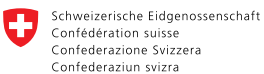


Dealing with the Past *Series*

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Civil Society and the Case of the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared in Lebanon

Paul Achcar

Nunca Más! (Never Again!)

Rallying cry for the Argentinian disappeared and title of the country's official 1984 report condemning the crimes committed by the military dictatorship (1976-1983).

Introduction

The subject at hand is particularly compelling. First and foremost, it requires us to examine the sphere encompassed by the term 'civil society.' The term is overly broad and, consequently, ambiguous. Over time, its meaning has shifted considerably, moving from one sense to its opposite: among the ancient Greeks, it referred to the 'political community' (Colas, 1992), while, with the rise of capitalist production, it came to signify the 'economic sphere' (Ferguson, 1867). Today, it refers to neither and, indeed, deliberately excludes both.

Contemporary ambiguities are no less pronounced. The re-emergence of civil society as a concept in the 1960s coincided with transformations at both the economic level (the ascendancy of the financial sector over the productive sector) and the political level (a move away from the traditional government-opposition binary in favor of a 'third current' positioned outside politics).

As these two developments have persisted and intensified, understandings of civil society have oscillated between a broad conception—encompassing all forms of social organization independent of the political and economic spheres, including trade unions and the media—and a narrower conception equating civil society with the NGO sector: i.e., mission-driven organizations, even

when funded by the state or new economic elites (Badie and Birnbaum, 1979). Taking these variations into account, this policy brief adopts, albeit implicitly, a Gramscian approach (named after the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci) based on the opposition between ‘political society’ and ‘civil society,’ and on a struggle for cultural hegemony (Douet, 2022) between dominant ideas and those that challenge them.

We now turn to the realm of war, the primary driver of the issue of missing and forcibly disappeared persons. In societies divided against themselves, war takes the form of civil conflict—a model that applies to the Lebanese case. It is therefore unsurprising that a third form of society rapidly emerged alongside the two already mentioned—political society and civil society. Known as ‘communal society,’ it occupied an intermediate position between the two, deriving its non-political character from civil society while maintaining an ideological affinity with political society.

By adopting this local classification, civil society sought to offset its social isolation by treating communal society as a less pure form of itself. Political society, for its part, sought to ensure that it had a stable social base through communal society, even as the latter, like political society itself, began fragmenting into distinct communities growing increasingly disconnected from one another.

Context: The Emergence of the Issue

The tragedy of abduction (and enforced disappearance), and the resulting loss, is as old as war and humanity itself. What concerns us here, however, is humanity’s struggle to eradicate this scourge and its efforts to have international law recognize such acts as crimes, identify their victims (including both missing persons and their families), classify them as continuing offenses, and, ultimately, expand the jurisdiction under which such crimes may be prosecuted. If we confine our discussion to the twentieth century, such crimes were undoubtedly committed on a large scale under Nazism, Francoism in Spain, and Stalinism, as well as during the colonial wars.

These crimes first entered legal discourse through documents adopted by the Organization of American States (OAS), which devoted specific provisions to them following the widespread practice of enforced disappearance across Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s and into the 1980s. This achievement was made possible by the struggle of the families of missing and forcibly disappeared persons. Significantly, these early instruments also recognized those families as victims.

Under pressure from these movements, the first official instrument to characterize enforced disappearance as a ‘crime against humanity’ was adopted by the OAS General Assembly in 1983 (Organization of American States, 1983).

This was followed by the first judgment against a state—Honduras—in 1988 (Inter-American Court of Human Rights, 1988), and by the adoption of a legal instrument binding on OAS States Parties in 1994 (Organization of American States, 1994).

In parallel, and as a result of the struggles waged in Latin America, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights established the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances in 1980. The issue then gradually entered international law, initially through instruments supplementing earlier conventions, such as the 1977 Protocol Additional to the 1949 Geneva Conventions and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1977), and through subsequent treaties that helped establish its legal foundations, such as the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT), adopted in 1984 and in force since 1987 (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1984), and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), adopted in 1998 and in force since 2002 (International Criminal Court, 1998).

