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## 40 years on: Lebanon's missing open 'old wounds' of war

*Thousands of families still seek answers on the fate of loved ones, despite government's failure to address the issue.*



Families have been pushing for a draft law to be passed that forces people involved in the civil war to come forward with any information about the missing [Getty Images]

By **Nour Samaha**

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**Beirut** – September 17, 1982, is a day Sobhiyeh Harb will always remember.

On that day, her 18-year-old son, Imad Arzouni, disappeared. Harb, in her late 60s, recalls vividly that he left the house in west Beirut and crossed into Achrafiyeh in east Beirut to get bread. That was the last time his family ever saw him.

“When he didn’t come home, we began asking around if anyone had seen him,” Harb told Al Jazeera. “The people at the bakery were too afraid to speak.

“He was so sweet, such a good person. He took care of us, made sure we were okay,” Harb said, as tears filled her eyes.

As Lebanon commemorates the anniversary of the start of its civil war (April 1975 to October 1990), families of around 17,000 Lebanese who either disappeared or were kidnapped during the war, are once again asking the government to help them find answers.

“You know, it’s much harder today [to deal with the situation]. At least back then I had hope. Now after decades have passed, there is no hope at all,” Harb said.

In September 1982, Lebanon, in the throes of the civil war, was divided between the Lebanese Front, which consisted of mostly Christian militias, and the National Front, which included secular forces and Muslim militias.

Beirut had become split along these lines; the Christians dominated the eastern parts of the city, while Muslim and secular militias took over the western neighbourhoods. Political-sectarian militias divided up the neighbourhoods and set up checkpoints, where tit-for-tat kidnappings and executions took place on a regular basis.

Israel had invaded Lebanon from the south and occupied Beirut, while Syrian troops were deployed in Lebanon under the cover of an Arab League peacekeeping mission.

Harb’s story is not unique. Nazira Habbal’s son, Fadi, went missing in February 1983 after he was detained at the notorious Barbara checkpoint manned by the Lebanese Forces – a Christian militia on the coastal highway in northern Lebanon.

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BY JUSTINE DI MAYO HOURY, DIRECTOR OF ACT FOR THE DISAPPEARED

The 18-year-old was travelling from Sidon to the Nahr el-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in Tripoli to collect weapons. “He was fighting Israel; that was his fight,” Habbal told Al Jazeera.

“He used to come home every week to get his clothes cleaned and see the family. When he didn’t come home, that’s when we found out he had been kidnapped by the Lebanese Forces.”

She spent years asking different militia leaders, political figures and military personnel about the fate of her son. Carrying a passport picture of him in her wallet, she would show whomever she could, hoping they might have answers.

Habbal was able to determine he was being held by the Lebanese Forces, but after a few years he was handed over to army intelligence. But no one in the military could confirm he was with them. It was only about eight years ago that she found out he had been held in a Syrian prison near Aleppo.

“Why did they hand him over to the Syrians? He’s not Syrian, he’s Lebanese,” she said, fingering the faded passport photo of him she still carries in her wallet. “He was fighting with the Palestinians against the Israeli occupation.”

According to ACT for the Disappeared, a local non-governmental organisation that works on documenting the fate of the missing as well as providing support to the families, the government has failed to tackle the issue of the missing seriously.

“They’ve adopted the policy of amnesia when it comes to dealing with the civil war. They’re afraid of opening old wounds or reigniting tensions,” explained Justine di Mayo Houry, director of ACT. “You have to remember as well, the main decision-makers in this country are all responsible for the killings; they were the ones in charge of the militias at the time.”

Families have been pushing for a draft law to be passed that forces people involved in the civil war to come forward with any information they may have on the fate of the missing, with the guarantee of immunity against arrest or prosecution.

In 2000, after pressure from civil society activists, the government created a committee to probe the fate of the missing. Six months later, a two-page report was published declaring that all those missing were presumed dead and probably buried in mass graves.

The government then created another commission in 2001 to look into cases of those detained in Syria. Syrian authorities, however, denied the issue. Following the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon in 2005, a similar attempt was made when the Lebanese government set up a joint commission with Syria to investigate the issue of Lebanese detainees in Syrian prisons. Families of the missing submitted their names, but this yielded no results, as the Syrian authorities continued their denial.

“It’s a joke. All these efforts executed by the state are meant to close the file,” said Houry.

Finally, in 2014, Lebanon’s Shura Council passed a landmark ruling that recognised “the right to know” for the families of the missing. The ruling granted the families access to the 2000 Commission report on mass graves, only to reveal there was nothing in the report.

The ruling] was more of a symbolic victory for the families,” said Houry. “It was proof that the commission had been created just to close the file on the missing.”

In a tiny apartment located off the Armenian neighbourhood of Bourj Hammoud in Beirut that she shares with her ailing mother, Mirna Mitri describes the day her father, Anis, disappeared. It was February 4, 1985, and he was leaving for Cyprus in order to pick up a work visa from the Saudi embassy there.

“He said bye to all of us, set off to the airport, and then we never heard from him again,” she said, noting she was around 12 years old at the time and still in school. “My mother wanted to go with him to the airport but he said no because of the bad weather.

“After several months, my mother started asking at the bank if any money had been deposited. None had.”

The family still has no idea what happened to him. They received information that he arrived at the airport, but records in Cyprus revealed he never landed there.

In the sparse apartment, there are no pictures of Anis on display. “We don’t want the daily reminders that he is gone,” said Mirna, noting they cannot even listen to the cassette recordings he used to send during the years he worked abroad. “We don’t want to keep living in the past, but all we want is to know what happened and where he’s buried.”

Today, the main demand of the families is for the government to pass the draft law pushed forward a couple of years ago to create a national independent institute to investigate the fate of the missing.

Meanwhile, the International Commission for the Red Cross (ICRC) has spent the last few years collecting scientific and DNA samples from the families of the missing to put together a database to facilitate identifying remains that may be discovered in the future.

Activists and family members hope that the draft law, in conjunction with the ICRC data, will help identify the remains of the missing, but the government has so far stalled on passing this law.

“At the end of the day,” Houry said, “even if they are all dead, it is the basic right of the families to bury their dead and to know where they are.”

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA