

Dealing with the Past *Series*

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The Search for Lebanon's Missing and Forcibly Disappeared: Interdisciplinary Science for a Humanitarian Cause

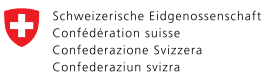
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Introduction

Lebanon's archaeological heritage bears witness to the glory of the powers that once ruled here, to wars and conquests, to destruction and reconstruction, and to the cultural wealth left behind. Yet amid this celebration of the past, how often do we pause to ask: how many of those who once lived on this same land were also victims of violence and atrocity, and how many of their stories have truly been acknowledged? Between the lines of national history taught in schools, or displayed in museums, how many voices remain unheard? How many families over the centuries were denied the chance to mourn their loved ones—those who went missing in times of war and conflict? While certain historical events are still remembered, countless personal tragedies have faded with time; their memories lost to silence.

More than fifty years have passed since the beginning of the Lebanese Civil War, and thirty-five years since it ended. Memories about the war continue to be passed down from one generation to the next; however, the case of the missing and forcibly disappeared has yet to be addressed, and the fate of many remains to be determined. The ability to find the missing and forcibly disappeared is getting more difficult by the day. The passing of former



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combatants who still hold crucial information and that of loved ones pursuing the truth hinders this process.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of the families of the missing and forcibly disappeared, the Law on the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared was passed by the Lebanese Parliament on November 20, 2018. This law established the National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared (NCMFD), tasked with creating and implementing the mechanism for the search.

This paper explores the search mechanism from the earliest stages of data collection and investigation—tracing the missing through estimates, family information, and the civil war narrative—to the physical search and recovery of remains, and ultimately their identification through multidisciplinary analysis and the reconciliation of evidence. It highlights how forensic science, in its broadest sense, can bring truth, justice, and a measure of peace to victims, their families, and the collective memory of the nation.

Tracing the Missing: Estimates, Narratives, and Investigative Pathways

The Missing People Number: Narrowing the Estimates

One of the main questions raised after the Lebanese civil war ended was how many have gone missing—with their fate still undetermined—over the course of the 15-year conflict. The officially announced and widely cited figure is over 17,000 Missing and Forcibly Disappeared Persons (MFDPs)—a number based on reports submitted to various authorities by family members declaring the disappearance of their loved ones during the war (ICMP, 2024).

Yet, not all families came forward. Some were silenced by security concerns; others had fled the country and sought to close off their past. Many, overwhelmed by loss, were unable to take the painful step of formally acknowledging the disappearance of a loved one. As a result, some lists remain incomplete, while others—compiled from a range of sources including authorities, associations, and institutions—contain duplications, with several entries referring to the same individual. Consolidating these lists is therefore a fundamental step in the search, helping to bring greater accuracy and truth to the record of the missing and forcibly disappeared.

The consolidation work entails a Unique File Number containing the personal data of each MFDP (ICRC, 2022a, p. 62; ICRC, 2022b, p. 23; Salado et al., 2021, p. 6). Initiated by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 2011, this work is to be pursued by the NCMFD, which is entrusted with compiling ongoing and future tracing requests and guaranteeing their protection in accordance with Law 105/2018 (Articles 26, 33, 34, 35, and 36).

Collecting Information from the Families

Each MFDP is assigned a dedicated file compiling all information that may assist in their identification. The process starts with an interview, an emotionally demanding stage that relies heavily on the active cooperation of relatives and close friends, and often requires several meetings. The collected data is regularly updated based on several factors: the interviewee's psychological and physical condition, their knowledge about the MFDP, the number of participants in the interview, and any new developments that may emerge over time (ICRC, 2022b, pp. 23-24; Salado et al., 2021, pp. 6-7 and p. 20).

The file contains detailed information on the genealogical history of the family, which helps identify potential DNA donors. It also includes a thorough account of the circumstances surrounding the disappearance, any possible links to specific events, and witness testimony, including the degree of certainty about the information provided.

The information collected about the MFDP should be as comprehensive as possible. This includes his/her occupation, detailed physical characteristics, unique identifying features, habits, medical and dental history, clothing, and personal items at the time of disappearance. If available, visual documentation such as medical and dental records, photographs, videos, and X-rays are gathered.

