

# Dealing with the Past *Series*

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## Echoes of Absence: Implications of Missing and Disappeared Persons on the Social and Family Fabric

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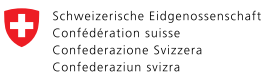
### Introduction

In Lebanon, the issue of missing and forcibly disappeared persons remains one of the most enduring open wounds left by the civil war (1975–1990) and subsequent cycles of conflict and violations. Thousands of families – mothers and fathers, wives and husbands, sons and daughters – have yet to receive answers regarding the fate of their loved ones.

Decades since their disappearance, and despite the adoption of Law No. 105 ('Law on Missing and Forcibly Disappeared Persons') in 2018 and the establishment of the National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared, this issue continues to shape the everyday realities of individuals, families, and society as a whole. It also reveals deeply intertwined gendered dimensions that go beyond a purely legal or humanitarian concern, emerging instead as a reflection of a broader system of structural violence that persists in the absence of transitional justice.

A common approach to this issue, particularly in official discourse and civil society, is often partial or fragmented. It tends to focus on specific legal or humanitarian aspects without fully capturing the complex interconnections between individual loss and collective legacy, and between personal suffering and intergenerationally transmitted violence.

The absence of a comprehensive understanding of these implications obscures the reality that this legacy continues to weigh heavily on the present,



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and that violence does not end with the cessation of direct hostilities, but rather re-emerges in symbolic, social, and psychological forms within affected families, in particular, and in society more broadly.

Despite limited institutional response, it is essential to acknowledge the pioneering struggle led by courageous individuals, foremost among them the women who refused to allow their loved ones to be erased from public memory. Since the 1980s, activist Wadad Halwani, alongside a group of mothers and wives, formed the core of the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon, which evolved into a national movement for resisting enforced forgetting.

Through their persistence, the issue remained present in public consciousness, and personal pain was transformed into a form of civic struggle that transcended sectarian and political divisions. These women embodied a rare model of public engagement in Lebanon: one that combined moral courage with humanitarian politics, and patience with demands for accountability. Without their voices, there would likely have been no official recognition of the issue, and perhaps no law such as Law No. 105.

Yet, what has been achieved at the level of public policy remains far below what meaningful justice requires. Government responses have largely been symbolic, sporadic, and slow, while the burden of seeking the truth has fallen primarily on families themselves rather than on the state. This disparity between civil society mobilization and institutional response reflects the persistence of a logic of impunity and underscores that the adoption of laws is insufficient without genuine political will and sustained investment in justice and memory.

Understanding the multi-dimensional consequences of this phenomenon, at both the individual and collective levels, is therefore not merely an academic exercise, but a necessary step toward rebuilding trust and repairing Lebanon's social fabric. Any policy or initiative addressing the issue of the missing without considering the long-term impact of absence on subsequent generations, or without adopting a comprehensive perspective that integrates the psychological, social, and symbolic dimensions of loss, will remain insufficient to achieve meaningful justice.

This paper seeks to shed light on the profound social and psychological impact of the issue of missing and forcibly disappeared persons on all those affected by its consequences, including families, spouses, and children. Through this lens, it aims to open a broader discussion on how this enduring legacy can be understood as an ongoing social and psychological experience rather than a closed historical event, and to explore ways of developing more responsive, sensitive, and equitable policy and programmatic approaches. Such approaches must take into account the cumulative effects of absence on individuals, families, society, and the nation as a whole.

## I Family Dimensions from a Gendered Perspective

In Lebanon, the experience of loss takes on differentiated forms at the family level depending on gender roles. Mothers often live in a state of suspended hope, at times illusory, combined with deferred mourning, while also bearing the burden of providing for their families or leading legal and social struggles in the absence of the state. Fathers, in turn, carry the weight of an inability to protect their families or ascertain the fate of their children, in line with socially prescribed roles in the Lebanese context.

