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Erasing Traces with DNA Tests: Syrian Military Security and Mass Grave Politics in Post-2005 Lebanon

Keywords: biohistory; forensic science; mass graves; enforced disappearance; Syrian military security; Lebanese civil war

Abstract

This article contributes to the emerging subfield of biohistory by exploring the nexus of forensic science and politics through an analysis of a mass grave exhumation in postwar Lebanon. In late 2005, a few months after the Syrian army's withdrawal from Lebanon, the Lebanese army unearthed a mass grave, carried out DNA analysis, and identified the bodies of several soldiers whose families had long claimed that their sons had been abducted in 1990 and subsequently held in detention across the border in Syria. Focusing on the mysterious fate of these soldiers, I use oral history, archival documents, and ethnographic materials to explore how Lebanese national institutions relied on forensic DNA identification to produce hegemonic narratives that sidelined the demands of the victims' families for more investigation and care. I demonstrate the overlap between forensic science, national security, and the army as an organ of the state, and I argue that DNA identification tests helped the Lebanese army erase traces of its decades-long collaboration with Syrian military security by allowing it to present the families' claims of illegal cross-border transfers of abductees and their corpses as examples of irrational or wishful thinking and as a psychological coping mechanism on the part of suffering mothers. The exhumation of the mass grave thus did not promote national solidarity against 'foreign occupation,' nor did it have a cathartic effect by helping people deal with a silenced past. Instead, forensic science supported a continuation of silence about past violence.

During the summer and early autumn of 1990, Violette Nassif, the mother of Johnny Nassif, a soldier in the Lebanese army, sometimes crossed the minefields in the village of Dahr al-Wahsh, 12 kilometers east of Beirut in Mount Lebanon, just to put a bag of potato chips beside the road where her son was stationed, so “he can find them and have snacks to nibble on.” “He was a baby, so young,” she recalled in the fall of 2014 as I was interviewing her,¹ tears rolling down her face. Johnny, nineteen years old at the time, was one of the hundreds of Lebanese soldiers, almost exclusively Christians, who fought under the leadership of General Michel Aoun against the Syrian army in what was to be the final battle that marked the end of the Lebanese civil war. On October 13, 1990, the Syrian army crushed Aoun’s forces and took control over the entire territory of Lebanon. According to data assembled by human rights activists and the soldiers’ family members, the Syrian army abducted between seventy and eighty Lebanese soldiers on that day and, most probably, detained them across the border in Syria (Solida 2005). Johnny was among the disappeared soldiers. After much effort and the assiduous use of contacts, Violette claims that she eventually managed to see him once in 1991 in a detention center in Damascus, but he remained in captivity.

From the late 1990s onward, the mothers of the disappeared soldiers, alongside local human rights activists, began to appear increasingly in public to draw attention to their sons’ plight, and in April 2005, few weeks prior to the Syrian army withdrawal from Lebanon, they launched a permanent sit-in at a protest tent in downtown Beirut, demanding that the state clarify the fates of the soldiers held in Syria (Comaty 2019, Haugbølle 2010, Humaydan 2006, Nikro and Hegasy 2017, Shaery-Yazdi 2020b). Soon after, a Red Cross volunteer testified the existence of a mass grave in the vicinity of the Lebanese Ministry of Defense in Yarze near Beirut. *Al-Nahar*, an influential Lebanese newspaper, published the eyewitness account in which he

detailed how back in October 1990 the army had ordered the volunteers to bury several army soldiers few days after the battle. Given this testimony, and the mounting pressure from activists, in addition to the politically polarized post 2005 atmosphere when many accused the army of close collaboration with a foreign military occupation the army ordered the exhumation of the mass grave. Lebanese officials identified several soldiers' remains (including Johnny's) through DNA tests, commemorated the dead soldiers in an official ceremony, and paid their families a lump sum in compensation.² The families then reburied the victims individually in their respective places of origin; Johnny, for instance, was reburied in late 2009 in his hometown of Debel, in South Lebanon. However, open questions remained for human rights activists, the kin of the disappeared, and the media in Lebanon. If Johnny had been abducted and taken across the border to Syria in 1990 and his mother had seen him in a Syrian detention center in 1991, how did his remains come to be found in 2005 in Lebanon? Had Violette, in her maternal distress, simply imagined her reported encounter with Johnny in 1991 in order to cope with the trauma of loss, as the army insinuated, or was she telling the truth, with the implication that the two military security services were secretly collaborating to, among other things, transport corpses across the border? What political story can Johnny's corpse tell us about the decades of Syrian army presence in Lebanon?

