

Record Lebanon's wartime dead

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In a celebrated aphorism, Karl Marx spoke of "the weight of the generations of dead over the living." His phrase underlined the impossibility of jettisoning history.

Lebanon commemorated the 29th anniversary of the start of its civil war Tuesday. The way successive governments have dealt with the war dead is to draw a blanket over 15 years of atrocities. "God forgive the past," is the way this option is rendered in the Arabic vernacular. However, only God may have the power to implement such a policy, though French philosopher Rene Descartes did suggest that even the Almighty was incapable of undoing what had been done.

The post-war Lebanese defiance of this law of history was an attempt to force forgetfulness when considering the tragic events consciously meted out by men against their fellow human beings. This does not work, and three years ago the Lebanese journalist Amal Makarem sought to underline it by convening a conference in favor of memory. Witness the powerful resurgence in recent months of two infamous cases from Lebanon's wartime years: the disappearance of Iranian diplomats in 1982 at the hands of the Lebanese Forces militia; and the 1978 abduction by Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi of Imam Musa Sadr.

How should one deal with the ugly weight of history? The first step is acknowledgment. Only by acknowledging that something inhuman was perpetrated can a society, and in particular those who were at the center of the tragedy, begin coming to terms with still-open wounds. The official Lebanese policy of forgetfulness - effectively a policy of the ostrich - will not work. Civil society fights back, and victims still awaiting a response to why their loved ones were killed in cold blood, by wanton shelling, or by booby-trapped cars, are entitled to answers.

Among the myriad examples of inhumanity, the case of the "disappeared" stands out. This specialty of onetime Latin American military dictatorships is now considered a crime against humanity in international criminal law, because the victims' relatives are denied even the right to grieve. The long calvary of the families is harrowing - from initial doubts upon receiving the news of a disappearance, to alternating cycles of hope and affliction, to their exploitation by individuals who, for a fee, will offer false information, to their slow descent into ever-deeper despair.

In my experience, the most serious response to the phenomenon of disappearances is through the judiciary. When responsibility can be determined, those suspected of the abductions should be brought to trial. We have a first-hand example in the case won before the Belgian Supreme Court last February (but subsequently canceled by a retroactive law voted by Parliament) involving survivors of the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacres: Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is no longer able to force his victims into silence, and one wishes he will live long enough to face justice, in Belgium or elsewhere.

There are a number of more modest steps that can be taken to acknowledge the lesser-known victims of war. Unfortunately, Lebanon continues to come up short with regard even to this minimal effort. But one should not expect much from governments in a region where they are mostly unaccountable to the people.

The case of the dead and disappeared of Lebanon's wars is a case in point, and a recent book published by Palestinian sociologist Bayan al-Hout shows what a determined and intelligent individual can do. Hout simply listed all the victims - both killed and disappeared - of the Sabra and Shatila massacres for which she could find a credible record. More comprehensive research can also be carried out. In *An Index of Deaths from the Conflict in Ireland 1969-93*, published in 1994, writer Malcolm Sutton simply listed the names of the 3,285 persons killed during the Irish conflict - their age, status, the probable faction behind the killings and the circumstances of death. His is also a formidable book.

Therefore, perhaps it's time to forget about the Lebanese government and follow the path of Hout and Sutton. Good researchers, with minimal funding, can within a few months come up with a preliminary list of the victims of the different cycles of war in Lebanon.

In Washington, US servicemen killed in Vietnam are honored by having their names placed at a memorial on the Mall. The false glitz of Solidere would benefit from a taste of memory through a similar monument, instead of becoming the terrain for what often seems an ugly competition between builders of churches and mosques. A new church or mosque is not the right way to come to terms with the history of Lebanon's bloodshed. A list of those killed or disappeared during 15 years of inhumanity is far more pressing for Lebanon's coming of age.