Women Fighting Against War Amnesia: The Case of the 'Disappeared'

Lynn Maalouf
Freelance reporter

In July 2003, as the Lebanese ministers met for their weekly session to discuss taxes, electricity, and cellular phone companies, two women were standing alone in the scorching heat, at the steps of the cabinet headquarters, desperately trying to get a word with anyone inside. But no one would let them in. The only response they got to their screams and shouts was to be dragged away by the security forces, before any of the ministers even knew they were there. They had walked from around the corner, from where a group of families were holding one of their weekly sit-ins before the National Museum, in one of their many efforts to keep their cause alive - that of the missing - their sons, husbands, and brothers.

The lives of these families have been besieged for the past fifteen or even thirty years, never knowing whether they can mourn their beloved ones or still have a chance of seeing them one day. Many have sacrificed their physical and mental health, their money, and their years, in the hope of knowing. Their cause is all the more difficult in that Lebanon is vainly striving to obliterate the war from its history. "The missing are the war memory that we just can't wipe out," says Adnan Houballah, psychiatrist.

There are 17,000 people officially unaccounted for in Lebanon, who were abducted or killed during the war at the hands of militias or of the armies of Lebanon, Syria and Israel. Since the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000, the majority of prisoners detained in the Khiam prison were released and on January 29, 2004, 23 Lebanese citizens known to be in Israeli jails were released as part of a prisoner swap between Hezbollah and Israel. Syria is the other place where an estimated 200 are known to be still alive, either through the families that managed to obtain a permit for a visit or through former detainees' testimonials, or even from the Lebanese or Syrian authorities that confirmed to the families the detention of their loved ones. Habib Nassar, legal advisor of the Committee of Families of Kidnapped or Disappeared in Lebanon, blames the amnesty law that was enacted in 1991 for the

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situation today, because it not only pardoned all those who took part in the war but also relieved them from the obligation of testifying and sharing all the information they have, including concerning the fate of the missing. The law thus ignored the victims and their families and relieved the state of any responsibility towards the families of victims, who, Nassar explains, are "confronting, daily, the silence of public authorities, the society's amnesia and the indifference of war criminals."

For years, wives, mothers, and sisters have been talking relentlessly to officials, local NGOs, and international human rights' organizations, organizing press conferences, attending conferences, and holding demonstrations. To them, there is no question of thinking that their beloved ones are deceased, even thirty years later, before they actually see the bodies.

Houballah explains that a mourning process can only be triggered when the body is seen. "The only proof of death is the body. The last look at the loved one's body is what triggers the mourning process. Without it, the process can't be triggered, and becomes endless."

Wadad Halwani 'lost' her husband Adnan on September 24, 1982. Sitting in a café in the flashy newly renovated downtown Beirut, Wadad starts losing her composure as she recounts what happened more than twenty years ago. Her sparkling green eyes lose their piercing focus, and her fingers fiddling with her straw make their way to the pack of cigarettes. Adnan was abducted from his home, in front of his wife and two sons. He wanted to be reassuring, and said that he'd be back in five minutes. Wadad tried to remain calm. She didn't want to show her panic to her children. The five minutes dragged into years. Adnan never returned. And she regrets having stayed calm. "Maybe if I had screamed, yelled, made a fit, the neighbors would have come out, the men taking him would have let him go."

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She found herself forced to deal with a new situation, not only with the fact that she was suddenly alone, but also that she had to manage the situation vis-à-vis her parents-in-law and become a single parent, with no explanation to give to her children about the sudden 'disappearance' of their father. She hid the truth from her father-in-law for ten days, for fear of causing him a heart attack. When she did tell him, she gradually found herself in a position of the family's 'delegate,' in charge of activating the search of her husband.

Since that day, Wadad has been obstinately active. She was one of the founders of the Committee of Families of Kidnapped or Disappeared in Lebanon, formed only two months after Adnan's disappearance. Since then, she explains that her search for her husband merged with looking for all the other husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons. "I felt I was struggling for everyone." This explains why today, even though she has lost hope of seeing her husband alive, she remains as active as in the past. This forced drive into being an activist had deep repercussions on her personal life. "Your personal life just disappears. Years later, my father-in-law used to make jokes about me starting a new life with another man." However, to the society, Wadad is not a widow, and so even though she has her private life, she has never made it official. "I haven't been a saint, but I'm not holding up banners either when I'm having an affair," she says with a grin.

Sonia Eid is a mother whose son 'disappeared' in 1990. Disappeared is not really the right word, because he was proven to be in a Syrian jail, but then he went missing again. But because Syria is involved in this case, Sonia also has to struggle against the taboo that touches upon anything related to Syria. In fact, since 1990, the Syrian authorities have officially announced that they do not hold any Lebanese who were abducted from Lebanon. As for the Lebanese authorities, they did form a commission of inquiry in 2000, under pressure mainly from the Committee of Families of Kidnapped or Disappeared. Besides the total lack of credibility this commission had, given the profile of its members, it supposedly examined over 2,000 files in a mere six months, to end up issuing a three-page report saying that all the missing people were dead. Nonetheless, a few months later, the Syrian authorities released 54 detainees. Under continuous pressure, a second commission was formed in January 2001, but to this day it has failed to even issue a report.