Wives face legal and social ambiguity regarding their marital status and their rights to remarriage, inheritance, and custody. As for children, many grow up in the shadow of the absence of a parent or sibling, a reality that profoundly shapes their identity, their trust in society, and their outlook on the future, with distinct manifestations for girls and boys due to prevailing gender norms and expectations (ICTJ, 2016; ICRC, 2015; Yakinthou, 2015).

What remains largely absent from the dominant approaches, however, is the recognition that these family dynamics are not merely psychological or social interactions, but rather constitute an ongoing structure of violence. When the story is not told, and when the fate remains unknown, trauma is transmitted silently from one generation to the next. This trauma becomes embedded in family relationships and in the ways individuals understand love, safety, and belonging. Unresolved memory turns into a persistent source of anxiety, hindering both individual and collective development, and reproducing a muted climate of fear and mistrust within families and across society as a whole (Hayner, 2011).

In previous interviews, Wadad Halwani spoke about the profound trauma caused by the disappearance of her husband Adnan on September 24, 1982, and the lasting impact it had on her daily life. She noted that she initially concealed the truth from her children in an attempt to shield them from shock, and spent years searching and inquiring about his fate, repeatedly encountering discouraging responses suggesting that such cases were widespread and that her experience was not unique. This highlighted the magnitude of the pain and challenges she faced in her pursuit of justice (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, 2025).

What distinguishes Wadad Halwani's experience, however, is the transformation of personal grief into organized collective action. At a time when demanding the truth was perceived as a threat to national security, she led a courageous and unprecedented movement advocating for the right to know and the right to access information regarding the fate of missing and forcibly disappeared persons.

She founded the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared during the Lebanese civil war, evolving from a woman searching for her husband into a voice representing hundreds of families demanding their

right to truth and justice. In doing so, she came to embody the experiences of women who lost husbands, sons, or brothers, becoming a spokesperson for a deeply gendered and human experience that bridged personal suffering and public responsibility.

Faced with state silence and the complicity of political actors, Halwani articulated a collective determination to uncover the truth, challenging an official narrative that framed engagement with the past as a threat to national unity. Her work represents one of the most courageous forms of civil resistance in Lebanon, as she mobilized in the streets, in courts, and in public spaces to defend a collective memory that the political system sought to erase, and to advocate for legal recognition of this right, as later reflected in Law No. 105 of 2018 on missing and forcibly disappeared persons.

In this sense, Halwani is not only a symbol of maternal grief, but also a political and social actor who redefined the relationship between memory and justice, and between the private and the public. She demonstrated that uncovering the truth is not a threat to the nation, but a condition for its healing, and that restoring names and faces from oblivion is itself an act of resistance against a culture of denial and recurring, intergenerational violence.

These trajectories are not unique to Lebanon. In Argentina, the 'Mothers of Plaza de Mayo' constituted one of the most prominent social movements in contemporary history, emerging from loss and grief rather than from formal institutions or political parties. These were women whose sons and daughters had been abducted during the military dictatorship (1976–1983), when the state carried out a systematic campaign of repression involving thousands of arrests and enforced disappearances. The mothers took to public squares, defying fear and persecution. Their weekly marches became a powerful symbolic act of resistance, ultimately forcing the issue of missing and forcibly disappeared persons onto both national and international agendas, and later compelling the government to acknowledge its responsibility and open secret archives (Bouvard, 1994).

The significance of this model does not lie solely in its legal outcomes, but in the transformation it brought about in the meaning of justice and memory. The 'Mothers of Plaza de Mayo' demonstrated that loss can be mobilized into a collective force to rebuild society on the foundations of recognition and accountability. Their movement redefined transitional justice from the perspective of victims themselves, laying the groundwork for a form of justice rooted in memory, dignity, and the right to tell one's story.

Argentina's experience has shown that confronting absence is not merely a legal matter, but an act of resistance against forgetting, and against systems that seek to turn the page without ever reading it. These lessons remain deeply relevant in Lebanon today, where families confront silence with the same

determination with which Argentine mothers once confronted fear, recognizing that justice begins with voice, with naming, and with refusing to reduce human beings to numbers or forgotten files.