On the basis of participant observation and oral history material such as interviews with the relatives of disappeared soldiers, human rights activists, and forensic scientists, I offer in this article a micro-historical account of Johnny Nassif's fate, using it to make two arguments. First, I propose that the corpses of soldiers such as Johnny are emblematic of the intelligence relationship between the Lebanese army and Syrian military security which facilitated Lebanese and Syrian elites' economic exploitation of the country and cleared the way for more political

repression. I break down the collaboration between the two into a set of micro-level practices one of which involve the transport of the soldiers—their initial abduction, their illegal transfer across the border, the probable move of some of their corpses across border back to Lebanon, and finally the identification of the corpses. I then identify the protagonists involved in the politicization and depoliticization of the dead bodies, paying attention to the respective modes of knowledge production that the soldiers’ relatives, the Lebanese army, and the forensic scientists engaged in as they made their various arguments about the cross-border movements of the soldiers’ bodies.

Second, I contend that in this case DNA tests were used to obscure past collaboration between the two military security services rather than to uncover truths as popularly imagined. The “forensic turn” in the treatment of victims of war has relied above all on steadily improving DNA sequencing technologies to identify missing individuals. DNA evidence produces a truth supported by the authority of rational techno-scientific expertise, and in many cases (Bosnia being the paradigmatic example) it feeds into a legal process conducted by state and international bodies (Dziuban 2017, Rosenblatt 2015, Wagner 2008). In post war Lebanon, however, I argue the function of DNA evidence has been to foreclose legal investigation or the attribution of responsibility: given the significant vested interest of the shadow network of state and former militia actors to conceal their history of collaboration with Syrian military security, there are great obstacles to any “truth recovery” beyond the merest show of forensic truth and certainly to the sort of “broader truth recovery” that Iosif Kovras (2017:37) identified in his comparative study of activism on behalf of the missing (including in Lebanon).³ The case of Johnny suggests that forensic methods of DNA analysis can often bolster the position of the perpetrators rather than help advance the cause of the subaltern victims. In such cases, these scientific methods do

not serve to alleviate the suffering of the victims. The exhumation of the mass grave in Yarze illustrates how forensic science can help official state organs control narratives in a manner that enforces their apparent depoliticization.

By unfolding Johnny's puzzling case, this article seeks to contribute to the field of biohistory (Stojanowski and Duncan 2016) and the study of the military in anthropology, as well as the links between the military and forensic science. Through the lens of the Yarze exhumation I reveal the overlap between forensic science, national security, and the army as an organ of the state. By discussing the oppositional modes of knowledge production employed by the army and the relatives of the dead soldiers concerning the modalities and location of the soldiers' actual death, I touch upon aspects of military culture, violence, and the opaque intelligence linkages between Lebanon and Syria. My goal is to shed light on an aspect of Lebanese history that remains challenging to explore for security reasons.

Mass graves, science, and memory

My research on the exhumed soldiers and the army's use of forensic science has particular parallels in Sarah Wagner's scholarship on the postwar Bosnian state and forensic politics in the aftermath of the Srebrenica genocide (Wagner 2008, Wagner and Nettlefield 2014) and in her more recent work on the US army's identification of missing American soldiers in Vietnam (Wagner 2013 and 2019). Echoing her argument that history and science are highly integrated fields of knowledge production and that they are coproduced (Wagner 2013:632–633), I show how the Lebanese army intelligence highlights certain aspects of the past while silencing others through forensic science. In Lebanon, as in Srebrenica and Vietnam, the “technology of remembering” and the “technology of identification” (Wagner 2013:633) overlap in the state's

production of official narratives through forensic science. The Lebanese military's narrative of the missing soldiers' fate, in particular as it relates to the sequence of their physical movements, differs significantly from that of the relatives. Wagner's case study of the memorialization of missing American soldiers in Vietnam demonstrates that DNA enables a shift from collective, anonymous commemoration to individuation of the victims: "Naming each dead soldier, returning each set of remains to surviving families, no matter how partial or delayed, personalizes the ideals of sacrifice and honor embodied in the fallen soldier and invites localized, communal remembrance" (Wagner 2013:631). But whereas the relatives of the American soldiers studied by her interpreted the individuation process as a duty on the part of the army to alleviate their suffering and demonstrate *care*, as Wagner calls it (2019:9), the Lebanese families of the dead soldiers demanded greater state involvement and saw the individual burial of the victims in their respective villages as a failure by the military to recognize their suffering and to continue investigating what happened to the soldiers between their abductions and their burials. Similarly, whereas the relatives of those massacred in Srebrenica succeeded in the creation of a memorial (Wagner and Nettlefield 2014:chapter 2), in Lebanon the army has controlled the official memorialization of the soldiers and has silenced the relatives by merely confirming the deaths of their soldiers. Consequently, the dead Lebanese, unlike the American soldiers, have never received a permanent official memorial beyond the commemoration event, nor have their families been able to create their own public memorial as the Srebrenica families did.

