of this article. This sit-in kept the focus on the issue as many events were held in the same area. The tent location gave the parents an opportunity to be in touch with each other and discuss issues pertaining to their cause.

The close coordination between the committee and SOLIDE has led to major achievements. The first achievement happened in 2008 when the government pledged to follow up on the issue of the missing. Few months later, a national commission was formed that included SOLIDE, the committee, the Lebanese Center for Human Rights and the Parliamentary Committee of Human Rights. The objectives of this commission was to gather information on the disappeared and the missing people build a DNA and post-ante mortem data base and locate suspected sites of mass graves. Another achievement with SOLIDE was to prepare a draft law for the missing people and the disappeared in collaboration with Act of the Disappeared (NGO) with the assistance of The International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ). This draft law was produced following an extensive consultative process and later submitted to the Lebanese parliament.⁸³

Since 2000 the Committee has worked hard to strengthen its relationship with international governmental and non-governmental organizations. As far back as July 2000, the committee played an important role in establishing a network of local and international NGOs for the purpose of sharing resources, expertise and join forces to pressure the Lebanese government to assist in revealing the truth about the missing people and all the disappeared in Syria and Israel.⁸⁴ In a very significant move, the International Human Rights Committee of the United Nations allowed representatives from the Committee of the Missing people to brief the committee on what had been achieved on the issue of the disappeared and missing people in 2001.⁸⁵ In 2003, the International Red Cross invited the Committee to attend the International Conference on the forced disappeared and missing people it organized in Geneva.⁸⁶ Furthermore, the ICTJ supported the Committee with educational trips, as well as with a consultative process to develop the draft law on the subject of the missing and disappeared that was submitted to the Lebanese parliament. On the other hand, the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) at the request of the Committee and the Gathering *Wahdatuna Khalasuna*, launched a campaign to collect the DNA of families of the missing, a step that might assist in revealing the

truth about many of the missing whose remains might be discovered in many of the mass graves that were identified and are likely to be excavated once a decision is made to do so.

Furthermore, the committee started to hold more press conferences, approximately one press conference per month. It made sure that these press conferences were well attended and covered by Media officials. The committee saw an opportunity in the events that took place after 2005 and recognized that it is very important to make its voice heard at the local and international levels.⁸⁷

The Committee is aware that the time factor is not on its side and that soon several of the representatives of the families of the missing will die.⁸⁸ With no records of the Lebanese who went missing during the war, their case will be brought to an end since it will become difficult to know who went missing during the war.. It will become then difficult for the coming generations or other concerned NGOs or individuals to advocate the case of the missing people if these cases are not documented. Archiving will definitely help these newly founded organizations to advocate the cause of the missing people, like the organization Act for the Disappeared, founded in 2010. Accordingly, the committee worked hard to ensure that a mechanism is found to archive all the cases of Lebanese who went missing during the war.⁸⁹ They established strong links with project Memory at Work of the organization UMAM Documentation and Research that has been working since mid-2000 to document everything that took place during the Lebanese war.⁹⁰

The committee realized that it should focus its efforts on the legal process. Through the legal process it could oblige power holders in Lebanon to assist in revealing the truth about the missing. The committee since it was established had tried to cite Article 2.3 of the General Amnesty law to pressure the Lebanese government to disclose the fate of the missing people. This article considers that forced disappearance is considered an 'ongoing crime' until the victim or the victim's remains are found. The Lebanese judiciary has only considered and issued verdicts in two cases; one culminated in a reduced sentence of three years (December 2001) and the other acquitted three men accused of kidnapping (September 2013).⁹¹ Nevertheless, Lebanese judges have been reluctant to rule on cases of missing people not only because of the influence of politicians on them, but also because of the lack of definition in the Lebanese Penal Code for ongoing and repeated crimes. Most judges have been unwilling to include missing people cases as exceptions to the General Amnesty Law under this category.⁹²

The committee, after close coordination with two Lebanese NGOS, managed to elaborate a judicial interpretation of the amnesty law of 1991. This interpretation based on international law found that the missing people should be considered as forced disappeared and should not be covered by the amnesty the law of 1991. Accordingly, the government should be legally obliged to work on revealing the truth about the missing people.⁹³ Accordingly, a few families filed lawsuits in order to oblige the government to locate and protect three mass graves cited in the report of the Commission of 2000.⁹⁴ These efforts led in October 2009 to a decision by a Lebanese judge who ordered the Lebanese government to disclose the unpublished report of the Commission of 2000. The response of the Lebanese government did not fully conform to the wishes of the judge and only two short reports that did not fully reveal the findings of the commission were delivered.

