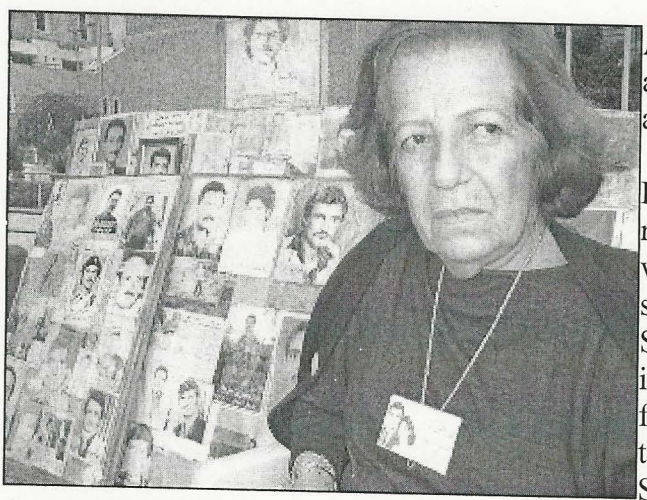
2006 0102-0001a-r

Mothers Press Issues of War That Lebanese Want to Forget
Loved Ones Still Missing From Years of Conflict
By Anthony Shadid
Washington Post Foreign Service
Monday, January 2, 2006

BEIRUT, On this morning, as on every morning since Oct. 17, 1985, Odette Salem cleaned the rooms of her son and daughter. She left his razor, toothbrush and comb as they were on the day her children were abducted from the streets of Beirut during Lebanon's civil war. She fiddled with her daughter's makeup and straightened her bed. She dusted the three guitars, the papers still on their desks and the pack that holds a 20-year-old cigarette, the artifacts of two lives interrupted.

"Everything is there as they left it," she said. "I haven't changed a thing, nothing at all. It's all still there."



At 70, quiet but determined, Salem is a woman who clings to memories in a country that prefers to forget.

In the heart of downtown Beirut, ravaged by a brutal 15-year civil war, then rebuilt into a graceful, if somewhat soulless, urban hub, Salem joins other women every day in a protest demanding to know the fate of their children. Many believe they languish in jails in neighboring Syria. Others are not sure. Behind them, their children's faces stare from pictures tacked to billboards, blank faces with generation-old haircuts, the dates of their disappearances reading like a war memorial yet to be built.

The protest by Salem and dozens of other mothers serves as a stark reminder, organizers say, that Lebanese society has yet to confront, much less resolve, the legacy of the most cataclysmic event in its modern history, the 1975-90 civil war. Fifteen years later, that conflict is still shrouded in silence. Under a 1991 amnesty law, all but a handful of killings were placed beyond prosecution. History textbooks address nothing more recent than 1975. And many factional warlords serve in government, their portraits staring down on streets they once wrecked.

"When you discuss the truth and you know the truth ... who was responsible, who prolonged the war ... then you can have true reconciliation. The door to bring in a new generation is to find out what happened in Lebanon," said Ghazi Aad, who heads Solide, an acronym for Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile, the group that has led the protest since April 11 in downtown Beirut. "Without that, you're just sweeping the dust under the rug. You cannot reconcile when you don't know what happened."

20060102-0001b-2

The protest's longevity reflects the changes unleashed by the departure of Syrian troops last spring after a 29-year presence. It is a sign of new transparency in public discourse as Lebanon, still deeply fractured along the lines of its Christian and Muslim sects, struggles to craft an alternative to the old Syrian order. Under the former system, Syria exercised the last word on virtually everything in the country, and its security services, along with their Lebanese allies, enforced compliance through arrests, intimidation and patronage. But now, long-discouraged subjects, including the perhaps more than 600 Lebanese taken to Syrian jails, are now being aired as calls for accountability have mounted.

'It's in Us to Hope'

At the protest in Jibran Khalil Jibran Park, staffed 24 hours a day, women wear name tags with their relatives' pictures, next to the words "How long?" In a tidy tent where the women sleep, a poster reads, "She's waited for him for 20 years." Next to the green canvas tent are the relatives' pictures, some so faded by time as to be barely recognizable.

"It's in us to hope," Salem said, sitting on a plastic chair next to the tent, sipping bitter coffee. "That is what a mother does."

Her children, Richard and Christine, were abducted on a road in West Beirut, probably at a checkpoint, as they drove home in an orange Volkswagen for lunch. Their mother had prepared a dish of rice and a stew of peas, carrots and potatoes. She waited, then contacted friends, who visited hospitals, restaurants, political parties and others with connections. Then she kept waiting.

Twenty years later, last spring, a former Iraqi intelligence officer released from a Syrian prison visited the Beirut protest. He gazed at the pictures, Salem said, then stopped at a photo of Richard. He had seen him in 1992 in Tadmur, one of Syria's worst jails.

"Hope is durable," Aad said. "It's so durable because they don't have an answer."

At the start of the protest, Aad had the names of 280 people who had disappeared and were perhaps in Syrian jails. Since then, more families have come forward, bringing the number to 643. Hundreds of other cases remain unresolved by families who believe their relatives were detained by Israeli or allied forces in southern Lebanon during its occupation, which ended in 2000. (Only one Lebanese detainee officially remains in an Israeli prison.) Both numbers pale before the 17,000 still unaccounted for from the civil war itself. But for Aad and others, the detainees in Syria, mostly unacknowledged by its government, remain the most pressing.

"There are people who are still alive in Syria," he said. "It's a matter of the living."

