



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)

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

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.



Painful past. A Lebanese woman paints as she stands in front of an oil painting of her son (C-background) who disappeared in 1982 at the age of 15 while fighting near Beirut. (AFP)

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.

17,000
people are said to be missing from Lebanon's civil war.

"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 com-

mission 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."

Samar Kadi is The Arab Weekly Travel and Society sections editor.

Scores of Iraqis missing during war against ISIS

Oumayma Omar

Baghdad

Thousands of Iraqi civilians have disappeared while fleeing battles in Anbar province and Mosul. Their families are in agony, uncertain whether their loved ones are alive.

Jamila al-Obeidi, a member of the Iraqi parliament, called on the US-led international coalition supporting Iraqi forces against the Islamic State (ISIS) to help determine the fate of the disappeared, including 500 documented missing people from her province of Nineveh, which includes Mosul.

"The government has turned a deaf ear to our quest. They form so-called investigation committees that yield no result. That is why we appeal to the coalition forces to help us deal with this thorny file," Obeidi said.

Approximately 5,000 people are reported to be missing in provinces previously controlled by ISIS.

"Months have passed since tens of our finest young men have gone missing or were imprisoned in ambiguous circumstances and we are incapable of having any news about them."

Human rights groups have accused the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) of committing violations against unarmed civilians. The abductions happened during military operations to retake mainly Sunni areas.

An Iraqi activist who asked to be identified only by his first name, Ahmad, said he feared the fate of the missing in Mosul is like that of the disappeared in Anbar province.

"Some 250 civilians have been kidnapped at the end of April in Al-Hadar, south of Mosul. They were taken while trying to reach the refugee camps of Hammam Al-Alil and Tal Abta, an area that was controlled by the [PMF] after ISIS militants were evicted," Ahmad said.

"Most surprising was the government and security forces' position. They had no information whatsoever about the missing or the area from where they were kidnapped."

Zohair Hazem al-Jabouri, spokesman for Nineveh Guards militia, was more categorical: "The area where the kidnappings occurred falls under the direct responsibility of the parties loyal to Iran," he said. "The aim of such acts is not merely to apprehend suspected collaborators with ISIS but to settle accounts with the people in the (Sunni-dominated) region."

At least 643 men and boys from Saqlawiya in Anbar governorate are missing more than a year after they were reportedly abducted by Shia militias.

The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights said as many as 3,000 civilians had been forcibly disappeared in Anbar since the beginning of military operations to uproot ISIS in 2015. Among them, 902 went missing in the district of Razaza, south of Falluja, in addition to those taken in Saqlawiya.

Many families refused to return to "liberated" towns before the fate of their missing relatives is revealed.

Oum Ahmad, a housewife, who lives in a refugee camp near Ram-

adi, said she was not budging. Her husband and eldest son were kidnapped during their displacement from Saqlawiya.

"We cannot return without our men. It is unacceptable," she said. "Most women refuse to go home because they fear they would be harassed by the forces that control the place now."

"The people of Saqlawiya have suffered a lot at the hands of ISIS militants and now we are accused of collaborating with the terrorists."

Anbar Governor Sahib al-Rawi has said that a commission tasked with investigating alleged violations against civilians during the battle to retake Falluja has gathered evidence that implicated PMF members in the killing of 49 people and the kidnapping of 643 others from Saqlawiya.

Rajeh Barakat, a member of the Anbar provincial council, said the number of the disappeared cannot be established as many families were reluctant to report their missing relatives out of fear for their safety.

"We all know that the PMF have control over certain parts of Anbar. The disappearance of thousands of people, including government employees, in mysterious conditions cannot be disregarded," Barakat stated.

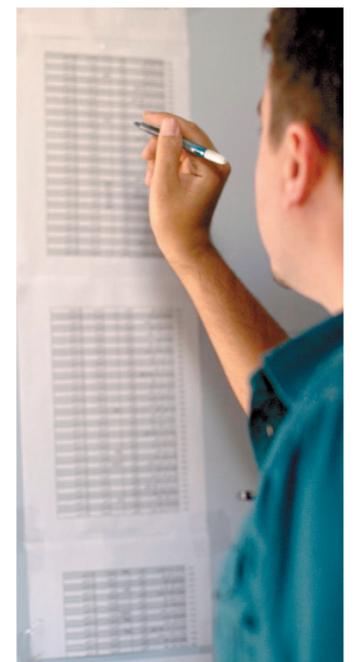
Amnesty International has repeatedly called on Iraqi authorities to reveal the fate of those who had been forcibly disappeared by the PMF and Iraqi security forces and to ensure investigations were thorough, impartial and independent.

Masrouh Aswad, former member of the High Commission of Human Rights in Iraq, underlined the complexity of the issue of the missing.

"It is one of the most controversial issues, especially that the government is not serious about revealing the fate of some 5,000 people missing in the provinces previously controlled by ISIS," he said.

"The violations in Mosul could be worse. The lack of law enforcement during the arrest of suspects led to the disappearance of hundreds of innocent people in mysterious circumstances."

Oumayma Omar, based in Baghdad, is a contributor to the Culture and Society sections of The Arab Weekly.



Unrevealed fates. An Iraqi points to a list of missing and killed people in a small office in Dohuk in northern Iraq. (AP)