

# Families of the missing, the forgotten victims of war in Lebanon

Sunday 17/09/2017



Wadad Halwani, founder and chairwoman of the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and the Disappeared, speaking at a rally in Beirut to push for clarifying the fate of the missing. (Samar Kadi)

Beirut - She was young, married and the mother of two little boys when she started to fight for the return of her husband, who was kidnapped on September 24, 1982, at the height of Lebanon's civil war. Thirty-five years

later, Wadad Halwani, founder and chairwoman of the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and the Disappeared, continues the struggle to learn what happened to her husband and the other 17,000 people who went missing during the conflict.

Halwani's children, Ziad and Ghassan, were aged 6 and 3, respectively, when their father was taken from their home in Ras el Nabeh on the Green Line, which divided Beirut into rival Christian and Muslim parts during 15 years of conflict.

"Today my children are older than Adnan (their father) when he was kidnapped at 35. He should be 71 by now," Halwani said. "I am convinced that my husband has not survived after 35 years of forced disappearance but nobody gave us a proof of his death for us to mourn him."

The quest to know what happened to the missing and to reconcile with the painful past are struggles waged by their families for more than three decades. For each family, there is a date; a moment when time stood still and a loved one disappeared. Some say their relatives are held in Syrian prisons, which Damascus has always denied.

Their campaign to clarify their loved ones' fate hit a wall of silence from successive Lebanese governments. Many politicians have argued that, instead of rehashing the past, Lebanon needs to move forward. In 1991, an amnesty law pardoned crimes that took place during the war, a move that civil rights activists and the families of the missing blasted as a miscarriage of the justice, truth and the reconciliation process in Lebanon.

"When the war ended in 1990, we were hopeful," Halwani said. "We thought that the war has deprived us of our loved ones, and peace will bring them back."

"I remember that I bought new clothes to Adnan's taste to welcome him back but unfortunately peace did not come our way, whereas the warlords who did the atrocities became ministers and were pardoned under the general amnesty law. We were victims of the war and became the victims of peace."

Halwani recalled the multiple, desperate searches for her husband and the brief spikes of hope when she received what she believed was a sign he was alive. "I knocked on all doors, talked to every militia but the answer was always the same: 'It is not us.'"

Under pressure from families of the disappeared, in 2000, Lebanese authorities created a commission mandated with probing the fate of the missing and disappeared. The final report acknowledged the existence of

many mass graves across the country, naming a few locations and recommended considering the missing people dead. Earlier, the government had passed a law that allows relatives to declare their disappeared dead.

“We interpreted the outcome of the investigation as a veiled invitation to the families of the disappeared to go home, stop searching and forget about the whole thing,” Halwani said. “The Lebanese state never provided any information about the inquiry that led to these conclusions and has not taken any steps to protect the sites of suspected mass graves or exhume the remains buried there.

“The state considered that it has done its duty by concluding that the missing people are all dead but what is most disconcerting is the apathy of the civil society. People are just not aware that they could be building their houses and parking their cars above the remains of human beings,” she added.

Under international law, enforced or involuntary disappearance is a continuing crime until the fate of the disappeared person has been clarified. Enforced disappearance is also considered a crime against humanity. The reality of what happens on the ground often differs from the regulations on paper, however.

Since 2012, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been conducting extensive forensic interviews with the families of the disappeared. It plans to collect DNA samples for tests if mass graves are opened.

More than a quarter of a century since the war stopped, there is no official list of the missing. It is not punishment of the perpetrators that the families of the disappeared are seeking. Their aim is much more modest.

“We don’t want to hold anyone accountable or to challenge the general amnesty law. We just want to identify and where possible bury their remains,” Halwani said.

“I want my children to feel reconciled with their country. I want my love to have a resting place where I can visit him and bring him flowers. We cannot deny the past regardless how black and ugly. We need to reconcile with the past.”



Written By **Samar Kadi**

Samar Kadi is the Arab Weekly society and travel section editor.