In line with the ICRC's guidelines on forensic genetics investigations in humanitarian settings (ICRC, 2020), Biological Reference Samples (BRS) from suitable familial donors are collected for subsequent DNA testing, and samples from the MFDP's belongings are also collected when possible. Additionally, the file must include the legal and administrative needs of the interviewees. Because the process involves collecting sensitive personal data, a signed letter of consent is required from each interviewee.

To date, families share their data with trusted institutions such as the ICRC (which has been collecting ante-disappearance data since 2012 and BRS since 2015), as well as with local organizations, political parties, or public institutions (Maalouf et al., 2015, pp. 296-297). All this information should be unified under the NCMFD in accordance with Law 105/2018, once the commission's data and information management system is fully operational. The security and confidentiality of the information will be ensured through both digital and physical infrastructure, to be built rapidly and in accordance with the ICRC's guidance on data preservation, trust, accessibility, and security (ICRC, 2022a).

Missing Persons and the Civil War Narrative

Decades of initiatives dedicated to documenting the Lebanese civil war—whether through testimonies, archival efforts, or academic research—have generated a significant body of knowledge. This accumulated material is

conserved in libraries and archival facilities within universities, research centres, organisations, and personal libraries, in Lebanon and abroad. The testimonies are wide and diverse, including collections of stories and different narratives. We might not be able to concur to write the history(ies) of the civil war, but we can find our MFDPs' stories.

Searching for the MFDPs requires diving deeper into the events of the war and surpassing the general and collective historical narrative that focuses on the events, the protagonists, and the geopolitical analysis that forgets about those who are absent. Searching for the MFDPs requires an effective mechanism that is rooted in a grounded, rigorous, and comprehensive collection of data, particularly concerning the circumstances surrounding each disappearance.

The more precise and reliable the information gathered, the more solid the foundation for subsequent investigative work. That is how the efforts invested by our scholars, historians, sociologists, and artists find their place. This wide range of experienced researchers, combined with a strong local network of informants and rich contextual knowledge, provides a powerful foundation for investigating events related to disappearances, checkpoints, detention centers, and suspected clandestine burial sites. This data is valuable for building hypotheses on the MFDPs' location or possible fate, or on the identities of located human remains that will determine the next course of action (ICRC, 2022b, p.10; Salado et al., 2021, p.5).

The Search and the Recovery

The Ground Search

Lebanon, with its extraordinary wealth of archaeological remains, has long attracted archaeologists from around the world and numerous international research projects. This has fostered a strong academic tradition within local universities, many of which offer advanced degrees in archaeology, including doctoral programs. Consequently, both Lebanese and international archaeologists possess extensive expertise in the country's diverse environments and in rigorous archaeological methodologies. These skills and experiences provide a solid foundation for forensic investigations—particularly in humanitarian contexts such as the search for MFDP—provided that strict protocols and international forensic standards are followed.

The process of locating and excavating concealed human remains builds directly upon well-established archaeological methods. While archaeology traditionally aims to uncover past civilizations through their material traces, the same principles of detection and precise documentation are applied when recovering forensic evidence (Dirkmaat and Adovasio, 1997, pp. 1-3).

Background research is a critical first step in identifying a potential area for investigation. It involves compiling comprehensive information on geological

and topographic features, the historical and archaeological record of the region, old maps and aerial photographs, as well as local testimonies and images documenting landscape changes that may reveal areas of concealment. Once this desk-based assessment is complete, a risk evaluation is carried out, addressing health and safety concerns, legal access permission, and the need to inform or coordinate with local communities and authorities (Cox et. al., 2013).

Fieldwork begins with a systematic on-site survey, often conducted through methodical pedestrian searches led by trained forensic archaeologists to detect any surface indicators of a clandestine burial. When necessary, non-invasive search and detection technologies are employed to identify and map subsurface anomalies or hidden structures. This meticulous approach ensures that no potential evidence is overlooked. When a feature proves to be of forensic relevance, it is fully documented and delimited, and the soil is sounded in preparation for the excavation (Dirkmaat and Adovasio, 1997, pp. 3-4; Cox et al., 2013).

The complexity of this phase depends heavily on environmental and human factors. In Lebanon, several challenges make this process particularly demanding. First, the country's rugged terrain, characterized by deep valleys and steep cliffs, complicates access and mapping. Second, its dense occupation: urban and rural areas alike are heavily built-up. Along the coast, rapid urban expansion and poor planning have produced chaotic construction patterns, while in rural regions, intensive land use and soil exploitation have altered the landscape considerably.

