



April 13, 2019

Lebanon: The right to know for the families of disappeared

“Let it be remembered, not repeated.” Every April 13, for the past 29 years, this has been the mantra of the families of those who were disappeared and went missing during Lebanon’s war, which started April 13, 1975. Every year, the families have repeated this mantra, stubbornly, defiantly, in the face of a nation deaf to the call for truth, a nation that came to be permeated then shaped by a victors’ justice that left no room for any form of accountability, let alone acknowledgment.

This year however, April 13 is different.

In November 2018, Parliament passed a law on the missing and disappeared, which should enable the formation of a national commission with a mandate to investigate individual cases of disappearances, locate and exhume mass graves, and enable a tracing process which potentially could bring some measure of closure to the thousands of families who have been locked in a state of frozen grief for far too many years. It also is the first time Lebanon’s authorities have taken a genuine step to address one of the most painful legacies of the conflict.

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Lynn Maalouf, Middle East Research Director at Amnesty International

This would not have happened without the sustained, unrelenting pursuit of families and activists for the right to know. “Of course, this year is different. This [law] is a really big achievement for a country like ours,” Wadad Halwani told me when I asked her about how she felt about this year’s commemoration. “We have finally achieved the first real step toward the truth.” The wife of a school teacher and political activist who was abducted from their home in 1982 and never heard from again, Wadad has been leading the struggle since then, first rallying other families, then artists, intellectuals, writers, filmmakers and, later on, NGOs and activists. who all joined forces.

During the conflict and in the early years afterward, the rallying cry was for those who went missing to be released. The 15 years of war were marked by successive rounds of mass killings, sieges of civilian populations, forced displacement, abductions and enforced disappearances. Between 1975 and 1977, newspapers featured special sections dedicated to reporting abductions. These were carried out by all sides to the conflict, armed groups and armies alike. Victims – the vast majority of whom were civilians – were abducted at checkpoints, taken from their homes or from the streets, whether it was in exchange for other prisoners, for money, for revenge, or for the purpose of creating fear within communities. The practice of enforced disappearances continued after the conflict came to a close in 1990, though on a smaller scale.

“You took our sons alive, give them back to us, alive,” I heard one woman shout in the face of a minister one morning, who was stepping into a Cabinet meeting. Security forces pushed her aside, as the minister ignored her without as much as a glance toward her. The country’s focus was on reconstruction, turning the page, moving on. Voices of families, victims, were silenced by the deafening cacophony of bulldozers.

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Family member of one of the disappeared

The call for the release of detainees shifted in the postwar years to a call for truth, as hopes for finding loved ones alive dimmed with each passing year. In the early '90s, SOLIDE, an NGO founded by Ghazi Aad, was among the first to highlight the alarming trend of abductions of Lebanese and Palestinian people who were then transferred to Syria where they would never be heard from again. Aad, a paraplegic from a car accident, led demonstrations and sit-ins, on behalf of hundreds of families who believed their loved ones were forcibly disappeared in Syria. He endured beatings and humiliation by security forces for leading these protests.

In 2005, when the Syrian army and its intelligence services left Lebanon, Halwani and Aad joined forces in pushing for the truth. A permanent sit-in was set up in the garden across the U.N. building, in the heart of the capital. There, Aad, with mothers, sisters, brothers, fathers, would take turns, day in, day out, staying in the tent, welcoming journalists, activists, opportune politicians, anyone who wanted to know more. It became a place of action, solidarity and support.

With fellow activists and families, they led an intense lobbying campaign that spurred the newly appointed President Michel Sleiman – the first president after the Syrian army’s departure – to pledge in his inauguration oath in 2008 to “work hard to release the prisoners and detainees and reveal the fate of the missing persons.” With a group of lawyers, activists and government representatives, Halwani and Aad went on to visit Bosnia-Herzegovina where they met the Mothers of Srebrenica, visited mass graves, the morgue, the laboratory where the tracing process

was happening; they visited the Institute for Missing Persons, and learned about the laws that established the processes for discovering the fate of Bosnia's disappeared.

Back in Beirut, they embarked on a process of developing a law. The draft, which was developed in consultation with a number of organizations with expertise on this issue, was submitted in 2014 by the two MPs who were part of the delegation. In parallel, SOLIDE and the Committee of the Families lodged a case before the State Consultative Council – Lebanon's highest administrative judicial body – to gain recognition of their right to know. In 2015, the council recognized this right and called on the government to hand over to the families any investigations it had conducted in the past. Still, the draft did not find its way to the agenda of a Parliament that was paralyzed by political deadlock and hardly meeting at the time. A petition was launched, gaining enough signatures to make it incumbent on Parliament to include the draft law on the parliamentary agenda.

Aad did not live to see the law finally enacted. He passed away in November 2016. Halwani continues to push forward and is today more active than ever in sharing her journey, and that of the thousands of relatives in Lebanon, with fellow family committees from Syria and other places. Her next mission is to ensure that the commission is formed as a first step toward implementation.

“I feel content now. Should anything happen to me, I am not worried anymore. We are now standing on solid ground,” she told me before turning her attention back to the planning of this year's April 13 commemoration.

Lynn Maalouf is director of research for the Middle East at Amnesty International.