Some of the answers may rest beneath the deep brown soil of Majdal Anjar, where Syria once maintained a de facto headquarters for its presence in eastern Lebanon. There, last month, a shallow grave that many had long looked at with suspicion was unearthed on a hill overlooking the Bekaa Valley, with as many as 30 corpses. Some of the bodies exhumed from two sites near a yellow swing set, green slide and

abandoned mosque, a short way from a cluster of olive trees, still had traces of clothing and military uniforms.

The town's mayor, Shaaban Ajami, said he had known about the grave since 1999, "but they told me, 'Don't say a word.'"

"There are still more bodies," Ajami said, nodding his head.
Amnesty International criticized the exhumation as unprofessional. On a visit after the search was finished, a reporter for the Daily Star, an English-language newspaper here, found bones still strewn across the hilltop. Some activists suspect the government is wary of making too large an issue of it, willing to unearth the grave to perhaps put more pressure on Syria, but not to risk furthering demands by victims' families to unearth civil war-era mass graves that still litter the country.

"You can't just open this mass grave and say that's it," said Habib Nassar, a human rights lawyer in Beirut. "Are you ready to open all the mass graves? You can't make a distinction between the Syrians and all the other factions involved in the war."

"I think now they'll even forget Anjar," he added. "They're afraid they'll open a Pandora's box."

For a country of 3.8 million, Lebanon's civil war exacted a breathtaking toll. Official figures put the dead at more than 144,000 and the wounded at more than 184,000. Nearly 13,000 were abducted, and more than 17,000 remain missing. The task of addressing the war's legacy has fallen to a handful of intellectuals. A conference, "Memory for the Future," was organized in 2001. But its proposals , a war memorial, for instance , are overshadowed by what some activists call officially sanctioned amnesia.

The amnesty law meant that none of the warlords were prosecuted, save Samir Geagea, a Christian leader opposed to Syria at a time when it controlled the country's politics. (He was released in July after 11 years in prison.) Government efforts have been directed more at closing cases by declaring the missing dead than in determining their whereabouts. One committee formed in 2001 to look into the missing never released a report; its chairman said he was pressured by pro-Syrian officials. A Syrian-Lebanese committee was formed last year, charged with resolving the fate of missing in each country's jails, but has yet to issue any findings.

"The reason why the problem was never solved was precisely because the perpetrators have been in power since the war and Syria was in control of the country. It was not in their interest to find a solution," Nassar said.

"All the factions, without exception, committed atrocities," he added. "They are united in their atrocities."

The civil war remains such a contentious subject that few Lebanese even agree on its name. To some, it is "the Lebanese war." Others call it "the Lebanese wars" to signify the separate battles that occurred, with the involvement of Israelis, Syrians, Americans, Palestinians, Iraqis and so on. For others, it is "the events" or "the

sectarian war" or, in a phrase coined by a prominent journalist and intellectual, "the war of others on our territory."

Fawaz Trabulsi, a professor at the Lebanese American University, is among those who have promoted a reckoning with the conflict. That process, he said, should be less an accounting of the crimes and more an understanding of the war's origins and consequences, drawing on its potential lessons. He said a South African-style Truth and Reconciliation Commission would only exacerbate Lebanon's divisions. Crimes would be attributed not to individuals, he said, but to the community they represent.

"Whom do you judge, whom do you punish in a civil war? It's not Nuremberg," he said. "The point I want to make is that perhaps the most important thing is to remember the most basic things about the war , its causes, its history and its lessons." The protest in downtown Beirut, he said, "is to tell us there's something wrong with the way the war is being treated."

'No Justice Without Truth'

Some activists in Lebanon point out that it took Germans a generation to grapple with the legacy of World War II and Nazi rule. Russia remains tentative in exploring its communist era. In the Middle East, attempts to account for the Arab world's authoritarian past are few. In a groundbreaking report last month, a truth commission in Morocco, established by the country's monarch, King Mohammed VI, investigated more than four decades of human rights abuses committed during the reign of his father.

In Lebanon, some believe the end of Syrian domination last year has created unprecedented space to discuss the civil war's legacy. One lawmaker, Ghassan Moukheiber, has suggested forming a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Unlike Trabulsi, he said he believes the government should attempt to unearth the dozens, perhaps hundreds, of mass graves in the country. The commission would oversee the technical process of exhuming the bodies, manage the investigations, administer any trials that might result and attempt to forge some kind of reconciliation. He acknowledged that not everyone is enthusiastic about the prospect.

"Memory is antidote to repetition of the wars," said Moukheiber, who heads parliament's human rights committee. "There can be no justice without truth and no justice without reconciliation." But he added, "It would take a lot of tap dancing."

In her office in downtown Beirut, Wadad Halwani expressed her frustration with the reservations about uncovering the past. On Sept. 24, 1982, as she and her husband prepared a traditional dish of ground meat, sipping beer while they cooked, two men came to their apartment. They took her husband, holding pistols to his head, and forced him into a white Peugeot.

A brief investigation, they assured her.

"Five minutes turned into this," she said.

She heads a group, which she formed months after her husband's abduction that represents the families of people missing since the war. Rationally, she said, she understands he could not be alive. But at times, she wonders. When a list of Lebanese

2.0.6.0.1.0.2-0.0.0.1.E.-.2

prisoners freed from Israeli jails in 2004 circulated on the Internet, she scanned the names for relatives of members of her group. As she read, she caught herself. She realized that part of her , as she put it, "a place deep inside" , was still looking for her husband's name.

"We have the right to know their fate," Halwani said. Her eyes glistened, slightly.

"You won't reopen the wounds of the war," she said. "The wounds of the war haven't healed."

Top picture: Sit- in tent in front of UN building in Beirut
Lower picture: Audette Salem standing next to the poster on the the missing Lebanese