Later, when profound gaps in the legal frameworks for addressing enforced disappearance became apparent, negotiations began, lasting three years and culminating in a dedicated legal instrument: the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, adopted in 2006 and in force since 2010 (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2006).

Lebanon's experience of enforced disappearance unfolded, albeit at some distance, against this historical backdrop (1975-1989), prompting a relatively early response (1982). However, the decisive step of adopting a law specifically addressing the issue did not occur until decades later (2018). The Lebanese experience reflected two forms seen globally: an 'external' form associated with regional actors (Israel and Syria) and an 'internal' form, which accounted for the majority of cases and arose from conflicts among different segments of Lebanese society. A third form commonly associated with disappearance (involving the state and its opponents) appeared in the Lebanese context only in exceptional cases during the 1980s and largely at the periphery.

Cases involving regional actors (or the state and its opponents) remained relatively marginal, at least initially, whereas civil war-related abductions and disappearances quickly became a defining feature of the internal conflict, including the conflict with the Palestinians. In the process, society immediately fragmented into 'communal societies' aligned with the factions carrying out the abductions, while abduction and disappearance frequently became little more than bargaining chips.

Collective Organizing and the Prominent Role of Women

At first, the search for missing and forcibly disappeared persons was restricted to a small circle of their relatives. Whether because of powerlessness, fear, division, or even targeted killings, advocacy on their behalf is invariably limited or obstructed. Such advocacy begins within the families' immediate circles and gradually expands. Yet the pressure to turn the page and forget in the aftermath of tragedy means that awareness of the issue remains confined to a minority in all societies.

In Lebanon, the widespread practice of abduction by all parties to the conflict, together with expressions of solidarity with the abductors, severely curtailed demands to know the fate of missing and forcibly disappeared persons. This extended even to so-called civil society—or, more precisely, to the segment of it able to maintain the greatest degree of independence from the opposing parties. Initially, the abductors generally monopolized the search for 'their missing,' while demands remained confined to the abducting parties themselves, as abductions and counter-abductions enabled large-scale exchanges.

In individual cases, people were left to fend for themselves, forcing them to turn to influential actors in their areas or to figures capable of reaching those actors. With the end of the military conflict, once the influential actors had exhausted the mechanisms available for exchanging abductees, they abandoned the issue. They stopped inquiring into the fate of those abducted from their own ranks to avoid being questioned about the fate of those they had themselves abducted. Once again, the logic of reciprocity!

Lebanon's first independent organization advocating for missing and forcibly disappeared persons—largely composed of their families—was the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon (CFKDL), established in 1982 at the initiative of Wadad Halwani (Halawani, 2025). This pioneering initiative began within the Muslim and Palestinian communities before gradually expanding to the rest of Lebanese society, gaining local, regional, and international recognition over time. Another initiative, Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile (SOLIDE),¹ emerged alongside the 'Aounist' movement in 1991, when General Michel Aoun tasked Ghazi Aad, an engineer, with searching for detainees held in Syrian prisons.

Gradually, owing to Aad's strong ethical convictions and his early recognition that cases involving those missing in Syria could only be addressed as part of the broader issue of missing persons, the two initiatives formed an alliance and ultimately converged in their demands and activities. This helped prevent any political actor from exploiting the cause. Indeed, after the disappointment of seeing the chapter of the war brought to a close without even a glimmer of a solution to the issue, the CFKDL succeeded in breaking through the 'wall of silence' and built relationships with various segments of civil society.

¹
In fact, SOLIDE's role gradually diminished following Ghazi Aad's death.

Another global phenomenon warrants closer examination: the predominantly male composition of the missing and the predominantly female character of the movements searching for them. In both international and civil wars, the proportion of men is extremely high, as they constitute virtually the only sex to participate in combat. Missing women, by contrast, are generally victims of civilian incidents occurring on the margins of the military conflict and account for a relatively small proportion of cases. Only in conflicts between the state and its opponents, particularly in Latin America, does the proportion of women rise to one-quarter and sometimes approach one-third (according to the websites of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo)², because the ‘abducting’ state targeted male and female activists alike.