In Canada, the case of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls offers a stark example of the persistence of systematic historical violence. The disappearance of Indigenous women and girls reflects an ongoing pattern of violence targeting women as the foundation of Indigenous families, and thus the core of community, culture, and memory. In the absence of meaningful accountability and structural reform, these disappearances became normalized, treated by both society and authorities not as an ongoing national tragedy, but as an inevitable reality.

Yet Indigenous women organized and made their voices heard in the public sphere, refusing to accept disappearance as a permanent fate. Their activism led to a comprehensive national inquiry published in 2019 (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019), widely regarded as a powerful testimony to ongoing violence.

The report concluded that these are not isolated crimes, but manifestations of a structural system of discrimination and neglect, where gender-based violence intersects with the legacies of colonialism and racism against Indigenous peoples. It called for understanding enforced disappearance within its broader political and structural context, emphasizing that justice must go beyond judicial measures toward rebuilding the relationship with the state on the basis of recognition, dignity, and shared history.

## **II Children: Victims of Illegal Intercountry Adoption**

In addition to the estimated 17,000 persons missing during the Lebanese civil war, more than 10,000 children were illegally adopted in practices closely linked to child trafficking for profit (El-Hage, 2019). These children should be considered missing in relation to their biological families, just as their biological families are missing in relation to them.

Despite extensive documentation pointing to the falsification of official records, including birth certificates and passports, and repeated calls to guarantee the adoptee's right to access information, there has been no serious governmental commitment to address this open wound affecting over 10,000 children adopted during the war (Ismail-Allouche, 2021). Notably, intercountry adoption from Lebanon continues to this day, which is a direct indication that the absence of legal accountability continues to enable further child trafficking (Allouche, 2022).

Documentation by the organization Badael (Alternatives) shows that the legacy of silence has had profound consequences for adoptees and their biological mothers, with many experiencing racism, mistreatment, and identity-

related struggles (Ismail-Allouche, 2020). It is also important to note that adoption often entails the loss of the right to Lebanese nationality. At the same time, the voices of biological mothers are suppressed by stigma, blame, and enforced forgetting, reflecting the persistence of structural and social violence.

Similar practices have marked other international crises. In Argentina, during the military dictatorship, children were abducted and forcibly adopted by military families, often those responsible for the deaths of their parents (Arditti, 1999). In Vietnam, child abduction and forced adoption were used as political and military tools to control populations and engineer demographic change (Strong-Boag and Bagga, 2009).

By contrast, countries such as South Korea, Ethiopia, and the Netherlands have introduced strict legal reforms to prevent illegal intercountry adoption, including measures to prohibit document falsification and restrict cross-border adoption. These reforms underscore the importance of legal accountability in safeguarding children's rights and protecting them from exploitation (Selman, 2012), an approach that remains largely absent in the Lebanese context.

This comparison highlights the urgent need for comprehensive measures, including national legislation, support for individual initiatives, and the restoration of the rights of adoptees and biological mothers to access information by reopening adoption files. These files often involve an extended chain of violations, from birth registration to forged documentation and cross-border trafficking, implicating both Lebanon as a country of origin and receiving states.

Efforts to trace biological families through DNA testing remain individual and unregulated, leaving victims of intercountry adoption vulnerable to financial, informational, and media exploitation. Moreover, calls to link their DNA databases with those of missing and forcibly disappeared persons have not been taken seriously, as intercountry adoption is not treated as a priority.

### III Absence of Narrative

Every missing person whose fate remains unknown is also a story that has never been fully told. This absence of narrative does not only deprive families of the ability to grieve or achieve psychological stability; it also prevents the emergence of a collective narrative capable of reshaping the relationship between citizens and the state.

When individual stories remain incomplete, absence deepens in both meaning and memory, and silence becomes a collective mechanism for avoiding pain. This silence, in itself, becomes a form of intergenerational violence, as children grow up in the absence of truth, within families exhausted by waiting, torn between loyalty to memory and the desire to forget.

