



Are Lebanon's Disappeared Unequal? [1]

by Nadim Houry

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Lebanon was right to flex its (limited) diplomatic muscle last week to express displeasure with Libya over the disappearance of Sayyed Musa al-Sadr, a leading Shiite cleric who was last seen on a trip to Libya in 1978. In a rare move, Lebanon's famously divided cabinet unanimously agreed not to send any of its top leaders to attend the Arab League summit in Libya that occurred last weekend, and limited its representation to its Arab league ambassador.

In diplomatic speak, and particularly in a region used to kings and presidents attending such gatherings, the low-level representation amounted to a snub. Don't expect Libya's Muammar Qaddafi to forget this slight any time soon. But whatever the possible cost of Lebanon's actions, the government took the right course of action by putting principle ahead of "business as usual."

The speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri, who succeeded Musa al-Sadr at the helm of the AMAL movement, was quick to laud the united stance of the government. "This stance, which comes decades late, puts Lebanon on the unity road," he declared last Thursday.

But is the speaker of Parliament, or for that matter any of the other top Lebanese leaders, willing to show unity and commit to concrete actions for Lebanon's other disappeared - the 17,000 estimated to have disappeared during the civil war and the hundreds of Lebanese missing in Syrian jails?

The short answer is no, and as long as that is the case, actions like last week's decision to give the Libya summit a pass will be interpreted through a narrow sectarian and political lens, and not as a unifying national act. A taxi driver -always a good weather vane of public sentiment-put it bluntly last week when I asked him about his thoughts on the decision: "the Shi`as succeeded in convincing the government because they have the power these days."

Wadad Halawani, head of the Committee of the Kidnapped and Missing in Lebanon, expressed her doubts about the decision when she spoke on March 21 at a gathering of the families of the disappeared: "Isn't it strange that Lebanon boycotts the planned Arab League Summit in Libya because of [Libya's] responsibility in the disappearance of Musa al-Sadr but Lebanon does not bother to shed light on those who disappeared in Lebanon? Is it possible to differentiate between one disappeared and another because of their position, affiliation or gender?"

The sad truth is that in Lebanon not all disappeared are equal. During the 1990s, it was popular for government officials to complain about the disappeared in Israel but to harass those who spoke about the disappeared in Syria. After the Syrian army withdrew from Lebanon in 2005, Lebanon's new ruling coalition embraced the cause of the disappeared in Syria, but refused to tackle the disappeared in Lebanon's mass

graves. Under the current national unity government, things look better on paper but not in practice. In its Ministerial Declaration, the government pledged to follow up on all of the disappeared, but still discriminates when it comes to its actions. So while Lebanon mustered the courage to stand-up to Libya symbolically over Musa al-Sadr, it is forging ahead in building better relations with Syria without conditioning this new rapprochement on reliable information about the hundreds of disappeared. One need not look further than the official apathy concerning the work of the joint Syrian-Lebanese committee, which has not produced any concrete result in almost five years of operations, to see that Lebanon's leaders are not willing to stand up to Syria about the disappeared.

As long as Lebanon continues to play favorites with those missing, the question of the disappeared will always be prone to politicization. The only way to build "unity" around this issue - to use Speaker Berri's term - is for the government to form an independent national commission with the authority to require all official sources, including intelligence and security agencies, to provide information about missing individuals and the responsibility to outline elements of a cohesive and principled foreign policy to shed light on those who disappeared beyond the Lebanese borders. Only then will we know if Lebanon's absence in Libya was a one-off decision or the harbinger of a principled policy.

Nadim Houry is director of the Beirut office for Human Rights Watch.

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