In any event, women dominate the search for missing and forcibly disappeared persons to an extent comparable to the predominance of men among those abducted. There are several reasons for this phenomenon. It undoubtedly stems primarily from the fact that the overwhelming majority of those abducted are men, which, in turn, mobilizes the women searching for them (mothers, wives, sisters, daughters...). It may also be explained by the perception that women’s involvement in such searches is less dangerous, more politically neutral, and driven by emotion, giving them a sense that they enjoy more ‘protection’ in their efforts than men would (Carrasco Gutiérrez, 2021; Calvin, 2026).

The best-known example remains the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, who came to be known over time as the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo because they now continue their struggle by searching not only for their children but also for their grandchildren, who were themselves taken from their mothers’ arms or wombs and subsequently ‘placed’ with families loyal to the military regime (according to the websites of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo).

The Lebanese context does not differ greatly from these patterns. According to the CFKDL’s incomplete statistics, women account for between 5 and 6 percent of all missing and forcibly disappeared persons,³ while they make up virtually all those active in family committees, with very few exceptions. This reality may have contributed, at least to some extent, to giving civil society activism a ‘female’ character, as we will see below.

The Emerging Role of Civil Society

We now come to the heart of our subject. Before the end of the Lebanese war, the issue of missing persons was, in practice, one of abductees exchanged in successive rounds. The establishment of the CFKDL in 1982 marked a crucial turning point, cementing the issue’s independence from the militias and various political forces.

² The female-to-male ratios in cases of enforced disappearance in Argentina and Mexico, respectively; in Mexico, the tragedy remains ongoing. Grafico-4.-Mujeres-y-hombres-ante-la-tragedia 1248x2048.png

³ The 2025 ‘Timeline’ exhibition, held at Beit Beirut (Damascus Road, Sodeco) under the supervision of the CFKDL, reports that men account for 94 percent of the missing, compared with 6 percent for women.

Yet this difficult birth went largely unnoticed by wider society, breaking into public consciousness only on rare occasions. These included the first demonstration, which brought the families of missing and forcibly disappeared persons to the prime minister's office on 24 December 1982, and which the press described as a 'women's demonstration' (As-Safir, 1982). They also included the families' closure of crossing points twice in 1984: first on 9 July, to make their voices heard, prompting an intervention by Dar al-Fatwa that led the President of the Republic and the prime minister at the time to receive a delegation of the women; and again on 27 December, following the suicide of Nayfa Najjar, secretary to As-Safir newspaper owner and founder Talal Salman, one year after the abduction of her 13-year-old son, Ali (An-Nahar, 1984; As-Safir, 1984; An-Nahar, 1984).

All these examples demonstrate that the families of abducted and forcibly disappeared persons were left almost entirely on their own. The media covered their cause only when they asserted their presence on the national stage or forced their way, with or without permission, onto the agendas of political leaders.

The failure to address the issue of the missing and disappeared when the war finally ended shattered the families' expectations, plunging them into deep frustration and suffocating isolation. Then, in the summer of 1999, at the initiative of Father Albert Abi Azar, a team of professionals from the media and visual arts—including the late filmmaker Borhane Alaouié—came together in a renewed attempt to break through the thick wall of exclusion.

Under the name 'It Is Our Right to Know,' the team became a second line of defense for the CFKDL⁴ and focused its work on two fronts. First, it began accompanying the CFKDL's weekly protests outside government headquarters, then located near the National Museum. For several consecutive weeks, the families intercepted ministers as they arrived for cabinet meetings to remind them of their forgotten cause, under the slogan, 'We Are Your Children, O State' (As-Safir, 1999).