The absence of individual narratives is mirrored by the absence of collective closure at the national level – that is, the inability to truly declare the end of

the war, not merely on paper, but within the collective consciousness. A state that has not confronted its past reproduces the logic of war in its everyday practices: in discrimination, in the erosion of trust, and in abandoning affected groups to face their fate alone. In this way, loss becomes an ongoing condition that extends beyond individual families to encompass generations of Lebanese who have grown up under official silence regarding what actually occurred.

Acknowledging the depth of this legacy is not about reopening the past for its own sake, but about breaking the cycle of violence sustained by silence and denial. Understanding absence as an ongoing experience, rather than a closed historical event, enables the development of more sensitive approaches to intergenerational trauma and the design of policies for care and transitional justice that restore memory as a foundation of citizenship and truth as a condition for dignity.

As Sean Field (2016), a scholar of oral history specializing in apartheid South Africa, argues, the inability of individuals to narrate their own experiences of violence constitutes a form of silencing akin to the effects of genocide. This insight also connects the experience of adoption directly to the broader legacy affecting families of the missing and forcibly disappeared in Lebanon.

#### **IV Implications for the Social Fabric**

The societal repercussions of the missing and forcibly disappeared persons, alongside displacement and forced or illegal adoption, extend far beyond individual suffering, striking at the very foundations of trust between citizens and the state. The absence of truth and the continued obscuring of the fate of more than 17,000 missing persons, as well as over 10,000 children who were illegally adopted or trafficked during the war, have deepened the rupture between society and state institutions that are meant to safeguard rights. This loss has not only shattered family bonds, but has also undermined the foundations of belonging and mutual trust.

A key question is whether Lebanese citizens have entirely lost trust in the state, or whether trust has instead been redirected toward sectarian leaders within clientelist networks that reproduce narrow loyalties at the expense of trust in national institutions. While trust in the state as a unifying entity has eroded, it has often been maintained in political parties and sectarian actors that present themselves as alternative sources of protection and justice. This paradox has rendered transitional justice hostage to political and sectarian interests, preventing the construction of a shared national narrative around memory and accountability.

At the level of civic engagement, this climate of mistrust has weakened incentives for participation in public life, particularly among women and young

people, who face a state perceived as incapable of recognizing its victims or protecting their families. The transmission of trauma across generations, from parents to children, has entrenched a culture of fear, silence, and disengagement, turning the wound into a defining component of Lebanese identity.

Although the adoption of Law 105 and the establishment of the National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared marked an important symbolic step toward recognizing the right to know, slow implementation and insufficient resources have undermined their tangible impact on restoring trust. For many, the law has not altered the reality of impunity or the perception that justice remains selective and deferred. As a result, the state continues to be seen as distant, complicit, or indifferent, further widening the gap between society and its institutions and perpetuating the fragility of the national social fabric.

There is also a structural interdependence between the agendas of successive Lebanese governments and the interests of political elites who share a common reluctance to reopen the files of the past, whether related to the missing, forced adoption, or wartime violations. In this context, truth is not merely a historical or humanitarian issue, but a direct threat to the political order that emerged from the war and its fragile settlements. Addressing these issues would inevitably challenge the legitimacy of many political actors, which explains the preference for maintaining a policy of non-resolution as a means of preserving the existing balance of power.

While there are emerging indications of potential openness within the current government to revisit this issue and strengthen the role of the National Commission, political will remains constrained by sectarian calculations and entrenched interests. Official positions often oscillate between symbolic commitments and non-binding bureaucratic measures, leaving trust between citizens and the state in a state of persistent fragility.

In addition, the erosion of trust is not confined to the relationship between citizens and the state; it extends deeply into the collective consciousness. Lebanese society, which has yet to confront its history and wounds with honesty, lives a form of collective denial, where many choose to distance themselves from painful truths in order to preserve a fragile stability, even at the expense of justice. This broader denial mirrors the silence of the state, and together they contribute to the perpetuation of structural violence and hinder the construction of a truthful collective memory capable of confronting ongoing forms of conflict.

