

# LEBANON'S GHOST WORLD OF MISSING SONS

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Hundreds of Syria's political and military captives are dead to all but their loved ones, writes **Rania Abouzeid** in Beirut

THE Lebanese authorities consider him dead and the Syrians deny knowledge of him, but Sonia Eid is sure her son Jihad is alive and in a Syrian jail, because she has seen him there.

"He was blindfolded, naked except for his underwear and handcuffed behind his back," the petite mother of four said.

Jihad Eid was detained along with the rest of his Lebanese army unit by Syrian troops on October 13, 1990, after they overran his barracks in Beirut.

His mother's 1991 visit was arranged after months of begging local politicians for news of her son's whereabouts. A Lebanese military officer eventually told her that Jihad was in Syria's Mazze detention centre, Prison 235 -- Palestine branch. He gave her written permission to see him on the condition that the visit remain secret.

"I was about 2m away from him, watching from behind a glass wall. He was being taken for interrogation, tied by rope to 20 or 25 other young men, and he was seventh in line. Some fell as they walked in single file and were kicked, others were hit with rifle butts. I will never forget that horrible scene," she said, quivering at the memory.

As the walls of fear surrounding Syria's domination of Lebanon crumble after the February 14 killing of former prime minister Rafik Hariri, and international resolve hardens to force Syria to withdraw its 14,000 troops from its smaller neighbour, the taboo issue of Lebanese political prisoners in Syria has come to the surface.

“Now I'm hopeful that our children will be released,” Eid's mother said, “because the world is watching.”

Syrian troops entered Lebanon in 1976 as a peacekeeping force, but soon became a party to the bloody civil conflict that raged from 1975 to 1990.

Damascus initially sided with Christian parties against leftist, pro-Palestinian groups, but then switched allegiances as the Lebanese state fractured along ever-changing lines.

Syrian troops and intelligence officers detained hundreds of Lebanese with political or military allegiances to anti-Syria groups during and after the war, often with the help of the pro-Syrian authorities in Beirut, according to human rights groups.

The detainees are from across the country's multi-confessional divide, and reflect Syria's shifting enmity with the various sectarian groups. But successive Lebanese governments have denied the existence of these people, even though every now and again the Syrians release a group of them.

In 2000, an official Lebanese commission of inquiry determined that any person missing for more than four years was considered dead, and asked the families of the detainees to sign death notices.

According to Ghazi Aad, co-founder of the Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile group, there were people visiting their imprisoned relatives in Syria at the time.

“We had a policeman called Elias Bou Tanios on our list,” the 47-year-old quadriplegic said. “His sister used to visit him in Syria every month, so how could she sign a death certificate knowing that her brother was alive and in jail?”

But apart from the testimony of family members still secretly visiting their loved ones and of former detainees, there is precious little documentation to prove the existence of these prisoners, largely, according to activists, because the Syrians retain all paperwork.

"This is a taboo subject," Mr Aad said, his limp arms at his side as a friend lifted a cup of coffee to his lips.

"I've been summoned by the intelligence services several times and asked not to work on this file. We couldn't even demonstrate; every time we tried we were harassed. Last year, in April, we were beaten by the security forces. They broke my wheelchair and doused us with water cannon."

In a country where criticism of Syria was whispered behind closed doors, Mr Aad said the atmosphere of fear has hindered his work.

"Some of the families are lucky enough to know the whereabouts of their loved ones and have permission to visit them," he said. "Other families are trying to get information by contacting or bribing Lebanese mediators who have close ties with Syria."

"Because of the fear of jeopardising those connections, many won't talk."

Mr Aad said he had 280 names on his list. "The longest-serving prisoners date back to 1976, the most recent to 1997."

Mrs Eid, who in 1996 co-founded a committee for parents of detainees in Syrian jails, has 176 names on her list.

"I used to travel to Damascus two or three times a week to try to get an audience with Syrian officials," she said. "I went so many times I cannot count."

Although her 1991 sighting of Jihad was her first and last, "we were encouraged to keep fighting for him because every now and again we would get word from someone who was detained with him and later released that our son was still alive," she said, turning to a photo of Jihad on the bookcase behind her.

The black-and-white portrait of the lanky young man in a white shirt and with frizzy black hair sits on a shelf near newer, colour pictures of his sister's wedding, of nephews and nieces he doesn't know.

The last time Mrs Eid saw her son he was just 20. Next month, he will turn 35.

“It's been very hard," she said. “You might think it silly but for the longest time I couldn't cook certain foods, because Jihad liked them.

“Life has not been the same; there is always sadness, even in our joy.

“There are mothers who have died waiting for their sons," she said, her voice cracking as she dabbed her tears. “When will they end our suffering and bring our children home?"