These weekly protests led Prime Minister Salim al-Hoss to establish the first official commission of inquiry into the fate of missing and forcibly disappeared persons on 21 December 2000—the state's first recognition of the legitimacy of the issue (Nida Al Watan, 2000). Second, the supporting team sought to convey a specific message to civil society by drawing attention, for the first time since the end of the war, to the symbolic significance of 13 April. This gave rise to the first civil-society campaign, 'Let It Be Remembered, Not Repeated,' a slogan inspired by a popular saying.

The campaign called for the date to be designated a National Day of Remembrance and for the construction of a memorial to all victims of the war. It was complemented by video clips featuring actors Carmen Lebbos and Rafik Ali Ahmad, which highlighted the need to remember the war and were set to a

⁴ Hard-copy minutes from this team's initial meetings are available at the 2025 'Timeline' exhibition, held at Beit Beirut (Damascus Road, Sodeco).

jingle by the late Ziad Rahbani. More than 1,000 people answered the call and gathered in Martyrs' Square on Thursday, 13 April 2000.

Since then, dozens of associations (including *Offrejoie*, for example) have organized various activities each year on this ominous anniversary. Following the success of 'Let It Be Remembered, Not Repeated' (As-Safir, 2000), seminars and lectures on the importance of 'memory' also began to be held regularly at universities and elsewhere. One example was the 'Memory for the Future' conference organized by Amal Makarem in 2001. Last but not least, newspapers and magazines began devoting articles and special supplements to the issue on this date. In short, for the first time, the CFKDL succeeded in establishing a direct relationship with civil society and, more importantly, in influencing its agenda and some of its institutions and actors.

The following offers a necessarily partial overview of the relationships that developed between the issue of missing and forcibly disappeared persons and Lebanese civil society. What warrants emphasis here is the persistence of the CFKDL, together with 'It Is Our Right to Know,' in making its voice heard by civil society—and its subsequent joy at hearing that voice echoed in a growing number of messages of support. These messages came to play an increasingly important role in championing the cause of missing and forcibly disappeared persons and contributing to the gains achieved.

Below, we will examine the various segments of civil society, selecting a representative initiative or individual from each. We do so, first, to pay tribute to them and, second and above all, because it is impossible to turn this short chapter into a mere catalogue or index of information.

Civil Society Campaigns

After 2000, the CFKDL began using civil society campaigns to raise the issue and convey specific messages to public officials or society at large. Here, we examine two such campaigns and seek to explain their messages.

The first was the 2015 campaign, 'The War's Fortieth,' marking forty years since the start of the war—and suggesting that the time had come to take stock now that the mourning period was over. Over several months, the CFKDL highlighted the issue of missing and forcibly disappeared persons as one of the country's unresolved problems. (This was made possible by the marketing agency Pikasso, which provided the CFKDL with free outdoor advertising space throughout Lebanon.) The campaign featured four black-and-white images accompanied by four slogans in red: 'Lebanon's Rulers, Where Are You?', 'Lebanon's Missing, Where Are They?', 'Lebanon's Citizens, Where Are We?', and 'Lebanon's Children, Where Are They Headed?' (An-Nahar, 2015).

The second campaign took advantage of the resumption of parliamentary elections after a prolonged hiatus and the introduction of proportional

representation for the first time. The new system required candidates to run on electoral lists, theoretically creating space for campaign platforms and public-interest issues. The CFKDL therefore fielded what it called the ‘List of the Missing in All of Lebanon’—also the name of the campaign. Missing persons thus ‘stood as candidates’ in every electoral district; their names had remained on the voter rolls precisely because they were missing. To draw attention to this reality, the CFKDL enlisted a group of prominent figures from the arts and media, each of whom represented either a missing person or a member of their family (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, 2018).

Lawyers

The issue of missing and forcibly disappeared persons is, above all, a legal one. The families’ struggle can be summarized as a fight to secure a law guaranteeing their right to know the fate of their loved ones. Accordingly, no effective struggle for the cause of missing and forcibly disappeared persons is possible without a lawyer to safeguard and defend the families’ efforts, build upon them, and give them a legal framework. The contributions of some of these lawyers must therefore be outlined, however briefly.