## **V Transitional Justice and the Right to Truth**

Transitional justice and the right to access information constitute a critical entry point for addressing the legacy of violence in Lebanon, not only through efforts to uncover the fate of the missing and forcibly disappeared, but also by

recognizing children who were illegally adopted during the war as victims of compounded enforced loss.

These children, separated from their biological families through falsified documents and enabled by political and institutional disorder, form part of a broader national wound that intersects with the issue of missing persons, as well as with questions of justice and memory. Yet, progress on this issue remains slow, and cases of forced adoption and child trafficking have not been integrated into the official agenda, despite repeated calls from organizations such as Badael and activists to include them in the broader right to access information (Ismail-Allouche, 2018).

In this context, a number of local initiatives have emerged seeking to rebuild trust and engage with the past outside formal state institutions. Among the most prominent is *Fighters for Peace*, which creates spaces for dialogue among individuals who once fought on opposing sides, attempting to transform individual memory into a collective reflection on responsibility and reconciliation.

Similarly, women peacebuilders play a central role in advocating for official recognition of suffering and in demanding justice for families of the missing and forcibly disappeared, as well as for mothers who lost their children through illegal adoption. Their work extends beyond legal advocacy to include the creation of community support networks and the documentation of women's narratives of loss, violence, and survival, seeking to restore the human voice often erased from official wartime narratives.

Theater has also emerged as an artistic medium for reclaiming collective memory and narrating experiences of disappearance and violence, through cultural initiatives that transform pain into acts of expressive resistance. However, this form of documentation raises ethical concerns, as it involves recounting the experiences of individuals who have endured violence or loss, often in the absence of adequate protection or referral systems capable of addressing the psychological distress that such recollection may trigger. While theater offers powerful symbolic tools to represent violence and break silence, it may also risk re-traumatizing victims if therapeutic and safe frameworks are not integrated into the processes of collecting and presenting testimonies.

Transitional justice remains incomplete when it is not institutionalized, or when it is implemented without a clear commitment to confronting the past in ways that respect suffering and honor those affected. The absence of political will to adopt a meaningful agenda for engaging with collective memory reduces justice to symbolic gestures with limited impact, leaving the national wound open and unattended. Transitional justice cannot succeed without tangible mechanisms for reparations, survivor support, and the healing of ongoing wounds that continue to shape both individual and collective memory. Recognition, accountability, and community-based care are not only

requirements of justice: they are essential conditions for a national healing process that remains deferred.

## **VI The Right to Access Information: Practical Recommendations on Missing and Forcibly Disappeared Persons in Lebanon**

The issue of missing and forcibly disappeared persons in Lebanon constitutes one of the most urgent challenges within the broader trajectory of transitional justice, given its profound human and rights-based dimensions related to truth-seeking, the restoration of family ties, and guarantees of non-recurrence. This file is closely linked to the issue of illegal adoption during the war, as both share a common root: disappearance, erasure of identity, and the denial of individuals' right to know the truth and to belong.

### **First: At the governmental level**

Governmental efforts must be consolidated through strengthening the capacities of the National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared established under Law No. 105. This requires sustainable funding and expanded authority to access official, security, and medical records, and to investigate cases of enforced disappearance. It is also recommended to establish multidisciplinary teams (legal, psychological, social, and medical) to address cases in a holistic manner and to develop a secure national DNA database to support the restoration of family ties and uphold the right to truth.

### **Second: At the legislative level**

Laws should be reviewed to ensure the protection of the civil rights of families affected by enforced disappearance. The following measures are recommended:

- Amending legislation to enable women to pass their nationality to their children in cases where the father is absent or missing.
- Ensuring the effective implementation of Law No. 105, while broadening its interpretation to include related cases such as illegal adoption during the war, in order to guarantee inclusive justice.
- Establishing an effective accountability framework to ensure the enforcement of laws, moving beyond symbolic recognition or financial compensation alone.