In addition, the Lebanese civil war ended over 35 years ago. As time passes, traces related to that period increasingly resemble ancient archaeological contexts, further complicating identification and interpretation. For these reasons, forensic investigations in Lebanon require a multidisciplinary, highly coordinated approach that integrates archaeological expertise with forensic rigor to ensure that every potential piece of evidence is documented, preserved, and correctly interpreted. As such, the most likely discovery on Lebanese soil would be human skeletal remains. However, taphonomic time (i.e., the progression of decomposition) does not necessarily correspond to chronological time (measured in months or years) (Sorg and Haglund, 2002, p. 7). With the exception of specific cases in which taphonomic conditions slow the deterioration of the body, a wide range of factors—such as seasonal variation, soil composition, plant activity, scavenger interference, and human alterations—play a crucial role in the decomposition of soft tissues, the displacement of remains, and, in some instances, the alteration of bone itself (through fragmentation or further decomposition) (Sorg and Haglund, 2002).

Unearthing the Remains

Once the presence of human remains is confirmed, the excavation process begins. At this stage, the site is treated both as a crime scene and as a historical context. It becomes the focus of a specialized operation that integrates archaeological and forensic investigation (Dirkmaat and Adovasio, 1997, p. 15).

Collaboration between archaeologists and physical anthropologists is crucial in reaching the most accurate and reliable results (Dirkmaat and Adovasio, 1997, p. 1). Archaeologists bring expertise in soil composition, excavation techniques, and stratigraphic analysis, as well as experience working with poorly preserved remains from ancient contexts—skills that are invaluable for recognizing, interpreting, and reconstructing highly fragmented remains. When they work in a forensic context, ‘they transform the evidence into a coherent story that tells us how the crime was committed’ (Snow, 2015, p. xxxiii). Physical anthropologists, in turn, contribute their specialized knowledge of human anatomy, body decomposition, and skeletal analysis.

This scientific procedure follows international guidelines and standards, combining both heavy machinery, when a large amount of soil needs to be extracted, as well as very precise instruments. Each bone and associated exposed remain is systematically located in three dimensions, fully recorded, labelled, photographed, lifted, appropriately packaged, and stored to maximize conservation requirements. Collection of samples for further forensic investigations is also conducted (Cox et al., 2013, p. 75-76).

Mortuary Procedures for Human Identification

Tracing Identity Through Multidisciplinary Efforts

The mortuary procedure follows strict standardized protocols and methodology that is approved worldwide and followed by international experts (UNHR 2017; Cox et al., 2013; Buikstra and Ubelaker, 1994). It represents a collaborative effort drawing on multiple scientific fields, including physical anthropology, pathology, radiography, odontology, molecular biology, and ballistics. The relative importance of one specialty over the others depends on the condition and completeness of the remains. Physical anthropologists will play a more important role in the case of skeletal remains, and DNA analysis will not be possible if the conservation of the remains is not satisfactory.

The first step involves implementing strict security measures in well-equipped facilities, which ensure that access is limited to authorized experts conducting the analysis, as well as family members, if required. Standardized documentary protocols designed to track each case through all stages are used. A primary radiographic survey is performed, along with an assessment of the remains, prior to the removal of clothing or associated artifacts, with complete photographic and descriptive documentation of all findings.

Depending on the state of the body, whether soft tissues are still preserved or full skeletonization is observed, decisions are taken regarding the appropriate analyses and sampling procedures. After cleaning, a complete inventory is performed, and fragmented parts are reconstructed. If commingled remains are present, a minimum number of individuals is estimated, and dissociated remains are inventoried separately. Finally, an assessment of taphonomic or postmortem changes is undertaken to distinguish between natural and anthropogenic alterations to the remains.

Estimating a biological profile from bones must rely on methods that have been scientifically developed and tested. Researchers verify these methods using skeletal collections of individuals whose characteristics are already known (like age at death and sex), ensuring the methods are accurate and reliable. Since there is no skeletal assemblage of reference in the Middle East, western references are used, but only when the method was peer-reviewed and tested on a statistically significant skeletal sample with known age, sex, ancestry, and stature.