The families’ legal struggle began with the late lawyer Sinan Barraj (who died in 2009). Having participated in the Lebanese war, he subsequently distanced himself from its entanglements and, beginning in the 1980s, made his office on Mar Elias Street available to the newly established CFKDL. At times, he also signed alongside the CFKDL on behalf of the Committee for the Defense of Public Liberties and Democracy, lending greater credibility to the families’ early efforts.

The late lawyer Nada Adhami (who died in 2022), a friend of Wadad Halwani and a fellow native of Tripoli, also provided legal advice through her involvement with the Bar Association’s Human Rights Committee.

Lawyer Habib Nassar likewise contributed while based in Lebanon until 2004 and subsequently continued his involvement from abroad, helping expand the CFKDL’s international ties.

Lawyer and MP Ghassan Moukheiber served as the voice of the missing persons cause in Parliament from 2005 to 2018. He was the first parliamentarian to emphasize the need to draft legislation aimed at resolving the issue.

Last but not least, the publication Legal Agenda and its entire team have provided the legal foundation on which the CFKDL has relied over the past two decades. Its executive director, lawyer Nizar Saghie, played a decisive role in drafting the legislation enacted by Parliament in 2018.

In 2014, the CFKDL and SOLIDE, together with the Legal Agenda, brought a case before Lebanon’s State Council, which ordered that the claimants be given a copy of the complete investigation file compiled by the official commission of inquiry in 2000. The government maneuvered to avoid complying with the

ruling before finally yielding following a second State Council decision and a sit-in outside the government headquarters in support of its implementation. Yet, to their great disappointment, all the state handed over was a ‘cardboard box’ containing nothing more than the forms completed by the families themselves. Nevertheless, the two organizations decided to hand the ‘cardboard box’ over to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) at a special ceremony held at the Beirut Bar Association.

Then in 2017, the CFKDL launched a national petition calling for biological samples to be collected from the families of missing persons and preserved, as well as for an independent national commission to be established to investigate the fate of the missing. Through this petition, the CFKDL succeeded in expanding its ties with political society and even wartime society, as its signatories included a number of political party and militia leaders, as well as members of Parliament.

Building on this support, the CFKDL was able to place the bill—which had been languishing in the parliamentary Human Rights Committee—on the agenda for a plenary session of Parliament. Parliament adopted it as Law No. 105/2018 in a landmark session for the cause. Thus, after a 36-year struggle, the issue finally had a law of its own—an implementation mechanism for resolving it. The law met international standards while leaving the Amnesty Law untouched, enabling its passage with the support of all parliamentary blocs (UMAM Documentation and Research, 2019).

Artists

Art played a vital role in bridging the gap between the cause and Lebanese society. Here again, it is difficult to account for all the artists from various disciplines who contributed throughout this long journey. In music, particular recognition must be given to Oumeima El Khalil, who consistently stood alongside the families, and to Ahmad Kaabour, who composed the music for ‘La Dallayt Wou La Fallayat’ (‘You Neither Stayed nor Left’), which became the anthem of the cause (Kaabour - composer, Mortada - lyricist, and Bitar - singer, 2017).

In theater, the late novelist Elias Khoury wrote an early theatrical work entitled ‘Mouzakkarat Ayyoub’ (‘The Memoirs of Job’), in which he explored the many dilemmas that the promised peace had failed to address. It was directed by Roger Assaf in 1994. Among the issues left unresolved during the postwar period was, of course, that of the missing, explored through the story of the late Odette Salem, whose son and daughter had disappeared. In 2010, Salem was killed in a tragic road accident while on her way to attend a meeting of the families; Wadad Halwani dedicated a short documentary to her. Another example is the 2025 play, ‘Wadad: An Ant That Digs in Stone,’ directed by Lina Abyad and featuring Christine Choueiri.

In cinema, the issue of the missing provided particularly rich subject matter. The late Jean Chamoun addressed it early on in the documentary, ‘Suspended Dreams’ (1992), before returning to it in his feature film, ‘In the Shadows of the City’ (2000). ‘Kidnapped’ (1999) by Bahij Hojeij, ‘Sleepless Nights’ (2012) by Eliane Raheb, and ‘The Soil and the Sea’ (2023) by Daniele Rugo all illustrate the substantial body of documentary works devoted to the subject. Last but not least, Ghassan Halwani’s ‘Erased, Ascent of the Invisible’ (2018) deserves particular recognition for its remarkable sensitivity.

Media Professionals

From the outset of the families’ struggle, the media—as a component of civil society—provided an essential platform for bringing the issue of missing and forcibly disappeared persons, and the voices of their families, to the wider public. In the twenty-first century in particular, several dates became established occasions for discussing the issue. In addition to 13 April, these included 30 August, the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances; 10 December, Human Rights Day; and 24 November, the anniversary of the founding of the CFKDL. On these occasions, articles and profiles of prominent figures in the struggle would be published. Those writing them were generally women journalists, for reasons already suggested above.

Here more than anywhere else, it is impossible to mention everyone who wrote about the issue. We therefore limit ourselves to the late Zaynab Yaghi, in recognition of her humility and her sustained coverage of the cause from its earliest days. From the outset, beginning in the 1980s, the late Talal Salman and the team at *As-Safir* newspaper (‘the voice of the voiceless’) also stood in support of the cause, providing over the years whatever printed materials and newspaper space were needed to keep the issue in the public eye.

As times changed, so did the means of communication. The CFKDL began producing video clips that needed to be broadcast. In addition to covering the CFKDL’s activities, the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC), Al Jadeed TV, and Sawt El Shaab Radio provided it with free promotional airtime.

The world changed once again, and the CFKDL became active on social media while also preparing to launch a dedicated website. It also developed the necessary ties with emerging online news outlets and began producing its own podcasts to mark relevant occasions.

Schools and Universities

From the end of the war until they left Lebanon 25 years ago, George Irani and his wife, Laurie King-Irani, worked with their students at the Byblos campus of the Lebanese American University (LAU), and more broadly within the community, to advance research on the memory of the war and ensure that its lessons would not go to waste.

In 2003, Students Without Borders organized the first exhibition on the issue of the missing on the campus of the American University of Beirut (AUB).

Under the supervision of Jihad Nammour, Saint Joseph University of Beirut (USJ) has run the Arab Master's Program in Democracy and Human Rights since 2015. The issue of missing persons in Lebanon and the wider region has held a permanent place within the program.

Since 2022, La Sagesse University, in turn, has offered courses on the issue of the missing in collaboration with Seeds for Legal Initiatives (SEEDS), with the aim of fostering collective memory and raising awareness among younger generations.

As a fitting conclusion, a dedicated team of specialists, under the supervision of designer Karma Tohmé, organized a notable exhibition entitled 'Timeline' (2023) to mark the fortieth anniversary of the CFKDL. The exhibition opened in the As-Safir newspaper building before moving permanently to Beit Beirut, where it has become a valuable and innovative resource for schools, universities, and anyone seeking to learn about the history and evolution of the issue.

Associations, Coalitions, Alliances, Specialized Bodies, and Regions

In addition to its ties with human rights organizations (and women's organizations), the CFKDL developed close relations during the lean years with the Lebanese Union for People with Physical Disabilities (LUPD). Adversity and experiences of marginalization can sometimes bring people together!

After the war, given the difficulty of sustaining momentum, a number of civil society organizations came together in coalitions. One notable example was the 2008 'Wahdatouna Khalasouna' ('Our Unity Is Our Salvation') initiative. In 2019, the Forum for Memory and Future was established to advance efforts to deal with the past and the violent conflicts that had marked it. In both initiatives, the CFKDL participated actively alongside its allies.