### **Third: At the level of public services**

Despite the passage of time, psychosocial support for affected families remains limited and unsustainable. Therefore, the following measures are recommended:

- Allocating government resources to develop specialized programs providing psychological, social, and legal support to families affected by enforced disappearance.

- Engaging the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Public Health, in collaboration with municipalities, women's organizations, and civil society actors, in the design and implementation of these programs.
- Ensuring respect for privacy and preventing re-traumatization in the delivery of services. This requires the adoption of clear standard operating procedures (SOPs) regulating how such sensitive cases are handled, including defining access to information, secure storage mechanisms, and limits on data sharing. These procedures must be accompanied by mandatory and continuous training for all personnel on 'do no harm' principles and trauma-sensitive care, as well as monitoring and regular supervision mechanisms to ensure consistent application of these standards across all institutional levels.

#### Fourth: At the level of public awareness and memory

The inclusion of women, mothers, and affected individuals, particularly young people, in shaping national transitional justice policies is essential to ensuring an inclusive approach. The following is recommended:

- Supporting artistic and documentation initiatives (theater, exhibitions, films, community dialogue sessions) that retell stories of loss and disappearance, while establishing ethical standards to guide these initiatives in light of current gaps.
- Integrating the issue of missing persons into educational curricula and national media in order to promote a culture of accountability and recognition of collective memory.
- Recognizing the right to know as a core component of peacebuilding and of rebuilding trust between citizens and the state.

#### Fifth: Toward a comprehensive vision of transitional justice

Addressing the issue of missing persons is not only a legal or humanitarian matter, but also a fundamental political and ethical step toward confronting the enduring effects of enforced disappearance. Justice cannot be achieved through compensation alone, but requires uncovering the truth, restoring broken ties, and ensuring non-recurrence. This demands genuine political will, sustainable funding, and a comprehensive approach that places women and families at the center of processes of justice and recognition.

## VII Conclusion

The issue of missing and forcibly disappeared persons has deeply and continuously affected the family, social, and gender fabric in complex ways. The rupture of family ties has extended far beyond immediate relatives, with its impact transmitted across generations, as women, men, and children carry the psychological, social, and gendered consequences of this trauma in their

daily lives. The erosion of trust between citizens and the state, the persistence of sectarian and political divisions, and the decline in civic participation, particularly among women and young people, are all direct manifestations of these unresolved realities, which cannot be ignored or silenced.

This suffering is powerfully captured in the story of a mother nearing death, who told journalist Saada Allaw in an oral testimony: 'Should my son come back, let him knock on my grave three times; in this way maybe I will find peace.'

Daniel Drennan ElAwar later recalled this statement on his online platform (Albikar, 2016). As an adoptee from Lebanon to the United States, he recounts how, after years of searching, he found his biological mother in Lebanon. He visited her grave, knocked three times, and said: 'I found you, my mother. I forgive you, and I promise to do everything in my power to help mothers who were forcibly separated from their children through illegal adoption to find their missing parts.'

In the Lebanese context, marked by entrenched political and sectarian divisions and persistent mistrust in state institutions, the right to a formal and just closure of the files of the missing and forcibly disappeared emerges as a fundamental and urgent right. Closing these files does not mean erasing the truth, but rather fully acknowledging fate, whether through identification, confirmation of death, or clarification of whereabouts, thereby granting families the right to grieve and allowing them to restore meaning to their loss within an official and recognized framework.

Justice, in this sense, lies in restoring dignity to victims and their families. Keeping the fate of missing and disappeared persons unknown deepens suffering and keeps wounds open across generations, whereas acknowledgment of the truth, however painful, is a necessary condition for any meaningful reconciliation. Closing these files in a transparent and humane manner is also a way of dismantling the logic of denial that continues to shape the legacy of the war, and a necessary step toward rebuilding trust and restoring dignity.

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