Sonia still keeps the piece of cloth that remained from the sleeve of Jihad's military uniform the day he disappeared. He was a 20-year-old student then, and like all the kids in the neighborhood, he joined the army, which was then headed by General Michel Aoun. At 6:30 am on October 13, 1990, Jihad's friends came to get him. His father wouldn't let him out of the house. "He had a bad feeling. He had never stopped him before. That day, he was clutching onto his son, trying to hold him back from getting out the door. But Jihad left, and all that was left of him was a piece of his sleeve, which stayed in his father's hand." When he didn't return that afternoon, his parents went to look for him. They found out that he had been taken to Hotel Beau Rivage, which was controlled by the Syrian

army. Eyewitnesses said he had been shot in the leg and the shoulder. Today, he is known as the "A'raj", or the limping, after his leg was amputated. For six years, Sonia worked silently to obtain the release of her son.

She saw him once in the thirteen years. She only had the right to see him from afar. He was the seventh in a line of prisoners, all blindfolded, with their hands tied behind their backs, "like a herd of sheep", she said. She wasn't allowed to talk to him. He probably didn't even know she was there.

"It is worth noting that since there is no official mechanism in Lebanon to help the families learn of the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones or to seek legal remedy, they live in pain and fear. The fear stems from the fact that the Lebanese government not only denies the problem but also intimidates the families and is putting sustained efforts to close the file," writes SOLIDE, (Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile), a human rights group formed in 1989, focused on the cases of Lebanese detainees in Syrian prisons.

Fatmeh Abdullah lives as a refugee in Beirut. Sitting in a large hall, with the bare minimum furniture, one large blown up picture hangs on the wall. It's her brother Ali, who was seized by Syrian forces in July 1981 at the Cola roundabout in Beirut. He was a cab driver, around 20 years old, one year younger than Fatmeh. "In 1995, a former detainee came to me and told me he was with Ali in the same prison, in Palmyra. When he wanted to testify to the Lebanese authorities, one high official told him: Don't open closed doors."

To Fatmeh, the most difficult part of the situation is the unknown. Although she's already had more than one source certify that her brother is still alive, the information is only sporadic, and doesn't describe Ali's latest situation. "We're constantly in a state of suffering. We can never be genuinely happy. When we laugh, we laugh but without any happiness," she says, as her eyes well up.

Finances are another major problem for these families. Most often, the persons abducted were the heads of families or contributed to the family's budget. So not only were these families deprived of a source of income, but they've also had to pay bribes over the years in order to visit their loved ones or to try to negotiate their release. Ghazi Aad, founder of SOLIDE, gives the example of a mother who has had to pay as much as $26,000 over the past thirteen years. He explains that there is a whole Lebanese-Syrian network of people who exploit the situation of these families, claiming to act as brokers. They can include the local mukhtars (notables), government officials, and others. "They go to the family and promise to help, and take bribes through blackmail and extortion. But there are no guarantees".

Since 1994, when George was abducted, the Chalaweet family has been enduring particularly strenuous economic – apart from psychological – problems. George was the eldest son and worked as a jeweler. George's father, Ayoub, describes the abduction of his son, to which he was a witness, as follows: "On March 30, 1994, individuals in civilian clothes came looking for my son at our home in Beirut, pretending they had golden jewelry in need of repair. George was not home. They asked that George present himself at the Ministry of Health. Our son returned home at 3 pm. We went to the Ministry of Health, and when we arrived there, some men came down from the fifth floor. They made me wait outside and took George away, in the direction of West Beirut. They later came back without George and told me they are keeping him for interrogation. George never came back. It took us six months to find his whereabouts: He had been detained in Damascus in the jail called Palestine Section. Later, we were allowed to visit him every three months at the Mazze Prison. But [since 1998] no visits are allowed" (FIDH/SOLIDA report, January 2001).

In the past nine years, the Chalaweet family has had to move into a smaller house and barely has enough resources to survive. Both sisters have had nervous breakdowns since their brother's abduction, and one of them is being hospitalized for the fourth time. Thérèse, the second sister, says: "For the past four years, I've been on medication, and I haven't been able to work." The two sons work as private drivers and have to pay for the family's expenses and the medical treatment. Nadia Chalaweet, who last visited her son six years and eight months ago, sums up her situation: "They took my son, our money, our health, and they haven't returned my son".

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All the women - the mothers, sisters and wives of missing - seem to share several points in common: They have no fear of the authorities, they are not the least impressed by all the official efforts to scrap the file, and they have an unfaltering will to keep struggling to the end, until they know the fate of their beloved ones. Maybe only then will Lebanon reopen the painful Pandora box of the war, before it closes it once and for all, after the amnesia has turned into memory.