

Dealing with the Past *Series*

About the author

Nayla Khodr Hamadeh is an education specialist advancing peacebuilding, dialogue, and social cohesion through history education. Co-founder and former president of the Lebanese Association for History, she empowers educators to address contested pasts through critical inquiry, oral history, and inclusive narratives, supporting reconciliation and collective memory in Lebanon and beyond.

The Past Is in Us and Around Us: The Societal Impact of Missing Persons from the Lebanese Civil War

Nayla Khodr Hamadeh

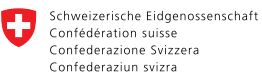
Introduction

The case of the missing in Lebanon is inextricably linked to the country's protracted civil war (1975-1990), during which thousands of individuals were forcibly disappeared, often at the hands of various militias and factions involved in the conflict.

Following the conflict, the 1990 Taif Agreement sought to establish peace and political stability, but it neglected critical issues of accountability and justice. The political landscape remained marked by a reluctance to openly address the past, allowing former warlords to occupy significant positions of power without facing repercussions for their actions during the conflict.

The unresolved cases of the missing resonate deeply in Lebanese society, complicating reconciliation efforts and emphasizing the need for historical memory. The issue also deepens sectarian divides, as conflicting narratives about the war hinder reconciliation and reinforce cycles of impunity. The lack of a true reckoning with the past undermines efforts to build a cohesive national identity. Recently, there has been growing recognition of the need for transitional justice to address these grievances, a framework that is vital for healing, rebuilding trust, and fostering a more inclusive future for all Lebanese citizens.

In the shadow of Lebanon's turbulent history, this paper invites the reader to journey through the lingering echoes of the civil war and the unresolved



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Designed by Zéna Khairallah

fate of its missing. It traces how these silent absences ripple through society—fracturing trust, shaping collective memory, and challenging the nation’s quest for unity. It offers not only a reflection on the past, but a call to embrace remembrance and healing as foundations for Lebanon’s future.

Background

The war that erupted in 1975 was the result of a complex interplay of internal and external factors. At its core, Lebanon’s fragile political system—built on a delicate sectarian balance—exacerbated tensions among its diverse religious communities. Economic disparities and regional inequalities further fueled grievances.

The nature and naming of the conflict remain contested. While some refer to it as a ‘civil war,’ others refer to it as ‘Lebanon’s war’ (Sinno, 2018) or ‘the war for others’ (Tueni, 1985), reflecting its complex multi-layered character and the involvement of numerous external actors, including local militias, neighboring states, and international powers. The absence of an official name for the conflict is often attributed to an official policy of denial and the promotion of forgetting, as well as the difficulty of conducting objective research in a context where partisan and communal passions are regularly reignited by current events (Khalaf, 2017).

The consequences of the war were devastating. Between 120,000 and 150,000 people are estimated to have been killed, tens of thousands were injured, and over a million were displaced, with around 700,000 emigrating abroad (Labaki and Abou Rjeili, 2005; Brogan, 1998). Amid conflicting tolls, ‘the Lebanese government issued a report after the war estimating the total number of war casualties, as follows: 144,240 killed; 197,506 wounded, including 13,455 with permanent disabilities; 17,415 missing, among whom 13,968 were kidnapped and presumed dead,’ according to Lebanon Support (Lebanon Support, 2014). The war left Lebanon’s infrastructure in ruins, weakened the state, empowered militias, and deepened sectarian divides.

Although the Taif Accord, signed in 1989, sought to restore stability, it failed to address deep divisions and instead reinforced sectarian powersharing. The war’s trauma and competing narratives continue to obstruct reconciliation and shape Lebanon’s ongoing challenges.

A major shortcoming of the accord was its failure to address the fate of thousands of missing and forcibly disappeared persons. By prioritizing political compromise over truthseeking and accountability, and culminating in a sweeping general amnesty, it sidelined the rights of families and entrenched impunity. The 1991 General Amnesty Law further institutionalized a ‘politics of managed forgetting,’ shielding perpetrators from accountability and preventing truth, reparations, or reconciliation mechanisms from emerging. This legacy has produced a political culture resistant to confronting the past.

Civil society, particularly the Committee of Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared, has played a crucial role in advocating for the right to know the fate of the missing. For decades, their advocacy could not generate results despite the formation of more than three commissions. The pivotal decision issued by the State Shura Council in 2014 marked a significant advancement in Lebanese law by affirming that families have the right to know the fate of their loved ones. This decision reflects an important evolution in the performance and independence of the judicial authorities (ICTJ Lebanon, n.d.).

Persistent efforts eventually led to the passage of Law 105 in 2018, which created the National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared Persons. However, the commission has faced significant challenges, including political inertia and limited resources.

Overall, Lebanon's approach to transitional justice stands in stark contrast to international frameworks, which emphasize four pillars: the right to know, justice, reparations, and guarantees of non-recurrence (Orentlicher, 2005). SwissPeace and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs developed a Conceptual Framework on Dealing with the Past that proposes a comprehensive approach, suggesting that these four pillars are interconnected and complementary (SwissPeace, 2016).

This process of addressing historical grievances is understood as a long-term endeavor that requires careful and thoughtful integration. While Law 105 grants families the right to know, broader reforms—such as an independent judiciary and official processes for reconciliation—remain unfulfilled. Today, Lebanon's journey toward truth, justice, and reconciliation is ongoing, with meaningful reform and accountability still needed to heal the wounds of the past.

After the fall of the Syrian regime, Syrian-Lebanese cooperation marked a significant step forward. The Lebanese government, led by MP Nawwaf Salam, and Ahmad al-Charaa's transitional administration agreed to jointly address the fate of Lebanese individuals held in Assad's detention centers, as well as Syrian prisoners in Lebanese jails. This collaboration is vital for uncovering new truths about the civil war era and deepening understanding of the complex circumstances surrounding the missing.

Guaranteeing non-recurrence remains a long-term challenge, requiring democratic institutions, a functioning judiciary, and the rule of law. While initial steps included demobilization and disarmament, constitutional and security sector reforms have mostly focused on power-sharing between Muslims and Christians. An independent judiciary, free from sectarian and political influence, remains unrealized.

Societal Impact

The absence of official investigations and the state's reluctance to address the fate of the missing have sustained injustice and mistrust, weakening confidence in public institutions and hindering national reconciliation. This neglect fragments communities and reinforces social exclusion, as unresolved disappearances prevent collective healing.

Women whose relatives remain missing face persistent legal and social uncertainty, which deepens marginalization and reflects wider structural failures. Addressing the issue of the missing is therefore essential not only for justice, but for restoring trust, strengthening social cohesion, and advancing a genuine process of dealing with the past.

Community Dynamics

Mistrust Among Communities

Families across sectarian and political lines share the anguish of unresolved disappearances. When the state neglects these cases, it deepens feelings of injustice and alienation, discouraging positive intercommunal engagement and weakening social cohesion. Communities retreat into isolated narratives of loss, often viewing others with suspicion rather than solidarity.

Unresolved disappearances also constitute a profound form of ambiguous loss that extends to entire communities (Robins, 2024). When loved ones are physically absent yet psychologically present, the lack of closure disrupts grieving, impairs decisionmaking, and leaves individuals and communities emotionally immobilized.

This uncertainty challenges notions of belonging and citizenship. It influences how communities and the state relate to those affected. Recognizing the missing and forcibly disappeared as collective tragedies can help reframe the past as a shared experience. By acknowledging collective pain, the state can promote inclusive narratives that honor memory, strengthen national belonging, and encourage communities to transcend sectarian divisions in pursuit of collective healing.

A stronger national identity requires acknowledging shared experiences and collective pain. By recognizing the missing and forcibly disappeared as a collective tragedy, the state can promote a unifying narrative that honors their memory, reinforces national belonging, and supports healing across sectarian divides.

Strengthening Social Solidarity Through Resolution

Uncovering the truth about Lebanon's missing and forcibly disappeared and providing closure to their families would have a transformative societal impact. It would ease prolonged anguish, open space for dialogue and empathy across communities, and help dismantle mistrust. By addressing these unresolved

cases, the state affirms its commitment to justice and human rights, restoring trust in institutions and strengthening social cohesion and long-term stability (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2016).

Welcoming Families into Society

When the plight of the missing is embraced as a collective concern, rather than the isolated struggle of affected families, it fosters unity and a shared sense of responsibility, transforming individual pain into a catalyst for national solidarity and reconciliation. Welcoming families into society reduces isolation and stigma, rebuilds trust, and strengthens social cohesion through empathy. At the state level, official acknowledgment, legal protections, and institutional support affirm that the fate of the missing is a national issue, not solely a private one.

Education as a Path for Healing and Reconciliation

The Swiss Framework for Dealing with the Past places history education and the preservation of historical narratives at the core of the 'right to now.' By integrating multiple perspectives and disciplinary approaches, education can address collective traumas, foster solidarity among divided communities, and cultivate a culture of dialogue and understanding in younger generations, contributing to intergenerational healing and the prevention of future conflicts.

Lebanon's education system is divided between a small, centralized public sector and a large, decentralized private sector mostly controlled by religious sects and in some cases affiliated to political parties. This structure perpetuates exclusion and sectarian divisions, as private schools reinforce group identities and power hierarchies, undermining long-term social cohesion.

A clear gap exists between civics curricula that promote values such as peace, justice, and equality and the realities students experience, leading many to dismiss these lessons as abstract or unrealistic. Although diversity is formally emphasized, curricula rarely equip students with practical skills for navigating differences or resolving conflict. Moreover, religious education often reinforces sectarian boundaries rather than fostering inclusion and reconciliation (Hogsett, 2020).

Education in Lebanon is seen as a key tool for social cohesion, especially in post-conflict contexts where history education is highly politicized and contested (Shuayb, Akar, Makouk, and Hashisho, 2012; Bush and Saltarelli, 2000; Bentrovato, 2017). Despite reforms in 1997 and 2010 aimed at promoting unity through shared curricula, sectarian divisions and socioeconomic inequalities persisted, with attempts to unify religious education blocked by sectarian leaders (Shuayb, 2016).

As a result, outdated history curricula persist, prioritizing a unified national narrative and leaving generations unaware of recent events, including the fate of thousands of missing and disappeared. This historical gap, maintained by policymakers' reluctance to address recent events, has hindered reconciliation and transitional justice, despite sustained calls from civil society for more inclusive and critical approaches.

A curriculum reform launched in 2022 offers renewed potential to address the past through inclusive content and a competency-based approach, supported by teacher training in both public and private schools. In parallel, the Lebanese Association for History (LAH) and civil society partners have strengthened educators' capacities to engage with sensitive histories, underscoring the importance of targeted training to foster dialogue, critical thinking, and empathy.

Despite these efforts, classrooms still provide limited exposure to the civil war and the issue of the missing and forcibly disappeared. The absence of a national reconciliation process continues to discourage many families from speaking openly about the past (Barakat and Ouais, 2023).

Research shows that teaching about missing persons and forced disappearances in post-conflict societies enables students to understand the ongoing impact of the past, develop empathy, and support a more cohesive society. Addressing these sensitive histories in the classroom is therefore crucial for building collective memory and supporting reconciliation (Association for Historical Dialogue and Research, 2024).

Psychosocial Impact

Ambiguous loss theory highlights how uncertainty about the fate of missing persons causes severe psychological distress. This ambiguity disrupts the grieving process, impairs decision-making, and leaves families emotionally immobilized. Studies show that such unresolved loss leads to depression, anxiety, and family conflict, as people struggle to make sense of their situation and cannot reconstruct normal roles or rituals.

The lack of closure affects both individuals and communities, erasing the usual boundaries between life and death and leaving suffering unacknowledged. Over time, this persistent uncertainty is even more stressful than confirmed death, and its emotional impact can be exploited for political purposes (Robins, 2024).

A Comparative Perspective

Lebanon's handling of missing persons from the civil war has been characterized by prolonged silence, political reluctance, and fragmented efforts. Despite limited recent progress, many families still lack answers, and the absence of a comprehensive truthseeking or reconciliation process continues to fuel trauma, mistrust, and impunity.

Experiences from other postconflict societies show that combining truthseeking, justice, and acknowledgment of suffering is essential for healing and rebuilding social trust.

In the case of South Africa, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established, providing a platform for victims and perpetrators to share their stories. The TRC's Missing Persons Task Team has played a crucial role in tracing and recovering the remains of anti-apartheid activists, offering closure to families and contributing to national healing. While not all cases have been resolved, and some victims feel material justice is lacking, the process of truth-telling and acknowledgment has helped foster reconciliation and strengthen public trust in institutions (National Prosecuting Authority of South Africa, 2025; Aronson, 2011).

In Northern Ireland, many individuals 'disappeared' during the Troubles. After the conflict, the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains (ICLVR) was established to recover remains and provide answers to families. Although Northern Ireland did not implement a broad truth and reconciliation commission, the targeted approach of the ICLVR has been effective in addressing some legacy issues. However, the lack of a comprehensive reconciliation process means that some wounds and divisions persist, and efforts to deal with the past remain contested (National Prosecuting Authority of South Africa, 2025).

Following the 1994 genocide, Rwanda pursued a national unity and reconciliation process. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) was established along with community-based courts. These mechanisms aimed to uncover the truth, prosecute perpetrators, and promote restorative justice. Reconciliation villages have brought together survivors and perpetrators, fostering forgiveness and social cohesion. While significant progress has been made, ongoing discoveries of mass graves and persistent psychological trauma highlight the challenges of achieving full closure and lasting peace (Bigabo et al., 2025).

These countries have actively sought truth, accountability, and reconciliation, and have generally seen greater progress in healing, social cohesion, and trust in institutions, even if challenges remain. Where the fate of the missing is left unresolved (as in Lebanon), societies experience prolonged trauma, mistrust, and division, with families denied closure and justice.