The goal of the exhumation of the mass grave at Yarze also differs from that of state forensic practices elsewhere. For instance, in Spain, the exhuming of mass graves and the identification of bodies launched a debate over the past atrocities of the Francoist regime, resulting in a 2002 motion in the Spanish parliament condemning Franco's uprising as an illegal

rebellion (Ferrandiz 2006, Araguete-Toribio 2017). In Lebanon, by contrast, the army managed to co-opt the narrative of the mass grave to cover up its own past involvement in a shadow network of state-to-state collaboration. In contrast to similar cases in other post-conflict zones, the Lebanese army's exhuming of the Yarze grave was neither motivated by a search for prosecution evidence, as in post-Saddam Iraq, nor used as a tool to establish atrocities committed by past regimes, as in Spain (Ferrandiz 2013). Also, unlike in Israel, for instance, where the issue of missing soldiers is part and parcel of the production of national solidarity in the face of the so-called foreign threat, Hizbullah and the Palestinians (Kaplan 2008), in Lebanon neither the disappearance of the soldiers nor their commemoration produced a moment of solidarity between the army and the families against past atrocities or foreign occupation. In the case of Yarze, the army limited its investigation of the mass grave strictly to the identification of the bodies and, unlike the Argentinian regime in a parallel situation, did not allow relatives or survivors to participate in the process (Fondebrider 2015). Similarly, Isaias Rojas-Perez (2018) has described how the Peruvian state's "governmentality of the dead" structured and limited the speech and actions of relatives and survivors of the 1980s conflict. The state's narrative in Peru was nonetheless unified, even when it focused on the "civilizing" potential of law and forensics and concomitantly labeled the 1980s "irrational."

State appropriation of forensics and official memory production are common features of post-atrocity DNA testing (Weizman 2017a:65), but the singularity of the Lebanese case lies in the absence of a single state narrative into which the missing or dead could be co-opted. It thus contrasts with the case of Cyprus, for instance, where the Greek Republic's narrative of missing Greek soldiers as recoverable legitimized its quest to recover lost territory, whereas Turkish North Cyprus's commemoration of the missing as sacrificial victims emphasized its own

separateness (Sant Cassia 2005). As in the Greek part of Cyprus, in Israel “dry bones” are an issue of public concern because they legitimize claims to territory (Weingrod 1995). But the Lebanese army closed down the possibility that the unearthed bones could signify, in Achille Mbembe’s (2003) meaning of the term, an anti-Syrian form of Lebanese nationalism. As is often the case when “things” and genetic information are interpreted to produce and support certain nationalist projects (Burton 2018, Zubrzycki 2017), the army replaced the most obvious reading of the event and any consequent ‘political life of dead bodies’ (Verdery 1999) with its own ahistorical and depoliticized narrative that avoided making connections between its past and present involvement with Syria.

Mart Bax (1997) has argued that in Bosnia monuments and ceremonies related to mass graves have revived traumatic memories and feelings of hatred, although these findings most probably reflect the perspective of the perpetrators. Similarly, the Lebanese army, complying with the general policy of the former warlords who now serve as state functionaries, harnessed widespread concerns about such an outcome by implying that grappling with the past would create increased friction in an already divided society. In fact, however, by performing forensic tests for identification purposes only, the army successfully hid potential prosecution evidence and, in the process, concealed its own collaboration and that of many Lebanese politicians with Syrian military security.

