

Wadad Halawani: Lebanon's War Memory

[Saada Allaw](#)

2019-01-21



Editor's note: On 12 November 2018, after a debate that lasted about an hour and a half, Lebanese parliament ratified a draft law on the missing and forcibly disappeared. The ratification was one more step forward on the long journey of the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon. The most important part of the law is the "right to know" for families of the missing and forcibly disappeared, along the lines of the State Shura Council's renowned decision issued on 4 March 2014.

In this respect, the draft law represents a rectification of great significance to the legislation relating to war crimes. The choice taken in the wake of the war not only suppressed criminal responsibilities through amnesty (which may be understandable)

but also facts, remembrance, and victims' rights too. After the 1991 legislator chose to treat the remnants of war with oblivion, disregarding the minimum conditions of justice, the 2018 legislator came to establish justice for the victims, albeit the Amnesty Law still reflects a waiver of criminal justice.

Thus, it is hoped that this law – if applied properly – would reveal a forgotten aspect erased from the war: the victims who died during the war. In this sense, it constitutes a road map to purify and unify our memory. Today, the collective memory of Lebanese people is dominated by hero figures (lords of war that have mostly transformed into leaders in times of peace). It is a sectarian and selective memory that increases division and polarization. It is hoped that this law will lead us in a completely opposite direction: to remember the victims' suffering and tragedies. Rather than being a reason to fear more sectarian feuds, such acts of remembrance – tugging at the strings of conscience and human emotions – are hoped to lead us to convergence and mutual sympathy for a national unifying memory. In celebration of this law, The Legal Agenda extends special greetings to Wadad Halawani.

One thing is certain: on 12 November 2018, Wadad Halawani was not alone when celebrations were held to pay tribute to her 36 years of struggle in the case of the Lebanese war's missing and the forcibly disappeared. When Halawani heard Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri say “ratified” on the draft law, tears streamed down the face of the tiny woman who had moved heaven and earth in the country for the past 36 years, steadfastly advocating for families of the missing to know the fate of their loved ones. She cried as everyone around her, from friends to supporters who wanted to stand by her side at this historic moment, clapped for her. Members of parliament all stood and gave a round of applause for the woman who honored them with her presence.

Halawani's supporters had never seen her tears before – not since the afternoon of 24 September 1982, when her husband Adnan Halawani disappeared. Her tears finally flowed, signalling the end of a stage of struggle over the missing, and the beginning of a new phase.

She must have remembered those moments that afternoon. She was making a dish of kibbeh for her husband and two sons Ziyad and Ghassan. There was knocking on the door. Her son Ziyad opened the door to find two men claiming to be from the “government”. Ziyad returned to watching TV with his brother in their room, while Wadad followed the two armed men down the stairs of the building with her hands covered in bulgur, asking what was going on. She heard Adnan's voice telling her, “Don't worry, I'll be back in five minutes” – a promise he never kept. Strangely, the man who loved, spoiled, and made her “a happy woman who does not even have to worry about buying her own pack of cigarettes” had never broken a promise before. She says: “He was bearing most of our responsibilities; I'm not the same woman I was when he disappeared”.

Today, Halwani and her supporters in the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared can commemorate the 36th anniversary of their work with a clear conscience. Priority will be given to the completion of the law that enshrines the right for families of the missing to know the fate of their loved ones, and the formation of the National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared. This law comes as rectification – albeit late and partial – for the general amnesty that benefited all warlords who were not asked to offer anything to their victims, not even a shred of information. They didn't even provide an answer to the question: "Where are they?" The only answer they gave was: "They have died"; a general answer to the question raised about every missing person, regardless of the group that committed the kidnapping, without providing any details, and most importantly without any proof.

The Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared was born from the whirlwind that Halawani made after the disappearance of her husband, running from one police station and official to another. All she heard was: "Many people are in the same situation as you". In the 80s, President Amine Gemayel was surprised when he saw Halawani's petite figure standing right in front of him at the presidential palace. Her clothes stained with soot after she and the mothers and sisters of the missing had closed the checkpoints on the frontline between East and West Beirut by burning tires. On that day, Dar al-Fatwa's Mufti escorted her to the presidential palace to meet with the president, after authorities informed him that a "tiny" woman was behind the smoke of burning tires at the crossings. When a meeting between Gemayel and Halawani was facilitated, Gemayel said to her: "So it is you who's blocking the roads?"

In her search for the "many people" who were in the same situation as her, Halawani left her school in Burj Abu Haidar and went to the radio station of one of the militias, al-Mourabitoun, to issue a call "to those who have someone missing in the war" to meet up with her in front of the Abdel Nasser Mosque on the Corniche El Mazraa on the afternoon of 27 November 1982. Hurrying after her working hours at the school to get to the meeting, Halwani thought she would find only four to five people waiting for her. From Ras El Zaroub leading to the mosque, she saw a crowd of at least 200 people, mostly women and children. The petite woman searched for a stone on the side of the road to stand on so that everyone could see her, and she addressed the crowd, calling for a march towards the governmental palace, in the Sanayeh area at the time.

On that day, Lebanon declared a state of emergency and prohibited demonstrations. Halawani and the women of the committee she had just formed ignored the curfew decision and were confronted by the police. The rounds back and forth with security forces ended with Prime Minister Shafik Wazzan accepting to meet them. The women came out of the meeting disappointed after he told them: "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak". On that day, Halawani became all the more determined and no longer looked just for Adnan. All the missing had turned into Adnan, be it a father, husband, brother, sister, son, or daughter.

The next day, the front page of Beirut newspapers featured the women of Lebanon confronting security forces. It was the first time women took to the streets, not to demand and defend women's rights, but to stop the war and demand the return of their children; more importantly, the families' right to know the fate of the missing.

For 36 years, Halawani has remained outside the classic struggle pattern of committees and associations. She and the committee did not have an office to start with. She was the office, and carried files, papers and pictures stacked under her arm wherever she went. Her big heart was still laden with tales and stories of comrades in a painstaking search that seemed useless. Most of them have passed away now, while those who remain continue on their search.

Halawani ran back and forth at local and international levels. She left no door unopened that was consistent with her cause and goals. She, along with a group from the committee and her friends and supporters, used diverse and effective methods of advocacy for their cause. She sought the administrative judiciary to compel the state to hand over the investigation file of the committee that was formed to reveal the fate of the missing. The file was as empty as the hearts and consciences of an authority that hadn't extended a helping hand to those suffering throughout decades of waiting. All they came out with was a solution that would comfort them rather than comfort the families of the missing: they developed a legal mechanism that enables the families to declare their missing dead in order to close the file and put the past behind them. What they failed to realize was that a right sought after will never be lost; let alone one sought by none other than Wadad Halawani and her supporters.

Now that she has reached her goal, a law that sets out a mechanism to reveal the fate of the missing and the forcibly disappeared, will she finally have peace of mind?

Her beautiful old face and her bright eyes say that the actual battle has only now begun. The Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared has torn the law out of the hands of the warlords, and now is the time to set a clear and precise plan for its implementation and application at all costs so that it won't end up back in the drawers like most laws.

Oh Wadad, it is your fate to keep fighting for a hundred years: an age we wish we could live to, not so we can still have a lovely person like you among us, but so we can learn more lessons in struggle and persistence. Defeat is not destiny, and a right remains so however long it takes to acquire it.