


Dealing with the Past *Series*

About the author

Wadad Halwani is a retired public sector employee. She worked as a secondary school teacher within the Directorate General of Education for ten years and served as an inspector at the Directorate General of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers for twenty-five years. She is the founder and director of the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon and is one of the leading activists advocating for the rights of the kidnapped and missing, as well as victims of enforced disappearance. She is also a founding member of several international networks concerned with victims of human rights violations, particularly cases of loss and enforced disappearance, in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Paris.

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Missing Persons in Lebanon: A Lasting Legacy of War, Fifty Years On

Wadad Halwani

President of the Committee of the Families of Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon (CFKDL)

Introduction

Among the many horrors of the human experience – indeed, among the most horrific – is war. Human beings willingly wage war against each other, losing their humanity in the process. In war, reason retreats, while weapons and armed men dominate. They subjugate defenseless civilians and turn them into victims – killed, wounded, disabled, or missing.

The war that ravaged Lebanon for fifteen years (1975-1990) was no exception to this destructive rule, the repercussions of which were felt at every level. Human losses were estimated at 144,240 killed, 184,051 wounded, 17,415 missing, and 13,455 physically disabled, in addition to hundreds of thousands of people who were displaced or forced into exile, not to mention the financial, economic, political, and social losses (An-Nahar newspaper, 1992, p. 5).

Yet the cause of the missing and forcibly disappeared remains one of the most painful legacies of that war, which gave rise to many other wars down the line. This issue continues to be an open wound in the daily lives of many families and a defining mark of a state that has neglected to address the legacy of a war that has now marked its fiftieth anniversary.

Background

On Friday, September 24, 1982, as Israeli forces were nearing the completion of their withdrawal from Beirut after besieging and shelling it for a month and

a half, from July 13 to August 28, there was a knock on our door. Adnan, my husband, was taken under the pretext of questioning him about a car accident, assuring me it would take no more than five minutes, after which he would return. The accident, of course, never happened. And Adnan has not returned since that day.

I knocked on every official's door I was able to reach. All I received were words of sympathy for my situation and promises that yielded nothing.

After exactly two months of searching for Adnan, I found myself searching for dozens, then hundreds, then thousands like him. This came after I issued a call through a local radio station, inviting anyone who had lost a family member to attend an introductory meeting.

I struggle to find words to describe that extraordinary scene on the street in wartime. More than one hundred women gathered, accompanied by dozens of children. I tried to regain my composure, as I found myself prey to questions gnawing at me in the face of the crimes inflicted upon these women and upon loved ones stolen from their homes, from their workplaces, or from checkpoints erected at the whim and by the decision of the warring leaders.

I realized that something had to be done. My booming voice, honed by my profession as a public school teacher, helped me appeal to the women to stop crying and to think about what we had to do to save our loved ones. The decision was made to meet with the prime minister to demand that he assume his responsibility and work to secure the release of our loved ones. Our march set off from the gathering point in front of Abdel Nasser Mosque on Corniche al-Mazraa, with voices rising to demand the return of our loved ones, amid sighs and tears.

As the procession approached the building of Télé Liban (the national television station), the regular security forces confronted us, attempting to prevent us from proceeding by striking us with the butts of their rifles, citing the state of emergency declared in the country. But what state of emergency could be more urgent than restoring those who had been stolen and whose lives had been forcibly halted without any justification or legal grounds? Due to our stubbornness and determination, a compromise was reached: A delegation from among us would be allowed to ride in the military jeep with the commanding officer to the Grand Serail (the prime minister's office), on the condition that the demonstration dispersed.

In the presence of the prime minister, the women began recounting the circumstances of their loved ones' abductions. He was visibly empathetic, and he openly acknowledged the legitimacy of our demands. However, his stance shifted when he was asked what measures he would take. He appeared unsettled, speaking of the weakness of the state and its lack of authority in the face of militia power and influence, invoking the popular proverb: "The eye can see, but

the hand falls short.' One of the women interrupted him, rebuking him at the top of her voice: 'Resign. Why don't you resign if you can't do anything to help us?'

What we encountered that long day was a resounding alarm bell, signaling the need to continue our meetings and organize ourselves to demand the return of our loved ones. That was on November 24, 1982, the date marking the birth of the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Missing in Lebanon (CFKDL).

