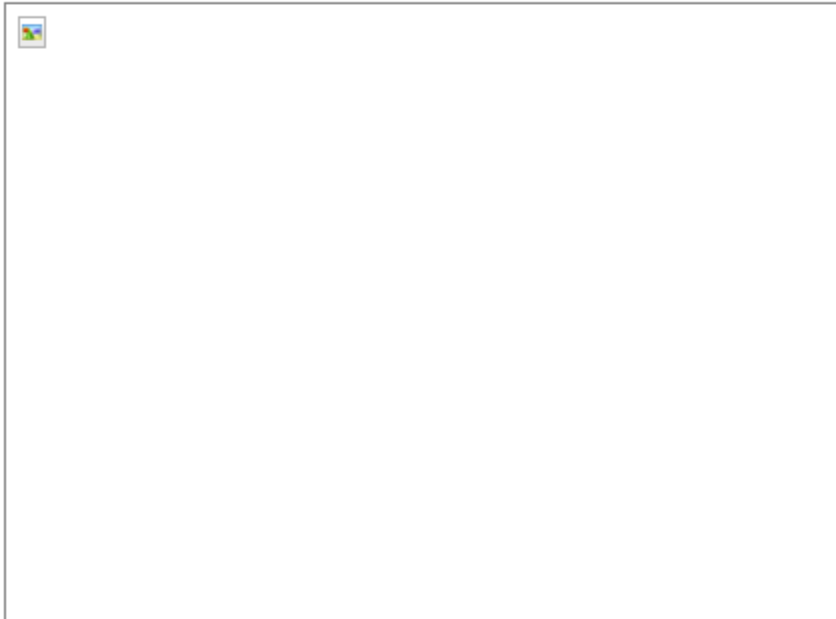


Neither dead, nor alive

Aline Sara



Against the manicured backdrop of downtown's Khalil Gibran Gardens sits a heart-wrenching reminder of Lebanon's past. For five years now, mothers of people who went missing during the civil war have been leading a quiet demonstration in the so-called "tent of the disappeared." Each night, one woman takes her turn sleeping in the feeble structure.

This past weekend, however, these committed few were no longer alone in their mourning, remembrance and activism. Demonstrators, artists, directors and passersby came together for *Act for the Disappeared*, an event featuring musical performances, exhibitions, artistic installations and documentary screenings.

"It's not only about remembering, but about taking action," said Justine Di Mayo, one of the event's key organizers.

Although the issue has been extensively tackled in the public forum, the activists maintain there is still much to be done. Several local and international NGOs are working to revive the cause - especially given that the Committee of the Parents of Persons Kidnapped or Missing in Lebanon, which was formed in 1982, has been unable to solve the majority of the cases.

Even the actual number of remaining disappeared persons is in question. A 1992 police report, the last time an official consensus was attempted, placed the number at 17,514.

"There are too many preconceptions, and our aim is to revive the 20-year-old problem, [and] depoliticize it," said Di Mayo, who argues national leaders have often hijacked the cause for political purposes.

To rouse up support, event planners opted for a powerful guerilla campaign over the past month. They hung posters of a young boy under the single word, "MISSING," on walls across Beirut, leaving many baffled. A few weeks later, another poster printed with the event details filled in the gaps, but left many irritated.

While some complained on the Act for the Disappeared Facebook group's wall that using the image of a lost little boy was inappropriate, others praised the campaign's wit. "You condemn the founders of the group because not only one child disappeared but 17,000... hypocrites," wrote one advocate.

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The one-day, multimedia event relied on contributions from a variety of organizations and concerned citizens. For the opening, messages of solidarity from families of disappeared persons across the world were read.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) contributed an exhibit on cutting-edge body-identification techniques. Thanks to scientific advances, a body can be successfully identified even 20 years after death.

On Friday, visitors were treated to the sounds of Lebanon's underground musical talents: Kristen, Youmna Saba, Hiba Mansouri, The Incompetents, Zeid and the Wings, and Zeinedine. The upbeat celebration was followed by a particularly somber moment as audience members joined in to read the names of the disappeared. Saturday featured a series of documentaries on the issue.

"We are in a country that suffers from some sort of amnesia....not that it's bad to move on from the past, but we don't acknowledge certain important aspects from the civil war," Serge Yared, lead singer of the Incompetents, told NOW Lebanon.

"There is so much indifference concerning this issue," added artist Deborah Phares. Her "Lost and Found" installation is a prefabricated kiosk - with a worn-out desk, chair, closet and paper -reflective of the freezing of time for the mothers of the disappeared. Even though it is safe to say that most of the disappeared are deceased, there are some who are still alive, "and they need our help," said Phares.

Although a bit disappointed with the small turnout, Di Mayo said the organizers were satisfied and aware of the challenges of mobilizing the Lebanese. Nonetheless, "The artists were very receptive to our call," she said, and a compilation of songs about the disappeared is already underway.

The next large-scale Act for Disappeared event is scheduled to take place in a few more months. For more information, please visit their [Facebook group](#).



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