

# Thousands still missing from the Civil War, lost amid 'state-sponsored amnesia'

To this day, between 7,000 and 10,000 people are still missing, from all regions of Lebanon, encompassing all sects and socio-economic backgrounds, says Bassel Bou Monsef, researcher at an NGO dedicated to revealing the fate of those disappeared during the Civil War.

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Relatives of persons missing during the Lebanese Civil War during a protest in Beirut in 2018. (Credit: AFP)

BEIRUT — Aug. 30 every year marks the International Day of the Disappeared, a day created to draw attention to the fate of people who

have been imprisoned in unknown locations and under poor conditions, cut off from their relatives or legal representatives.

Rights organizations estimate that during Lebanon's 1975-1990 Civil War, some 17,000 people were kidnapped or disappeared. Some of the missing are believed to have been arrested or captured by the various forces and militias involved in the conflict — Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian, and Israeli.

L'Orient Today spoke to Bassel Bou Monsef, a researcher at ACT for the Disappeared, an NGO that works toward clarifying the fate of the missing and disappeared persons and supporting their families. Monsef gives a brief history of past attempts at finding closure and bringing justice, describes the various shortcomings, and explains the processes underway today.

### **Who are the disappeared from Lebanon's Civil War? What are the numbers?**

The official number of missing and forcibly disappeared persons [from the Civil War] in Lebanon is 17,415, though this figure is not entirely accurate. Estimates range between 7,000 and 10,000. The missing individuals come from all regions of Lebanon, encompassing all sects and socio-economic backgrounds. While most of the missing are civilians, the group includes Lebanese as well as non-Lebanese individuals such as Palestinian fighters, other foreign combatants and soldiers, migrant workers, and Western nationals. Most of the missing are men, but not exclusively.

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## **Under what circumstances and in which contexts did these disappearances occur?**

The majority of the missing and forcibly disappeared in Lebanon were taken from their homes, workplaces, or checkpoints. Some were displaced from their towns and never seen again. These disappearances primarily affected civilians.

## **How has Lebanon tracked this issue so far? What have been the private and public initiatives?**

Lebanon's approach to this issue has largely been characterized by a policy of state-sponsored amnesia. This began with a "no winner, no loser" pact between former warlords and the introduction of an amnesty law shortly after the war. There was no transitional justice or significant grassroots reconciliation processes.

In 1982, the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped was established to seek answers about their loved ones. Their persistent efforts led to the formation of several commissions in the early 2000s. The 2000 Commission issued a report shortly thereafter, concluding that all missing individuals were deceased and identified three mass graves. However, the work of these commissions was inadequate, failing to provide satisfactory answers. Authorities had a tendency to close files rather than pursue serious investigations.

On Nov. 13, 2018, the Lebanese Parliament passed Law 105 on the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared Persons, marking a significant step forward. The National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared was established on June 18, 2020, to investigate the fate of the missing, locate and exhume burial sites, identify and return remains to families, and provide reparations. Notably, Law 105 grants the National Commission a truth-seeking mandate, rather than pursuing judicial accountability.

The National Commission has faced numerous challenges, including Lebanon's financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Beirut Port blast, and ongoing political and institutional paralysis. Despite these obstacles, the commission has been working on institutionalization, including

developing its statutes and internal regulations, creating a strategy and action plan, engaging with stakeholders, and preparing for investigations. They have also recently dealt with the first discovered [mass grave](#) during their term, in Mdoukha.

Several local and international organizations have been involved in addressing this issue. ACT for the Disappeared, established in 2010, is a non-partisan human rights organization dedicated to clarifying the fate of the missing and fostering reconciliation. They provide psycho-social support, advocacy, inter-community dialogue, and research. Since 2015, ACT has collected data on thousands of disappearances and numerous events, checkpoints, and detention centers. They have also developed platforms like Fushat Amal ([www.fushatamal.org](http://www.fushatamal.org)) and Waynoun ([www.waynoun.com](http://www.waynoun.com)) to engage the public.

### **What ideally should have been done over the past decades to address this issue?**

Law 105 was a significant step forward in recognizing the issue of the missing and taking concrete action towards acknowledging the families' right to know. However, the law's focus is on truth-seeking rather than judicial accountability. It is crucial to support the implementation of Law 105 and the National Commission to provide answers to families and prevent future kidnappings through preventive measures outlined in the law.

Supporting the National Commission and addressing the families' needs is essential for initiating a comprehensive and sustainable reconciliation process. Civil society, political parties, and authorities must recognize that the ongoing issue affects everyone and that healing cannot occur while families and communities are still suffering. The focus should be on leveraging the progress made through Law 105 and the National Commission to foster a significant reconciliation process. Political parties from the war era need to understand that Law 105, the National Commission, and the right to know are aimed at addressing the past to build a more peaceful future, not at targeting them or seeking retribution.