I The Difficult Journey (1982-90)

Dar al-Fatwa: The Starting Point

We had to find a place to hold our daily meetings. Dar al-Fatwa in the Aicha Bakkar area was chosen. Certainly, this choice was not driven by sectarian affiliation, even though most of us present were in West Beirut, in accordance with the division imposed by war and its combatants. Rather, it was intended to keep us free from the tutelage or authority of any of the political parties or militias active at the time.

Plight of the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared Becomes a Movement

The majority of the family members were women, given that most of the victims were men. We came from different social backgrounds, intellectual affiliations, and educational and cultural levels. What united us was the act of abduction. At first, it was not easy to accept one another, to listen to each other, to respect feelings, opinions, and differences, and to comprehend and acknowledge our shared pain without distinguishing between one abducted person and another, regardless of the identity of the abductor.

Our first task was to call on families to come to Dar al-Fatwa, where we began recording the names of the abducted, along with the date and place of their abduction or disappearance. This was to affirm that the kidnapped and missing were not numbers, but individuals with names and families who loved them and awaited their return. We regularly sent copies of the completed name lists to several daily newspapers and carried copies with us to every official we visited.

We knocked on the door of every official without exception, including militia and party leaders, as well as religious authorities. Most of our marches were suppressed and attempts were made to disperse us. Demonstrations in the streets of the capital became a daily occurrence, despite the gunfire and the threats of armed groups. We were almost the only group demonstrating on the streets of the capital, a resounding voice demanding the release of those whom the warring parties had torn from the embrace of their families. We also defied the demarcation lines, transforming them into meeting points with our counterparts from the eastern part of the city, for dialogue and joint planning.

None of us imagined that this cause would consume our lifetimes, nor that we would confront so many hardships and challenges, from security risks to the

false promises to attempts at co-optation and outright threats. It must also be noted that several women and girls were subjected to violent, sometimes life-threatening, intimidation. We organized ourselves and, in a country torn apart by sectarian conflict, formed a community that transcended sects, denominations, regions, intellectual and ideological affiliations, and nationalities.

Three Committees That Achieved Nothing

As protests intensified, then-Prime Minister Chafik al-Wazzan formed a committee to investigate the fate of the kidnapped and missing (July 20, 1983). We soon discovered the ineffectiveness of that committee, prompting the late Grand Mufti of the Republic, Sheikh Hassan Khaled, to establish the Dar al-Fatwa Committee (December 11, 1983). When the mufti's committee yielded no results, and as our mobilization escalated, Prime Minister Rashid Karami issued Decision No. 14 (June 1, 1984), establishing a committee to gather information on the missing.

Three committees were formed within two years, without a single abducted person being returned to their family.

The Taif Agreement and the Declaration of the End of the War

The National Accord Document was signed on September 30, 1989, and ratified by Parliament on November 5, 1989. The declared aim of the agreement was to bring the Lebanese war to an end, and the official cessation of military operations was announced in October 1990. We went to sleep to the rattle of war and woke up to the news that it had ended. Peace had arrived, and after a long wait, we celebrated it.

II The Peace Process Bypassed the Missing and Their Families (1991-99)

A Peace of 'Let Bygones Be Bygones'

The families of the war's missing were fully prepared to welcome peace. Some busied themselves improving their homes, repainting walls, repairing furniture, cleaning curtains, buying new clothes, and taking other steps befitting the magnitude of the moment.

But the peace process, which was supposed to bring our loved ones back, was not fair. It ignored the missing and their families. The shock was deeply painful. What peace were they speaking of, when those abducted and disappeared during the war were not officially accounted for, and not a single individual successfully returned?

Before we could even emerge from our state of shock and anger, a law was issued granting amnesty to the perpetrators of crimes committed during the war, while disregarding the victims and their families (General Amnesty Law No. 84 of August 26, 1991).

Authorities Attempt to Sideline the Cause

The atmosphere of the declared ‘peace’ left the CFKDL feeling profoundly frustrated, isolated, and further marginalized. Most people were preoccupied with shedding the dust of war and turning a new page in their lives. The General Amnesty Law paved the way for perpetrators, instead of holding them accountable for their crimes or even questioning them about the victims of their actions—it elevated them to positions of authority and decision-making. We saw them fill the seats of Parliament through appointment, effectively stalling the democratic process. They and their associates took control of ministries and public administrations, dividing among themselves the country’s spoils.