The response of the government to the judge's decision did not discourage the committee from pursuing the legal option. After a hard campaign that targeted the first Chamber of State Council in Lebanon, one of the highest courts in Lebanon, the Chamber on 4 March 2014 issued a historic ruling that overturned the decision of the Lebanese government not to allow the relatives of the missing access to the dossiers and findings of the committees of 2000 and 2001. The Council based its ruling on the right of the families to know the truth about what happened to their beloved ones. According to the Council the right to know was considered a natural right derived from the right to life, the right to a decent life and the right to an appropriate burial, family rights and the respect of family re-union and institutions. According to Halwani, 'With no doubt this ruling will give the committee a strong incentive to continue its search, giving them the legal right to ask the Lebanese government and all who are held responsible for the disappearance of many Lebanese to tell them the truth about what happened to their loved ones'.⁹⁵

The committee's hopes were however soon confronted by a decision of the government to request from the Lebanese State Council to stop and retry its decision, claiming a threat to civil peace in case this information was to be provided to the families of the missing. The committee was quick to react and meet with the Prime Minister whose office had initiated this request. The committee also issued a press release supported by over 60 NGOs both local and regional strongly criticizing the government's decision.⁹⁶ These steps were sufficient to see the Lebanese State Council uphold its decision and enshrining the right to know in Lebanese law.⁹⁷

Conclusion

The Committee has remained committed to its cause for more than 30 years without bending to the difficult and dangerous conditions of the regional conflict that turned into a Lebanese civil war. Nor did it despair due to the lack of cooperation on the part of political leaders, ex-combatants and the international community to its initiatives and to the passive attitude of the majority of the Lebanese to its cause. It achieved what it achieved during those difficult years without being substantially supported or directly linked to the successive Lebanese governments, political parties, political elites, ex-militiamen, ex-combatants, religious authorities, the Lebanese society or the international community. Although the Committee had no sectarian discourse or affiliation in a country where sectarian affiliations take precedence over other social or political affiliations; its members and supporters were mostly women or the elderly in a society that is highly patriarchal; and did not provide social or political services to its supporters or to its members in a society where political support is mainly guaranteed through patronage, it managed to sustain its contentious campaign successfully for more than 30 years.

Bringing all families of the missing in a sustained collective action for around 30 years happened because the Committee managed to preserve its cohesiveness by sticking to its unchanged collective identity, to its well defined common purposes and agendas, and to its ability to surmount continuous collective challenges. In other words, it became a social and political force in Lebanon because it managed to mobilize a section of a society that was passive politically and socially, into a movement that demonstrated the properties of worthiness, unity and commitment to a cause.

