

LEBANON STRUGGLES WITH FATE OF THE MISSING (For use by New York Times Syndicate/News Service clients as desired) (RANA EL-FIL is a master's degree candidate at the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University.)

By RANA EL-FIL

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Wadad Halwani recalls the day in 1982 when armed men took her husband, Adnan, from their apartment, they said, to investigate a car accident. Halwani never considered that would be the last time she would see him.

Like families of thousands who disappeared during the 15-year Lebanese civil war, Halwani continues to look for answers. A decade after the war ended, Lebanese authorities have offered few.

For years, the government ignored the problem. Families thought they had reason for hope last year, when a government commission was formed to investigate. But after seven months, the inquiry ended with a pronouncement that all missing were dead. The government this year opened a new inquiry, but families remain skeptical.

Through it all, Halwani and others have pushed on with their own efforts to know the truth.

Halwani's search started the morning after the gunmen made off with Adnan. When the first night passed without his return, Halwani realized he had been kidnapped. She could learn nothing from authorities other than the fact that others were also searching for loved ones. She decided to try to join forces with them.

Halwani placed a short radio advertisement inviting other families to a meeting. "I had in mind to find two or three

With that meeting, Halwani founded the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped, aiming to pressure authorities to investigate the fate of the missing.

The Lebanese government had estimated the number of the missing at the end of the civil war at 17,415, of whom 13,968 are Lebanese. There are 168 missing persons whose families believe they are in Syria and 216 whose families contend they are in Israel. Syria has denied having any of them while Israel has acknowledged detaining 19 people.

The commission created last year by former Prime Minister Selim Al-Hoss to find the missing left families with many nagging questions. It presented the results of its investigation in two pages that did not produce any evidence.

Habib Nassar, a lawyer and advocate for the families of the disappeared.

some Halwani

The commission did investigate with former militias but they all denied kidnapping people, said former Prime Minister Selim Al-Hoss

Al-Hoss pointed out that the report considered the missing to be dead, conforming to a Lebanese law, which stipulates that any person who remains missing for more than four years is considered dead.

For Najat Nouchi, whose brother Houssam was kidnapped on a checkpoint in 1982, the results of the report were

Leila Gadaa last saw her son Semaan, a computer student at the American University of Beirut, in 1985. Her voice still trembles and her eyes dampen as she recalls the details. A Red Cross volunteer, he was kidnapped at a checkpoint after rescuing people injured by two explosions.

Gadaa

Nassar said.

Still, new doubts about the report emerged last year when Syrian authorities released 54 Lebanese prisoners, two of whom had been declared dead in the report. The Syrians had informed the commission that they did not have them.

trying to heal our wounds after the first report declared them all dead when suddenly the government announced
Halwani

issue of the persons whose families say they are i

The issue of prisoners held in Syria has provided ammunition to those who resent Syrian presence in Lebanon. Lebanese frustration with Syrian control of their country has intensified since Israel pulled out its troops from Lebanon last year. Syria says that it will only withdraw its troops from Lebanon, which it entered in 1976, after an

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official demand. But all major political figures in Lebanon have strong ties to Syria and any such demand is seen as unlikely.

Fatima Jarbough, a Palestinian, recalls the day in 1985 when she sent her 15-year old son to buy bread. When he was late in returning, his 22-year old brother went to look for him. Neither came back. She is convinced that the Amal

Syrians have denied detaining her sons. But when a former prisoner in Syria told her that he was in the same cell did not have him, but

Jarbough

Hoss

Families of the missing are concerned that the government did not include on the new commission representatives of the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped, the United Nations or another international monitoring organization. They were encouraged, though, that the commission includes Abdul-Salam Choueib, a representative of the Beirut Bar Association, whom they trust to provide accurate information.

Choueib

Choueib said.

Unlike the previous one, the new commission will investigate cases only if families can produce evidence that the disappeared are still alive.

Kamal Maarouf, a Palestinian, clings to two pieces of paper that he believes will help him file the demand: a newspaper article mentioning his name among the kidnapped and a UNICEF letter confirming that his son worked for the organization.

He recalls how in 1982 the Lebanese Forces militia forced its way into his building and round up all men and boys. The militia handed him to the Israelis who released him few hours later while it took his 18-year old son to an unknown destination. He has been waiting for his return since.

Staring intently into space, Maarouf

Families cling to anything that might give them the slightest hope that their missing loved one is alive. When a picture of an Israeli prison published in a German newspaper found its way to Lebanon, all families thought that they recognized a son or husband among the prisoners.

Nassar said.

is no cemetery they can visit, no grave under which they can be sure that their son is buried, they will not accept

Halwani

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