

Resurrecting the 'disappeared'

by Michael Young

When Lebanon's wars ended in 1990, it was apparent that a sizable cornucopia of scoundrels was among the winners. Among the losers were 17,415 individuals who, during the protracted requiem of the war years, vanished into an enduring, largely forgotten void. Despite a fondness for transparency, the present regime has been as opaque on the fate of Lebanon's disappeared as was the plutocracy under Rafik Hariri. One group would like to change this.

As long ago as October 1982, some may recall, a group calling itself the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped was formed to secure the release of those individuals who had been abducted by the forces – legal and illegal – that roamed the alleyways in those spirited days. That the committee still exists is striking, as few things endure in this most frivolous of societies. Yet it endures because the disappeared remain unaccounted for, and the grandees of the republic have never bothered to inquire what happened.

What happened is no longer a matter of conjecture. Relatively few people believe that the disappeared are alive. Indeed, in February 1995 the public had it on no less an authority than Nabih Berri that all were dead. A majority of committee members obstinately reject this view, however, since, as the father of one victim put it, "where do you hide 17,000 corpses?" It is no mean feat, one responds with reluctance, to conceal 17,000 living humans either.

On Friday, the committee, which has since renamed itself the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and the Disappeared in Lebanon, announced the start of a new campaign, suitably entitled: "It is our right to know." It has enlisted the help of a well-known activist, Paul Ashqar, who previously organized a national petition demanding the holding of municipal elections. And it has set up a Friends Committee to mobilize the support of individuals and organizations wanting to assist in its campaign.

The committee's demands are three: that the authorities set up a commission of inquiry to determine the fate of the disappeared, and that its results be made public within a year; that a social program be set up to relieve the needier families of those abducted; and that April 13 be declared a Day for Memory and the Disappeared, and that a memorial be built. For those who have followed the committee's progress, the demands are a sensible step backwards from previous conditions.

Markedly, the committee no longer insists, as it once did, that the government pronounce the disappeared collectively dead, if indeed that is what a commission of inquiry rules. Such a declaration would, among other things, place the government on a collision

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course with the Muslim religious courts, which have jurisdiction over personal status matters, specifically inheritance.

In 1995, Parliament approved a law accelerating the time period required to have an absent relative legally declared dead. This was met with howls of protest from the families, who retorted that it was up to the state, not them, to legally "kill" their abducted relatives. The authorities disregard this, however, wishing to avoid the backlash that would have accompanied an obvious encroachment on the prerogatives of the Muslim religious courts.

The committee has also dropped a demand that the families of kidnapped public servants be compensated by the state and receive back pay. This was never acceptable to the government anyway, as it would have opened up a Pandora's box of claims that the authorities have little practical ability to honor. Instead, the committee replaced it with the proposal to set up a social program, though nowhere did it request that the state finance it.

Formal demands aside, the most contentious of the committee's invocations has also been brushed under the rug. From the outset, the families of the disappeared have been of two minds on the question of retribution against those responsible for the death of their loved ones. Most would doubtless delight in seeing their tormentors – particularly those in positions of authority – thrown to the wolves. However, the state has always rejected such an alternative and the general amnesty law makes it unrealizable.

That is why the committee asserts today that it is not after revenge, but information. That and the construction of a permanent marker that will point an accusatory finger in the direction of the former militiamen who have, since war's end, become pillars of the postwar establishment. The demand is subtle because the symbol is a powerful one, which officials cannot easily reject for fear of appearing to abet the sundry assassins in their midst.

The state prefers a serene status quo, based on the incorporation of wartime leaders into the political hierarchy, to a potentially destabilizing search for the truth. However, a Lebanese version of South Africa's Truth Commission would be a bad idea, as would a partial lifting of the amnesty law. Yet if Nabih Berri can declare that those abducted are dead, surely a commission of inquiry can announce, more modestly, that no individuals have been found alive, while avoiding a generalized declaration of death.

This legal conundrum neatly sidestepped, the government could then set aside a lucrative plot of land it owns in one of Beirut's busier sectors for the building of a memorial to the disappeared. The dossier would, thus, be conveniently closed, Lebanon could pursue its divinely-inspired destiny to make money, and 17,415 individuals would remind us no more of this country's formidable ability to devour its own children.

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