With the declaration of that ‘peace,’ or rather the ‘post-war’ phase as the CFKDL termed it, a policy of blackout was adopted. Media outlets were placed under censorship, and a thick wall was erected around the events of the war, as though it had never occurred. Under the banner of reconstruction, every dissenting voice was silenced. The voice of the CFKDL, however, did not fade. It was the first to expose the falsehood of that peace.

The authorities attempted to circumvent our demands, resorting to intimidation and accusing us of threatening civil peace by persisting in our call to know the fate of the missing. Yet this official conduct only intensified our mobilization. One official eventually shifted from intimidation to persuasion, urging us to be ‘reasonable,’ to leave the past behind, and to look ahead by joining the reconstruction effort. Our response was clear: ‘What kind of future can be built, sir, if the past remains unaddressed?’ That same official later attempted to dangle financial incentives before the families in exchange for closing the file permanently.

When all attempts to subdue us failed – attempts that only strengthened our insistence on our right to know the fate of our loved ones, whether alive or dead – the authorities issued a law on ‘Procedures to Be Followed to Establish the Death of Missing Persons’ (Law No. 434 of May 15, 1995).

The tragic irony of this law was that while the CFKDL demanded disclosure of the fate of the missing, the law purported to ‘grant’ families procedures enabling them to declare their missing relatives legally dead. More distressing still were the law’s stated justifications, which claimed that declaring a missing person dead would provide psychological relief to the family. The families were demanding their right to know the fate of their missing, while the law sought instead to relieve them psychologically.

Even more troubling was the fact that the law stipulated that ‘a request for a declaration of death shall be submitted to the competent court of the sect to which the missing person belongs.’ In other words, the legislation sought to fragment this unified humanitarian and national cause into individual case files to be handled by sectarian courts.

It is worth noting that only a very small minority of families resorted to this law, and even then, their goal was primarily to resolve pending inheritance matters, not out of conviction that their loved one was dead. In some cases, reliance on the law even generated disputes within the same family.

III CFKDL's Quest for a Just Law (2000–2018)

Building a Circle of Friends

From the perspective of the families of the missing and forcibly disappeared, the only positive outcome of that inhumane and unethical law was that it awakened in them the awareness that this collective cause was not their responsibility alone, but the responsibility of Lebanese society as a whole, its individuals and institutions alike. Translating this conviction into action, the CFKDL sought to attract allies to its cause. At every activity it organized or participated in, it invited attendees who supported its demands to register their names and phone numbers in a notebook designated for that purpose. In this way, the CFKDL established a supportive 'Friends' framework that embraced its cause and adopted its demands.

The Friends framework adopted the CFKDL's slogan, 'It Is Our Right to Know,' as its name. In partnership with the Committee, it developed an action plan centered on three demands:

- The establishment of an official commission to investigate all kidnapped and missing persons and determine their fate.
- The adoption of a social welfare project for the families of the kidnapped and missing, to shield them from hunger, unemployment, and illness, and to guarantee them a decent standard of living.
- The declaration of April 13 of each year as a 'National Day of Remembrance' and the erection of a memorial honoring the victims of the war as a lasting condemnation of its crimes.

Launching the Friends Support Network

At a joint press conference held at the Press Syndicate in Beirut on October 29, 1999, the Friends framework announced its formation and called on citizens to join its ranks. Its statement read in part: 'Among those we forgot are the thousands of our people living with deep wounds that have yet to heal. They are the families of thousands of kidnapped and missing persons for whom none of our officials has taken the trouble to answer a simple question: If the war is over, where are they? Only the CFKDL has neither forgotten nor faltered... A handful of mothers and wives continued their mobilization... and with patience, determination, and stubbornness, shattered the mountain of our indifference and forced us to lift our heads from where we had buried them...' (As-Safir, 1999, p. 5).

In turn, the CFKDL expressed its relief at no longer standing alone. In its statement, it said: 'Today we feel that we can rest, if only for a moment, from the burden of our suffering that has consumed us all these years... How beautiful it is to rest, even for a moment, with a glimmer of hope in our hearts because our society has begun to hear us.' Yes, our confidence grew with the formation of the Friends framework supporting our cause in the face of a state that had failed to hear us through its successive governments over seventeen years (As-Safir, 1999, p. 5).

Commission Urges Families to Declare Their Missing Dead

Approximately three months after the formation of the Friends framework and the launch of our joint national campaign, 'It Is Our Right to Know,' Prime Minister Salim Hoss established an official commission to investigate all kidnapped and missing persons and determine their fate. The commission was given three months to submit its report (Decision No. 10/2000, dated January 21, 2000). Its mandate was later extended for an additional three months (Decision No. 89/2000, dated April 25, 2000).

The official commission's report read like an obituary notice for the missing. It stated that no one had been found alive, but that mass graves had been identified, including one within the Martyrs' Cemetery in the Horsh Beirut area, another in the Mar Mitr Cemetery in Achrafieh, and a third in the English Cemetery in Tahwita. It further noted that some bodies had been thrown into the sea.

In keeping with the broader policy of turning a blind eye to the war and concealing the crimes committed during that period, these graves were not handled in a proper scientific manner. The justification offered was the inability to conduct the necessary identification tests within Lebanon and the high cost of performing them abroad.

The commission's report ultimately concluded that 'all kidnapped and missing persons whose disappearance dates back four years or more and whose bodies have not been found shall be considered legally deceased,' and that their families should therefore be instructed to petition the competent court to establish death in accordance with the law.

It is worth noting that this conclusion mirrored the substance of Law No. 434 mentioned earlier: the refusal of the state to accept its responsibility and the transfer of the burden onto families, by converting this unifying humanitarian cause into individual case files placed under the jurisdiction of the sect to which the missing person belonged (Al-Ittihad, 2000; An-Nahar, 2000; As-Safir, 2000).

Three Committees and More Than Ten Years Without Results

Before the families of the victims could regain their breath after the

announcement that their loved ones were dead, without any bodies being found, and before the ink had dried on that ‘fabricated’ report, 54 Lebanese detainees were released from Syrian prisons as a ‘gesture of goodwill,’ according to the terminology used by the head of the Syrian regime at the time.

This episode illustrates how the authorities dealt with the suffering of thousands of families of missing persons: With one stroke of the pen, their loved ones were declared dead; with another, they were restored to life, disregarding even the most basic human and moral considerations (An-Nahar, 2000).

Faced with the families’ reactions, once to the loss of a dear one, and again to the official belittling of their suffering, the government moved to contain their uprising. It established a new body, named the ‘Commission for Receiving Complaints from Families of the Missing’ (Decision No. 1/2001, dated January 5, 2001), and once again called on families to fill out forms at police stations. The commission’s mandate was extended several times (Decision No. 69/2001, dated June 9, 2001, extending its term by six months; An-Nahar, 2005; and Decision No. 155/2001, dated December 7, 2001, extending its term by another six months).

The Beirut Bar Association, a member of the commission, later published a draft of its report in An-Nahar newspaper. The report’s conclusion revealed that the fate of no missing person had been determined; instead, the missing were merely distributed across lists according to the entity allegedly responsible for their disappearance, based on the testimonies of their families.

Following the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon on April 30, 2005, in the aftermath of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, families of Lebanese detainees in Syrian prisons declared that the withdrawal was incomplete as long as their relatives had not been released. Together with the Committee in Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile (SOLIDE), they launched an open-ended sit-in in a tent erected in Gibran Khalil Gibran Garden. The CFKDL soon joined them, and the tent became a permanent headquarters for meetings and the launch of mobilization efforts. The tent remains standing to this day as a symbolic locus of the cause and a site for annual activities.

The official response did not differ from previous patterns. Prime Minister Najib Mikati promptly formed a Lebanese–Syrian commission to address the issue of Lebanese detainees in Syrian prisons (Decision No. 43/2005, dated June 20, 2005). It is worth recalling that prior to Syria’s withdrawal, official discourse had consistently denied the existence of Lebanese detainees in Syria. No results emerged from this joint commission, and no report was ever issued regarding its work, despite repeated extensions of its mandate, the last of which occurred in 2010 under Prime Minister Saad Hariri.