In what follows I first provide historical context to situate the Syrian military presence in Lebanon after 1976, the patterns of abduction, and the eventual withdrawal of the Syrian army in 2005. The historical context indicates that for the Assad regime, the transfer of the forcibly disappeared soldiers across the border did not constitute a violation, because it questioned the very legitimacy of the border between the two countries. Next, I describe the multiple activities

the relatives have undertaken to produce knowledge about the whereabouts of the victims. I focus particularly on Violette's search for Johnny. I show that for the relatives, the DNA tests fit into a longer series of search practices spanning decades. I then consider the Lebanese army's efforts to produce information on the missing soldiers between 1990 and 2005 and suggest that the DNA identification formed part of the state's longer trajectory and policy of silence on the disappeared in general and these soldiers in particular. Finally, I examine the actual event of the Yarze exhumation from the initial eyewitness testimony of a Red Cross member in 2005 to the reburial of the victims. The exhumation created a clash between the expectations of the civilians and the refusal of the army to address their inquiries and grievances.

Syria in Lebanon

Lebanon's 1975 civil war and the involvement of various external parties, most notably Syria and Israel but also the United States, France, and Saudi Arabia, were shaped by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and its replacement by putative nation-states whose boundaries were drawn by and in the interests of the colonial powers, France and Britain (Chaitani 2007, Shaery-Eisenhlohr 2008, Traboulsi 2007). In 1932, under the French mandate, the only census to be conducted in Lebanon recorded Maronites as the largest single community, not without controversy (Faour 2007), and the political system has been based ever since on this census, allocating the post of president to the Maronites, that of prime minister to the Sunni Muslims, and that of the speaker of the parliament to the Shi'ites. More generally, religious "confessional" or "sectarian" affiliations have been singled out as the most important marker of individuals' complex identities, including when it comes to access to state services (Nucho 2016). Although the balance of power has shifted over time, the Lebanese "state," encompassing important

institutions such as the army, is far from a neutral power ruling Lebanon's territory and people in their name. Instead, it is effectively a creature of sectarian political forces.

As the Syrian dissident Yassin al-Haj Saleh has explained (2017), since the early 1970s the Assad clan, enabled by its increasing perversion of Baathist ideology into what al-Haj Saleh terms "absolute Arabism," has asserted its hegemony by propagating the idea of an Arab homeland with Syria as its center. The Syrian army entered the Lebanese civil war in 1976, and until 2005, when it was forced to withdraw under international pressure, it maintained around thirty thousand soldiers in Lebanon. The Syrian government referred to its engagement in Lebanon with the administrative euphemism "the Lebanon file" (*malaf Lubnān*), indicative of the power asymmetry between the two countries that allowed Syria to be cast as the manager of this file among others. The Fraternity, Cooperation and Coordination Treaty of 1991, dictated by Syria during its military occupation of Lebanon but ostensibly signed by the two countries as equal partners, summarizes the absolute Arabism that determined the relationship:

[The treaty] has been brought forward to express the nature of the distinguished Lebanese-Syrian relationships, in addition to the historical, fateful and fraternal ties which were embodied in a structural, economical, cultural and political life cycle throughout the ages [...] . Lebanon, the Arabic state in belonging and identity, has true fraternal ties with all the Arab states, in addition to its distinguished relationships with Syria, such relationships derive their strength from kinship and history roots and from the common fraternal interests as well.

(SLHC n.d.)

In reality, during the three decades of its military presence in Lebanon, Syria coordinated its relations with Lebanon through its ministry of defense, and more precisely through its

military security service, which received its orders directly from Hafiz al-Assad. He had appointed as head of military security Ghazi Kanaan, a distant relative who from 1982 to 2002 directed Syria's relations with the various Lebanese parties (Ziadeh 2013:80), arguably acting like a "colonial high commissioner" (Harris 2005:34). Kanaan's office was responsible for the bulk of the abductions in Lebanon that were carried out by Syrian forces with the support of local militias (Benghazi 2004).⁴ In Lebanon, the Lebanese ministries of the interior and of defense maintained a number of security agencies, with the defense ministry supervising the activities of the Lebanese army, which, in turn, had a directorate of intelligence with two branches, national security and military intelligence. Several episodes hint at vibrant ties between the security organs of the two countries. Intelligence bulletins indicate that Lebanese intelligence agencies from both the ministry of the interior and the ministry of defense reported regularly to Syrian military security (Harris 2005, Kline 2015, Nassif 2000). For instance, Colonel Jamil al-Sayyid, as of 2018 a member of the Lebanese parliament, was from 1991 to 1998 deputy director of the military intelligence directorate of the Lebanese army and from 1998 to 2005 the director general of the interior ministry's general security department, and in both of these roles he reported routinely to Ghazi Kanaan.⁵

The nature of Syria's relationship with Lebanon is illustrated by the fact that until 2008 Syria had no embassy in Lebanon, insisting that the latter was not a foreign country, properly speaking and that their so-called diplomatic relations be articulated in the morally inflected language of brotherhood. The consequences were manifold, ranging from ambiguously phrased economic treaties resulting in thousands of Syrian laborers working for minimal wages in Lebanon (Chalcraft 2009) to problems in the policing of boundaries, wartime refugee flows from

both countries, and the ease with which the Syrian army and their local collaborators abducted both Lebanese citizens and Palestinian residents of Lebanon and detained them in Syria.