All parameters allowing for the identification are used: biological sex, age at death, and living stature, particular morphological variables, ante-mortem lesions, specific anomalies or indicators like morphological variants, specific pathologies that occurred before the death of the individual. Peri-mortem lesions are recorded and are related to the circumstances of death. Bone samples are collected for DNA analysis. These results are then compared with the BRS provided by the relatives of the MFDP, in order to establish kinship links that can support the identification process.

Reconciling Evidence and Restoring Identity

Mortuary procedures and the scientific analysis of human remains involve a wide range of expertise, disciplines, and techniques (ICRC, 2022b; Salado et al., 2021). The identification of human remains is possible only through the comparison of multiple independent lines of evidence, relying not only on a single technique (like DNA), but on a comprehensive, holistic, and multidisciplinary approach.

Furthermore, successful identification strictly depends on the quality, quantity, and variability of the available data. Ultimately, the process involves comparing information gathered from human remains with data related to the MFDP. This comparative process allows the refinement of potential matches and supports the assessment of whether a specific known individual may correspond to the unidentified remains.

Finally, adopting a rigorous, inclusive approach that assigns proper importance to every stage of the process helps prevent misidentification, particularly in commingled contexts involving multiple bodies, body parts, skeletons, or bones. As there is no justification for misidentifying a person,

given the profound consequences for the family, scientists bear a significant responsibility in the careful execution of their work. Accordingly, extreme caution in issuing definitive identification guides forensic experts, especially when significant uncertainty persists due to insufficient evidence throughout the investigative process (ICRC, 2022b, p. 33-34).

Honoring the Identified, the Unidentified, and the Unfound

Following identification, standards for proper and dignified handover of human remains are followed in accordance with local regulations, taking into consideration the wishes of the families (ICRC, 2022b, p. 34). Families may be present at every step of the procedure and, in some cases, may actively contribute to the identification process by providing critical information on the MFDP's physical characteristics, which aids with the final identification.

For families who do not participate, a transparent explanation of the scientific procedures conducted on the remains is provided. Viewing of the remains can be arranged upon the family's request and is conducted with the necessary psychosocial support (psychologists or trained support staff) to help the family cope with the experience (ICRC, 2022b, p. 34–35).

Even when proper investigations are conducted, some remains may still not be identified due to missing information in the process (see above). With the support of the NCMFD, burying these individuals offers a form of care that was denied to them by their perpetrators (Rosenblatt, 2015, p. 165). This act constitutes a way to restore their dignity, if only through collective remembrance. The same principle applies when a body has not been found, yet sufficient evidence confirms that the person is dead.

Bodies without names, names without bodies—in both cases, the dead are denied one of the most fundamental human rights: the right to identity, a right that transcends all cultures and faiths (Rosenblatt, 2015, p. 164). Yet their families can find solace in knowing that these rights are being upheld by historians, investigators, and forensic experts. Through rigorous scientific procedures applied at every stage of the search, facts are examined, cross-checked, and verified in pursuit of the truth. Whatever the outcome, the process itself restores to the missing and forcibly disappeared their right to remembrance and ensures that they are not erased from collective memory.

Conclusion

The search for missing persons in Lebanon affects society as a whole, touching every family, every religious community, and every political party, whether directly or indirectly. The process is highly intricate: every stage—from collecting testimonies to analyzing evidence and identifying human remains—is closely interconnected. Managing this sensitive and complex chain of

procedures requires one central unified body: the National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared (NCMFD).

The commission's independence from political and confessional influence gives it the needed legitimacy to ensure that all national and international laws and standards are respected. It is also obliged to protect the extensive amount of information collected throughout the process, including data about the MFDPs, their families, witnesses, and all those involved in the investigations.

Furthermore, until the NCMFD's national search mechanism for MFDPs becomes fully operational, the NCMFD can place burial sites under judicial protection when evidence suggests that they are linked to enforced disappearances dating from 1975 onwards, particularly as there are not yet enough resources to begin excavations.

Finally, by being at the very heart of the NCMFD's work, family representatives participate in every part of the process—even the scientific stages—ensuring its transparency, its inclusiveness, and its overall success. Their involvement keeps the memory of their loved ones alive and passed on from generation to generation, so that their remains are not left to be discovered centuries later by archaeologists, unidentified among thousands of others, and reduced to mere traces of yet another painful event in Lebanon's long history of suffering.

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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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