Draft Law on the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared

In 2010, following a scientific field visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina organized by the International Center for Transitional Justice, with support from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, my late partner in the struggle, Ghazi Aad, and I had the opportunity to participate in a multidisciplinary delegation. The purpose was to examine how local authorities there addressed the issue of missing persons in cooperation with the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), under a dedicated legal framework governing the matter.

Following that visit, the members of the delegation agreed on the need to work toward a draft law on missing and forcibly disappeared persons that would take into account the specificity of the Lebanese context. Accordingly, the Executive Director of the Legal Agenda newsletter, Nizar Saghieh, undertook the drafting of a preliminary bill. The draft was discussed and revised multiple times in light of comments and proposals from the CFKDL, SOLIDE, and a number of local and international non-governmental organizations. The draft law was officially launched in 2012 at a press conference attended by several officials and local and international experts.

With the launch of the families' draft law on missing and forcibly disappeared persons, a competing draft decree emerged proposing the establishment of a national commission for the missing and forcibly disappeared. There is not enough space here to recount the fierce battle we were compelled to wage against a powerful political faction that did not hesitate to present us with a stark choice—accept its draft decree or receive nothing. We chose nothing and remained steadfast in our commitment to the draft law. The State Shura Council had issued an opinion stating that a decree would not suffice to authorize the DNA testing necessary to identify remains, and that such measures required a law (Decision No. 224/2011-2012, dated August 9, 2012) (An-Nahar, 2018).

The Long Road to the Parliament

We registered the draft law with the Secretariat of Parliament in April 2014, through MPs Ghassan Moukheiber and Ziad Kadri. The bill remained dormant and was not placed on the agenda of plenary sessions until 2018. This occurred as a result of our persistence in claiming our right, in addition to three national campaigns we launched: the National Petition, the List of the Missing Across Lebanon, and August: Month of the Missing in Lebanon.

The National Petition called for the approval of the draft law on missing and forcibly disappeared persons, which sought to establish an independent national commission mandated to trace these victims and determine their fate, whether alive or dead. The petition gathered 5,187 signatures, excluding those of the families of the missing.

It was also signed by most leaders of Lebanese political parties and movements, a significant number of MPs from all parliamentary blocs, as well as several former MPs. A number of ministers signed it, along with a former Speaker of Parliament. In this sense, popular approval of the draft law on missing and forcibly disappeared persons preceded its placement on Parliament's agenda. The National Petition thus became the second document, after the Taif Agreement, to receive unanimous parliamentary endorsement.

The CFKDL succeeded in registering the National Petition with the Parliament Bureau, insisting that it be placed on the agenda of the first legislative session convened to enact urgent legislation, as was the practice at the time. This was an achievement in restoring a direct channel through which citizens could bring their causes to their representatives in Parliament, without the need for partisan or sectarian intermediaries, as had been the norm.

The draft law on missing and forcibly disappeared persons was adopted by Parliament in its session held on November 13, 2018. It was promulgated on November 30, 2018, under Law No. 105, and published in the Official Gazette on December 6, 2018 (National News Agency, 2018).

IV Between Text and Reality

CFKDL's Expectations

The enactment of Law No. 105/2018 was a profoundly significant achievement that cost the CFKDL 36 years of waiting and suffering. Yet the Committee did not cease its struggle to ensure its implementation. After a year and a half, the first implementing decree was issued, appointing the members of the Independent National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared, which is entrusted with tracing these individuals and determining their fate (Decree No. 6570, dated March 7, 2020, and its amendments). This is what the families want – nothing more, and nothing less.

The CFKDL was represented by two members on the National Commission. They witnessed firsthand the full range of challenges the Commission faced in carrying out its mandate. Although families were provided with essential details about the Commission's work, and although the Commission met with them and informed them directly of its progress, a sense of dissatisfaction prevailed among the families concerning what had been achieved over five years, relative to their expectations.

Without diminishing the importance of what has been accomplished, and without overlooking the good intentions and efforts made to lay the groundwork necessary for uncovering the fate of their disappeared loved ones, objectivity requires acknowledging that the families' restlessness stems from the length of their suffering and their loss of trust in a state that failed to search for its own citizens. Nevertheless, they remain firmly committed to the National Commission. They were keen to prevent any institutional vacuum after the end

of its first term and succeeded in pressing for the appointment of new members for the Commission's second mandate (Decree No. 973, dated August 27, 2025).