Of the roughly 17,000 individuals who disappeared in Lebanon between 1975 and 2005 an estimated six hundred were being held in Syria at the end of that period. However, since there are no official statistics and many families still hesitate to report their missing members, the numbers account only for those whose relatives registered their names with human rights organizations (RCPL 2003). The release in 2012 of a Lebanese man who had been detained in Syria for more than twenty-seven years but whose name had not been included in any list testifies to the difficulty of producing meaningful estimates (*Daily Star* 2012).

The pattern of Syrian military security's abductions reflected its ever-shifting politics as well as the varying extent of Lebanese politicians' collaboration with it. In contrast to the situation during the Bosnian war, for instance, in Lebanon the sectarian or ethnic patterns of abductions and killings were far from stable. For instance, from 1976 to 1978, the principal targets were political enemies of Syria—especially affiliates of the Lebanese National Movement (LNM) and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), who were mainly Muslims and Druze. From 1978 onward, the abductees were primarily members of the right-wing Lebanese Forces (LF), a coalition of several Christian parties, although other members of LF collaborated with Syrian military security.⁶ In Tripoli in northern Lebanon, Sunni Islamists were targeted and continued to disappear well after the end of the war. And from 1989 to 2005, many supporters of General Aoun, the Maronite interim prime minister of Lebanon from October 1988 to October 1990, became victims of enforced disappearance.

Some of the abductees were tried in military courts just across the border in Syria, receiving verdicts within minutes and eventually being transferred to detention centers such as

the infamous one at Tadmur (Palmyra). Others were not even given a mock trial; they died under torture and were most probably buried in mass graves somewhere in the vicinity of the prisons. A few were eventually released (Shaery-Yazdi 2019).

Several former Lebanese detainees have described how, upon their release from Syrian military security facilities, they were handed into the custody of the Lebanese ministry of defense at the border crossing and put into the hands of people they presumed to belong to Lebanese military intelligence, who subjected them to further torture before their eventual release (Cedrus_Libani 2009).⁷ Cooperation between the intelligence services of the two countries was the backdrop to such stories, and it is therefore a key element in the story of the disappearance of Johnny Nassif.

The search for the abducted

I have elsewhere written in detail about the relatives' search practices since the early 1980s and their participation in patron-client relationships to ascertain the whereabouts of their abducted kin (Shaery-Yazdi 2020a). The search for Johnny followed a typical pattern. It entailed the parents' establishing ties to patrons, often to Syrian officers imagined to possess the power to secure a detainee's release; outlays of thousands of dollars on travel and on bribes for the patron and the multiple intermediaries and messengers who sometimes helped connect the families to supposed power brokers. Since the mid-1990s relatives also collaborated with human rights organizations and created the Committee of the Families of Lebanese Detainees in Syria. The families' individual searches thus slowly transformed into a social movement with links to international humanitarian organizations and local embassies. Alongside this process, their

individual knowledge production turned into a collective effort to engage the state through legal means to help determine the fates of the disappeared (Shaery-Yazdi 2020b).

Violette Nassif's search trajectory illustrates the experiences of many of the relatives of the disappeared, in particular the military families. She became a well-known figure in media coverage because she claimed to have seen Johnny in Syria in 1991. In our lengthy conversation, Violette recalled:

In 1991 my husband's business associates helped him establish contact with Ali Eid [an Alawite member of the Lebanese parliament who was closely associated with Syrian military security]. Eid, in turn, was known to maintain business connections with the nephews of Hafiz al-Assad. This one particular nephew took USD 7,000 [a substantial sum in Lebanon at that time]⁸ and drove me in his own car over the border to Qurdaha [the hometown of the Assad family in Syria]. I stayed the night in a hotel, and the next morning another relative of Assad sent his official car to pick me up for the two-hour drive from Qurdaha to Damascus.