The Committee has focused its activities mostly on peaceful contentious collective action as the basis of its movement since it was one of the only methods it could use against its stronger and much more powerful opponents and since its members lacked and continue to lack regular access to state institutions. It managed to build dense informal networks, forge alliances with other NGOs, locally and internationally and benefit from the different political opportunities that were appearing in Lebanon to improve its chances of having an impact on the issue of the missing people and truth finding. Nevertheless, the most important strategy that allowed to sustain itself for that long and allowed to meet the challenges it has been facing since the 2000s was by its ability to modify its protest methods and select the ones that suits best the demographic conditions of most of its members.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. The missing or disappeared are individuals who were kidnapped or abducted by the parties of the conflict and who never returned to their families and relatives. Their parents have no official confirmation of what had happened to them.
2. This article relies on a large number of primary sources, including interviews and the archives of newspapers to collect the data needed. Most of the positions and activities of the Committee are covered by the main Lebanese newspapers: *An Nahar*, *Al Safir*, *Al Bayrak*.
3. This study had delved into the archives of most Lebanese newspapers to discover the activities, protest and positions of the Committee from 1982 until today. The authors interviewed Ms Wadad Halwani on 9 April 2014. Ms. Halwani is the founder and the leader of the Committee since it was founded in early 1980s. She was the only member available for interview. Other members had either died or they were not available for interview for health reasons. Halwani attended most the meetings and protest activities organized by the committee since it was established.
4. See Julie M. Mazzei, 'Finding Shame in Truth: The Importance of Public Engagement in Truth Commissions', *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 33, N. 2 (May 2011), pp. 431–52; O. al Safa, 'Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation in the Arab World: The Work of Civil Society in Lebanon and Morocco', Berghof Research Centre, 2007; G.M. Steinberg, 'The Politics of NGOs, Human Rights and the Arab Israeli Conflict', *Israel Studies* Vol. 16, N. 2, (Summer 2011), pp. 24–54; G. Alther, 'Colombian peace communities: the role of NGOs in supporting resistance to violence and oppression', *Development in Practice*, Vol. 16, N. 3 and 4 (June 26), pp.278–91; V.F. Heinrich, 'The Role of NGOs in Strengthening the Foundations of South African Democracy', *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Non Profit Organization*, Vol. 12, N. 1 (2001), pp. 1–15; and L. Stan, 'Civil Society and Post Communist Transitional Justice in Romania', in *Transitional Justice and Civil Society in the Balkans*, O. Simie and Z. Volcic (eds) (New York: Springer Science, 2013), pp. 17–30.
5. For example see: L. Jaquemet, 'Fighting Amnesia: Ways to Uncover the Truth about Lebanon's Missing', *The International Journal for Transitional Justice*, Vol. 3 (2009), pp. 69–90 and S.Haugbolle, 'The Historiography of the memory of the Lebanese Civil War', (Paris: Science Po, October 25, 2011): http://www.massviolence.org/IMG/article_PDF/The-historiography-and-the-memory-of-the-Lebanese-civil-war.pdf.
6. *An Nahar*, 18 November 1982.
7. *Ibid*.
8. See Wadad Halwani, interview in *An Nahar* 18 November 1982:
9. Lebanese Centre for Human Rights, 'Lebanon Enforced Disappearances and Incommunicado Detentions', (Beirut: February 2008), pp. 16–17: <https://docs.google.com/a/cldh-lebanon.org/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=Y2xkaC1sZjWJhbm9uLm9yZ3xjbGRofGd4OjU5NTU2YjQzM2Y2ZjY3YTI>.