The National Commission: CFKDL's Lifeline

The CFKDL has not ceased, and will not cease, demanding the removal of all obstacles hindering the National Commission from fulfilling its noble mandate. It also hopes that the newly appointed members will build on the foundations laid by their predecessors. The CFKDL looks forward to the Commission's work proceeding at an accelerating pace. It will continue to accompany this work and will do everything that contributes to its proper functioning and advancement, until the long-awaited resolution is reached.

A Strategy for Moving Forward

The struggle to know the fate of the missing is, first and foremost, a humanitarian demand. It is also a profoundly political, legal, and societal battle. As such, this struggle is not confined to their families alone; it is a responsibility borne by society as a whole.

Accordingly, the CFKDL has deemed it essential to intensify efforts to raise awareness about the issue of the missing, specifically Law 105/2018 and its implementation, focusing on younger generations, most of whom are unaware of the course of the war, its causes, and its consequences, even though they have inherited its repercussions.

Among the projects and activities undertaken by the CFKDL to this end:

- Organizing meetings at several universities and municipalities outside Beirut to introduce younger generations to the cause and to the CFKDL's activity, alongside local and international partners, which led to the adoption of a law enshrining the right to know, and to highlight the role youth can play in ensuring its implementation. This project was carried out in partnership with the association Act for the Disappeared and with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).
- Organizing a timeline exhibition marking the fortieth anniversary of the CFKDL's establishment, held at the As-Safir Forum. The exhibition highlights key milestones in the CFKDL's struggle and the irresponsible handling of the issue by the authorities. The exhibition became permanent after being transferred to Beit Beirut in Sodeco. It has attracted a large number of school and university students accompanied by their teachers, sparking wide-ranging and meaningful discussions.
- Working on documentation and archiving the CFKDL's struggle in order to preserve collective memory and prevent the repetition of the past. Activities included the publication of the book *Windmills of Our Hearts*, authored by 15 women members of the CFKDL; the launch of two social media campaigns marking fifty years since the beginning of the war; the production of five

podcast episodes that garnered significant viewership; and the commissioning of contributions from individuals of diverse backgrounds and expertise for publication in an upcoming book.

- Initiating discussions with friends and activists about establishing a civil forum to support the implementation of Law 105/2018. An action paper was drafted, discussed, and developed, accompanied by the launch of an ongoing national petition. The forum was officially launched during a press conference held at Beit Beirut on September 12, 2025.
- Continuing societal pressure to activate the mechanisms of transitional justice.

Recommendations

At the Level of the CFKDL

Continue the struggle to ensure the implementation of the Law on Missing and Forcibly Disappeared Persons through:

- Sustained efforts to empower families by providing psychological and legal support and building their capacities, as a fundamental step in continuing their struggle to know the fate of their loved ones.
- Engaging second- and third-generation relatives of the missing.
- Continuing awareness-raising efforts among younger generations.
- Pursuing the implementation of an oral history project with the families.
- Continuing advocacy for Lebanon's ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.
- Pressing for the inclusion of the issue of the missing and forcibly disappeared in school curricula.

At the Level of Coordination with the National Commission

- Accompanying and supporting the work of the National Commission in order to advance it and to build a bridge of communication between the Commission and the families.
- Coordinating efforts to establish a unified database of the missing and to ensure its protection.
- Organizing regular meetings with the CFKDL to remain continuously informed of progress and of any obstacles encountered, and to provide the CFKDL with all information obtained.
- Publishing periodic reports to inform families and the public, as stipulated by the law.
- Holding formal joint meetings with leaders of all political parties, movements, and organizations to explain the provisions of Law 105/2018 and to agree on a comprehensive action plan for supplying the Commission with all available information and details related to the war and to the missing, through a delivery mechanism acceptable to all. Notably, the law does not seek to hold perpetrators accountable for crimes committed during the war; rather, it

penalizes those who withhold access to information, obstruct the provision of required information, or provide false information that misleads the process of tracing the missing.

- Establishing a specialized team to complete the collection of biological samples from the families of the missing and forcibly disappeared, a process initiated by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).
- Mapping mass graves to ensure their protection, in preparation for handling them in accordance with the provisions of Law 105/2018.

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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