Violette told the press and, later on, me in our interview that in Damascus, at the Military Interrogation Branch (known as Branch 248), she met Johnny for a few precious minutes in one of the branch's offices. There were no barriers of any kind, and she was allowed to see him and talk to him for five minutes. After this visit she spent the next three years establishing contacts to various Lebanese businessmen with ties to Syrian counterparts who, in turn, had relationships with Syrian army officers. In addition, she went several times directly to the al-Qaboun military police headquarters in Damascus to obtain a visitor's permit for Branch 248, but her request was repeatedly denied. Finally, in 1994, she was granted official permission to visit Johnny again.⁹ The visitor's permit that was issued to her indicated that Johnny had been transferred to

Damascus Central Prison, a separate facility from the Military Interrogation Branch. Showing me the permit, Violette recalled her attempt to visit Johnny again:

I went to Damascus Central Prison and *almost* had a meeting with Johnny. At the prison, I was asked by the officer in charge to wait in his office while he gave an order to a guard to bring Johnny from section number 5. As the soldier left to fetch Johnny, the officer opened a logbook listing the detainees and checked Johnny's status, then ran out to stop the soldier. I overheard him telling the soldier, "Johnny belongs to the Aoun crowd (*jamā'a*).” Both the officer and the soldier returned to the office and told me that there was no detainee by the name of Johnny at the facility.

As her hopes of gaining renewed access to Johnny in detention waned, Violette became one of the first relatives to coordinate activities with local human rights organizations in the cause of the disappeared soldiers, and after 2005, she was among the leading faces of the social movement at the permanent sit-in in downtown Beirut that demanded governmental action to clarify the fates of the detainees. Violette and her fellow activists staged demonstrations, insisting that the state create a DNA database, exhume mass graves, and establish an independent commission of inquiry to investigate all the cases of disappearance in Lebanon. She was finally able to confirm Johnny's fate in 2009, when the Lebanese army asked her to undergo a DNA test; she had initially refused to comply, insisting that Johnny was still held in Syria. The only remaining unidentified soldier in the Yarze mass grave turned out to be Johnny.

The role of the Lebanese state

In March 1976, a year into the civil war, the Lebanese army split into a broadly Muslim (and secular) faction and a mainly Christian one. Under the leadership of Ahmad Khatib, a Sunni lieutenant, the former part of the army joined the Arab Army of Lebanon that Khatib had created a few months earlier, with headquarters in the Beqaa Valley (Khalidi 1983:51). The Christian part, which still considered itself the official national army, was led by Michel Aoun (currently the president of Lebanon), whose bitter battle against the Syrian army in October 1990 formed the backdrop to the Syrian army's abduction of some of his soldiers, including Johnny. The Lebanese army was reunified only once the Syrian military had established control over the entire country after the October battle. The official line of the army in postwar Lebanon was to maintain silence over the wartime period and the sectarian disintegration of the army at the outset of the war. The story of Dory Nammoura, a low-ranking officer whom the army declared insane in 1994, exemplifies the attitude of the army toward anyone seeking to testify about the events in October 1990. Dory's case reveals the internal divisions in Lebanon and highlights the violence perpetrated by the Syrian army during the civil war.

Dory was a young soldier in the Lebanese army who was stationed at the convent of Dayr Qala' in Bayt Merry from 1988 until October 13, 1990, when the Syrian army took control of the town. Badly injured in that day's fighting and believed dead, he hid under the corpse of another soldier and was able to witness how Syrian soldiers surrounded the convent, rounded up about thirty Lebanese soldiers in addition to two priests, and beat the Lebanese soldiers and executed rows of others even though General Aoun had officially acknowledged his defeat earlier that morning.¹⁰ Syrian officers also forced a large number of soldiers and civilians from Bayt Merry into their jeeps. Dory eventually recovered and returned to the army. He spoke openly about the

massacre until, in 1994, he was forced into early retirement, allegedly suffering from a mental disorder. In Dory's view, however, the label of mental illness was meant to prevent him from talking about the atrocities he had witnessed and was unwilling to pretend had not happened, especially embarrassing details such as the collaboration he had seen between some Lebanese Christian army officers and Syrian officers and the abduction of the soldiers.¹¹

Formal agreements, such as the 1991 Fraternity Agreement that resulted in the creation of the Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council, legalized such cross-border collaboration and reinforced Syrian authority in Lebanon. The council's official responsibility was to promote and coordinate cooperation between the two states "in all fields (political, economical, social and many other fields)" and to supervise such cooperation through its multiple committees (SLHC n.d.). The council was able to overrule the Lebanese government's decisions, and many Lebanese state officials also collaborated with the Syrian president through Syrian military security in Lebanon.