Throughout the CFKDL's long journey, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been a key ally almost from the outset, since 1985, one that Wadad Halwani describes as 'strategic.' Indeed, without the ICRC, the cause would not have advanced as far as it has. For decades, the ICRC provided advice, support, and institutional backing in the CFKDL's dealings with public officials. Its most important achievement, however, has been the collection, since 2015, of thousands of biological reference samples from relatives of missing and forcibly disappeared persons. These samples now provide a scientific basis for identifying the missing and forcibly disappeared even if those relatives die (ICRC, 2013).

Alongside this strategic partnership, a specialized organization called ACT for the Disappeared was established in 2010. It relieved the CFKDL of a considerable burden and facilitated communication among families across different regions, among other functions.

Last but not least, following the adoption of the law and the formation of the first National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared

(NCMFD), the Civil Forum to Support the Implementation of the Law on Missing and Forcibly Disappeared Persons (Law No. 105/2018) was established in 2023. Its purpose was to bridge several existing gaps, including those between the law and public awareness and between the NCMFD and the broader community. These gaps impede progress on the issue and will be considered in the conclusion below.

Conclusion: Conditions for Progress

If we were to stop here, we would be left with a rosy picture of the prospects for the issue of missing and forcibly disappeared persons, but that impression would be misleading. It is true that the CFKDL succeeded in breaking out of its isolation and forged alliances and relationships with various segments of civil society, and the leading figures of this struggle have become respected members of civil society, recognized for their competence both in Lebanon and abroad.

It is also true that the struggle produced an effective law—one capable of being implemented. In turn, the law led to the establishment of the NCMFD, which is now in its second term. But, the question remains: What is still needed to make decisive progress on the issue and move closer to its ultimate resolution?

On a many levels, Lebanon continues to suffer from deep structural problems that are difficult to navigate. Politically, the confessional political system has become dysfunctional and structurally incapable of providing inclusive solutions to citizens' problems. Economically, the banking system collapsed in 2019, reversing decades of economic gains and devastating the country's pension system. Socially, the overwhelming majority of the population is experiencing growing impoverishment, widening the gap between social classes.

In a country facing such deterioration, the issue of the missing and disappeared has yet to become a priority for either those who govern or those who are governed. This may be understandable, given the pressures of daily life. To put it plainly, the law on the missing and disappeared is ahead of public awareness. As for the influential political forces, having voted for the law, they appear to have either disregarded its implications, feared it (out of ignorance, since it does not call the Amnesty Law into question), or forgotten their own missing persons, let alone the missing of the 'others' whom they once abducted.

Even the law itself—which may have been adopted partly because of external pressure—could remain merely ink on paper, as increasingly happens with legislation representing social progress, unless the state provides the conditions and resources necessary for its implementation. Thus, with society largely unaware and the state lacking resolve, little can be achieved by civil society's repeated refrain that resolving this fundamental issue would serve as both a benchmark and an opportunity for the state to reclaim its role as the protector of its citizens.

To break this deadlock, two possible scenarios for progress may be envisaged, both of which would require an unexpected and shocking event: first, the identification of the remains of a missing person; or second, the discovery of a mass grave.

The first scenario could compel the state and its security and public service institutions to assume their responsibilities and emerge from their inertia. Only the state can implement the law by instructing its institutions to respect the authority and powers vested in the NCMFD—powers that might otherwise remain purely theoretical.

The second scenario could compel some sectors of societies to confront their past and recognize the law's practical value, prompting them, in turn, to press the state to implement it. In either case, what is required is a change in the state's conduct, enabling it to rise to the level of a 'civil' state, together with a change in the outlook of the broader public, bringing their outlook closer to the consciousness of a 'civil' society.

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Founded in 1989, the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies is an independently managed, non-partisan, non-profit, non-governmental think tank whose mission is to produce and advocate for policies that improve governance in Lebanon and the Arab region. LCPS's current research agenda focuses on: enhancing governance, informing the process of economic growth and sustainable development, promoting inclusive and effective social policies, and informing the development of policies for a sustainable environment. Four themes cut across the above areas of focus, including gender, youth, conflict resolution, and technology.

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