Recommendations

Accelerating Truth Uncovering

Sustained support to the National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared is essential to enable it to fulfil its mandate of truth-seeking. Key policy measures include: 1) securing the commission's financial and

administrative independence through a dedicated and sufficient budget, free from political interference; 2) Guaranteeing its administrative autonomy to ensure the continuity of its work; 3) Strengthening its legal authority through clear legislation obliging all public institutions—including security agencies and the judiciary—to cooperate fully and grant access to all relevant archives and information; 4) Safeguarding the commission’s political independence by shielding it from sectarian quotas and political bargaining that have previously delayed its formation and undermined its credibility (Touma and Zaghbour, 2020); 5) Urgently protecting suspected mass grave sites and burial locations from destruction or tampering, as mandated by Law 105, to preserve evidence and uphold families’ right to truth; 6) Ensuring the commission’s representation in all official delegations and negotiations concerning missing persons, particularly in bilateral talks with foreign states (e.g., Syria), to prevent marginalization and protect families’ rights (AFP and L’Orient Today Staff, 2025).

Unleashing the Power of Education

Education plays a crucial role in ensuring that the legacies of the civil war—including the case of thousands of disappearances—become opportunities for building a deeper understanding of the past, acknowledging collective losses, and fostering social solidarity.

Main recommendations are:

- *Curricular reforms should* adopt a multiperspective, conflictsensitive approach to teaching the civil war and the issue of the missing; promote critical thinking about competing representations of the past, enabling students to navigate differences and engage in peaceful conflict resolution; ensure that history curricula address recent events, including the civil war period and forced disappearances; integrate narratives of the missing and the war into school and university curricula through disciplinary approaches that reflect multiple perspectives and convey the complexity of Lebanon’s history and the societal impact of unresolved disappearances; and raise youth awareness through workshops and dedicated programs that encourage dialogue on conflict resolution, the significance of history, and the value of social cohesion.
- *Teacher Training* should be provided in the form of extensive training programs for educators in both public and private schools, equipping them to engage with sensitive histories and to foster dialogue, conflict analysis skills, and empathy in the classroom.
- *Cultural production*—including novels, stories, films, and theater— should be leveraged to build public awareness and contribute to a shared and healed collective memory.

Rendering the Legal System a Partner

To date, the link between dealing with the past and the legal system in Lebanon has remained limited. Aside from Law 105, few measures have been adopted to address the needs of the missing and forcibly disappeared and their families. Strengthening this relationship requires several steps:

- *Capacity building for legal professionals*

Legal professionals must be equipped with the skills and knowledge to address cases of missing and forcibly disappeared persons in a sensitive and victim-centered manner. In countries such as Sierra Leone and Cambodia, specialized training for judges and lawyers has strengthened capacity in transitional justice and victims' rights. Similar initiatives in Lebanon could be led by civil society organizations, such as the Legal Agenda, to provide practical guidance on investigations and survivor-focused legal approaches (Center for Human Rights and International Justice, n.d.).

- *Developing a comprehensive reparations framework*

An effective reparations system should combine psychological and material support for victims and their families. International experience shows that reparations often include official acknowledgment, public apologies, remembrance initiatives, and financial compensation, as seen in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In Lebanon, reparations could include social assistance for families of the missing and returnees alongside psychological support through counseling and community-based memorialization (McLeod, 2015).

Building Solidarity

Public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives should be mandated to foster empathy, reduce stigma, and build broader support for the cause of the missing and for transitional justice. Their impact can be amplified through coordinated efforts involving mainstream media and new media, as well as the ministries of Information, Education, Culture, and Justice. The objective is to raise national awareness, encourage community understanding, and affirm that the case of the missing and disappeared is a national concern.

To achieve this, several steps are essential. The state should formally acknowledge the suffering of the families of the missing by integrating their stories into national narratives, commemorations, and educational materials. Legal frameworks must support the mandate of the National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared, ensure families' rights, and provide psychological and social assistance.

While civil society has led discussions on ambiguous loss and created spaces for families to share their experiences, the state should establish nationwide platforms for cross-community dialogue. Finally, national memorials or official

remembrances should be instituted to honor the missing and recognize the shared trauma of their absence.

These actions will help build solidarity, empathy, and a more cohesive society, where the case of the missing is no longer just a private sorrow, but a shared national cause that unites citizens and strengthens their relationship with the State (Barakat and Ouais, 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the past exists both within us and around us, and there is an urgent need to address it. One key area on this path is the unresolved cases of missing persons in Lebanon and their impact on social stability and national unity.

By examining the importance of acknowledging past grievances through education, legal reforms, and comprehensive reparations, it becomes clear that several measures can help. Key recommendations are necessary for healing and reconciliation and represent an urgent call to action to ensure social stability and cohesion. Lebanon cannot afford to delay; policymakers and society must prioritize this issue now to ensure that remembrance and justice guide the country toward a peaceful and united future.

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Contact Information Lebanese Center for Policy Studies

Sadat Tower, Tenth Floor
P.O.B 55-215, Leon Street,
Ras Beirut, Lebanon
T +961 21 799 301
info@lcps-lebanon.org
www.lcps-lebanon.org