10. Ibid, pp. 16–17.
11. G. Corm, 'The War System: Militias Hegemony and Reestablishment of the State', in *Peace for Lebanon? From War to Reconstruction*, ed. Deirdre Collings, 215–230. (London: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 1994), p. 217. 'Document: Liban – L' Argent des Milices', *Les Cahiers de L'Orient: Revue D'Etude et de Reflexion Sur Le Liban et Le Monde Arabe* no. 10 (Deuxieme Trimestre, 1988), pp. 271–87; K.I A. Beyoghlow, 'Lebanon's New Leaders: Militias in Politics', *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 12, no. 3 (Spring 1989), pp. 28–36.
12. Ibid.
13. B. Labaki, and K. Abou Rjeily. *Bilan Des Guerres Du Liban: 1975-1990* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993).
14. *Al Safir* 18 January 1983
15. *Al Safir* 23 January 1983.
16. *Al Safir*, 21 December 1982. *Al Safir*, 5 December, 1982.
17. *Al Safir*, 11 December 1982, *Al Safir*, 12 December 1982.
18. Ibid.
19. *Al Safir* 25 May 1987.
20. Wadad Halwani interview by author on 9 April 2014.
21. Halwani, 2014.
22. Ibid.
23. Halwani, 2014.
24. Ibid.
25. The *Taif* accord was reached in 1990 between the diverse warring factions in Lebanon under the sponsorship of Saudi Arabia, the United States and Syria. This agreement amended the constitution of the country, redistributing power, laying the political foundations of the post-war Lebanon.
26. *An Nahar*, 20 May 1991.
27. Halwani, 2014.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Lebanese Centre for Human Rights, 2008.
36. Halwani, 2014 and Lebanese Centre for Human Rights, 2008.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. *An Nahar* 13 April 2000.
40. Halwani, 2014.
41. Lebanese Centre for Human Rights, 2008, p. 29.
42. Ibid.
43. *An Nahar*, 28 September 2000.
44. *Al Safir* 26 July 2000.
45. Ibid.
46. Halwani, 2014.
47. Lebanese Centre for Human Rights, 2008 and *Al Safir* 8 December 2001.
48. Ibid.
49. *Al Safir* 12 June 2001 and *An Nahar* 24 December 2001.
50. ICRC, 'The Families of the People Missing in Connection with the Armed Conflicts that have occurred in Lebanon since 1975: An Assessment of their Needs' (Beirut: May 2013) and Halwani, 2014.
51. Ibid.
52. Halwani, 2014.
53. Ibid.
54. ICRC, 'The Families of the People Missing in Connection with the Armed Conflicts that have occurred in Lebanon since 1975: An Assessment of their Needs' (Beirut: May 2013) and Halwani, 2014.

55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. L. Maalouf, 'Enforced disappearances in Lebanon: a nation's unyielding legacy' (Beirut, July, 2009): http://www.actforthedisappeared.com/assets/documents/Report/Article_LynnMaalouf_ENG.pdf.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid.
64. Halwani, 2014.
65. Ibid.
66. Haugbolle, 2011.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid.
69. For Chaftari's letter of apology see *An Nahar*, 10 February 2000.
70. Assaad Chaftari, interview in *An Nahar*, 9 May 2000.
71. Ibid.
72. *An Nahar*, 12 October 2005.
73. *An Nahar*, 27 April 2011, *An Nahar*, 28 March 2008, *An Nahar*, 12 April 2007.
74. Anjar's mass grave was discovered few meters away from the headquarters of the Syrian Intelligence Services. The Lebanese authorities claimed that the remains in Anjar were not for people who went missing during the years of the civil war, but were remains that dated back to the Ottoman period. The committee doubted if DNA tests were made in the first place as claimed by the Commission in-charge. The committee claimed, based on testimonies from witnesses who lived in the surrounding areas or individuals who claimed that they were detained there, that the remains found in Anjar were actually the remains of Lebanese who were detained and later killed at the hands of the Syrian forces.
75. Halwani, 2014.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
78. *An Nahar*, 30 August 1999.
79. *Al Safir*, 11 November 1999
80. *An Nahar*, 4 July 2008, *Al Bayrak*, 22 January 2010, *Al Safir*, 18 March 2011.
81. *An Nahar*, 16 January 1993.
82. Halwani, 2014.
83. Ibid.
84. *An Nahar*, 14 July 2000.
85. *An Nahar*, 15 March 2001.
86. See *An Nahar*, 20 February 2003.
87. See position of the Committee in *An Nahar*, 12 December 2005, 12 March 2006, *An Nahar*, 12 April 2007, *An Nahar*, 27 February 2007, *An Nahar*, 16 August 2008.
88. Halwani, 2014.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid.
91. International Center for Transitional Justice, 'Failing to Deal with the Past: What Cost to Lebanon', Beirut: January 2014): <http://ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Lebanon-Impunity-Report-2014.pdf>.
92. Ibid.
93. Lebanese Centre for Human Rights, 2008.
94. Ibid.
95. Halwani, 2014.
96. 'Civil Society Backs Families of Missing After Calls to Reconsider Lebanese State Council Decision' The Legal Agenda (June 11, 2014): <http://english.legal-agenda.com/newsarticle.php?id=2&lang=en>.
97. Ibid.