Despite these legal agreements and other forms of economic cooperation between the two countries, which enabled Syria to consolidate its control over Lebanon with the support of local politicians, the Lebanese government, facing growing pressure from human rights activists, authorized three national commissions between 2000 and 2005 to inquire into the situation of the Lebanese detained in Syria. The Selim el-Hoss government established the first national commission on January 21, 2000, to investigate the issue of Lebanese citizens gone missing during the civil war. The commission issued a recommendation that the families of the victims found shocking: every person who had been missing for more than four years would be declared dead, and the families could receive official death certificates. In January 2001, the Rafiq Hariri government launched a second commission, composed of the heads of the security branches and a representative of the Beirut Bar Association. This commission never issued a report and fell

apart in 2005. Finally, after the Syrian withdrawal in 2005, the interim prime minister, Najib Miqati, in agreement with Bashar al-Assad, established a joint Lebanese-Syrian commission; this commission did not publish a report either. Throughout the committee's lifetime, Syria's representatives denied that any Lebanese citizens were detained in Syria. The Lebanese contingent did not pursue legal action, relying instead on lists of detainee names compiled by local human rights organizations; the Syrian representatives dismissed the lists as unofficial. After a decade of waiting for the commissions to come up with serious solutions, activists took matters into their own hands and lobbied politicians to establish an independent national commission to map mass graves, take DNA samples from the family members, compensate families, and develop a mechanism to search for the missing in both Lebanon and Syria. In 2018 the Lebanese government finally approved the formation of such a commission in what came to be known as Law 105.

The excavation of the mass grave in Yarze in November 2005 took place at a time when the third commission was supposedly investigating the status of the detainees in Syria. The political constellation in Lebanon had shifted dramatically with the Syrian army's departure a few months earlier. The assassination of the Sunni prime minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005 and changing US attitudes toward Syria had reinvigorated UN resolutions and accords urging Syria to withdraw from Lebanon. The Lebanese political sphere was polarized into two blocs, one advocating continued close relations with Syria (which came to be called March 8) and the other demanding an end to the 'special' ties between the two countries (so-called March 14). However, the general stance of Lebanese state organs to bury any discussion or evidence of wartime atrocities by and postwar collaboration with Syrian military security remained in place.

Exhumation and DNA identification

On October 13, 1990, as fierce battles raged in Mount Lebanon, hundreds of soldiers' and civilians' bodies piled up in hospitals in Hadath, east of Beirut, and in Baabda in Mount Lebanon, close to the battlefields. In the documentary *Lost Children of Lebanon* (Choukire 2006), Sami, a Red Cross volunteer at the Baabda State Hospital (BSH), described the scene at the hospital. The staff were overwhelmed, and for two days bodies lay in hospital corridors while families examined them, hoping to recognize their missing loved ones:

Eleven soldiers remained unidentified in the BSH for several days. [...] The Lebanese army ordered the hospital staff to bury all the remaining unidentified bodies quickly. Some Lebanese army officers, along with the three of us volunteering for the Red Cross at BSH at the time, were told to organize a burial detail. The volunteers helped dig a pit in what had been a soccer field just outside the ministry of defense. In this pit we buried the eleven bodies, all still wearing their uniforms and wrapped in black plastic body bags as if to facilitate their identification in the near future. [...] The army prohibited the three of us and the army officers involved in the episode from speaking to anyone about it. I therefore kept silent.

Only once the Syrian army had withdrawn did Sami dare to speak out. Significantly, he said he did so after consulting General Aoun, who had recently returned from his fifteen-year exile. The general most probably felt that the dramatic story would bolster his own image as a patriot and provide valuable publicity to support his political comeback as a national hero who, according to his followers, had been forced out by the occupying Syrian army. According to Sami, Aoun advised him to tell his story to the newspaper *al-Nahar*. The choice of publication

was not random. *Al-Nahar*'s general manager and editor, the Greek Orthodox Gibran Tueni, had been a close ally of Aoun since the latter's departure into exile in 1990, and he had been outspoken in calling for a Syrian withdrawal since early 2000. Sami went straight to Tueni, who published an article on the mass grave on October 13, 2005, exactly fifteen years after Aoun's defeat, a date that his followers commemorated every year. Two months after the publication, in December 2005, Tueni was assassinated by a car bomb near Beirut. Fingers pointed to Syria, but the perpetrator could not be identified with certainty.

As soon as Sami's testimony had been published, the army command formed a special commission to investigate the matter. The commission's members included forensic experts, army intelligence officers, and regular army officers but no relatives, former abductees, or local human rights activists, implying that solidarity with victims was hardly the aim of the exercise; nor was an international expert team involved, as had been the case in the former Yugoslavia (Rosenblatt 2015).¹² After just three weeks, the commission ordered that the mass grave be opened, and on November 9, 2005, excavation began. Ghazi Aad, a human rights activist who ran the nongovernmental organization Support of Lebanese in Detention and Exile (SOLIDE), told me in a personal interview on June 6, 2011:

A tent was set up next to the burial site, and in it commission members as well as [we] human rights activists who had forced our way in debated and argued, criticized each other, and watched the unearthing of the corpses. The army maintained a list of all soldiers reported as missing, in particular those who disappeared on October 13. Captain Imad Khoury, the medical expert on the commission, began contacting the soldiers' families. He asked them to go to the military police compound in Jisr al-Basha [a neighborhood in Beirut], where the

recovered bodies had been taken and where DNA samples would be collected from the relatives for purposes of identification.

But as Aad explained to me, several significant puzzles remained. First, the mass grave that was being dug up was *not* in the location to which Sami had originally directed the army. Instead, the army uncovered a mass grave *inside* the precinct of the ministry of defense in Yarze. This meant that the army had probably known all along about the existence of the mass grave it was now opening, but it showed no interest in the site Sami had identified just outside the ministry's premises in an open field. Since the army did not allow digging in the field, it remains unknown whether the other mass grave is in fact empty. Second, instead of the eleven bodies that Sami had reported, the grave contained the remains of twenty-four men, all buried facing Mecca, even though all the buried soldiers turned out to be Christians. The orientation of the bodies suggested that those who had buried them might have been Muslims. It is not uncommon for bodies to be moved from one mass grave to another, or for new corpses to be added to old mass graves; in Bosnia this was a deliberate strategy employed by Serbian forces aiming to cover up the traces of their massacres (Wagner 2008). Third, there is a possibility that the army knew the identity of the corpses even before opening the grave, as the army's list contained only names of missing soldiers, ignoring the possibility that the corpses might have been civilians. The army's control of the graves prevented them from being turned into an "epistemic resource" to be used by international scientists to identify the missing on behalf of their relatives or for the purpose of post-conflict transitional justice, on a model first established in the mid-1980s in Argentina (Dziuban 2017, Weizman 2017b); the truth about the biogenetic identity of the remains exhumed served far more limited ends.

The families' distrust of official avenues of redress was so deep that they considered the army's proposed DNA tests a trap, designed to make them stop looking for their sons who might still be in Syrian detention. Ghazi Aad recalled his debate with the relatives on the issue of trust:

I was in favor of DNA testing. I urged all relatives of soldiers missing since the October 13 battle to take the DNA test. Although it was uncommon for Lebanese soldiers to wear metal tags at the time, at least some of the bodies that had been found were those of soldiers because the forensic team had identified traces of army uniforms. If the families' test results were not matched to the corpses, I argued, their claim that their sons remained in detention across the border would be strengthened, whereas a positive identification would finally provide the relatives with a degree of closure. Sixty families agreed to go to the hospital and submit to testing to establish whether there was a genetic match with any of the remains, but Violette [Nassif] and the parents of army officer George Abou Halloun refused, both convinced that their sons were detained in Syria. To prevent the families from flocking to the lab and seemingly disturbing the work of the genetics team, the army kept the location of the DNA procedure secret until the results were ready.

Dr. Khoury had in fact sent the twenty-four bodies to the Saint Joseph University Medical Center genetics lab in East Beirut for DNA identification. To prevent the possibility of mix-ups, the team took several samples from each body, and the DNA tests themselves were repeated numerous times. When I interviewed her in Beirut in 2011, Dr. Eliane Khoury (unrelated to Captain Khoury), a member of the laboratory, recalled:

Our team repeated each family's DNA test several times, on different body parts, even though usually each test is carried out only twice, as the results of the first test are already considered certain. I encouraged the families to have the tests repeated abroad so as to remove any suspicion that the results might have been engineered for some economic or political end.

Once the identity of the lab was disclosed, many parents visited the lab to seek explanations of the testing procedure to make sense of how the army had come to its conclusions. Dr. Khoury's suggestion to repeat the DNA test abroad was clearly meant to establish the laboratory's reputation as a sound and trustworthy medical institution free of the usual political manipulation and corruption, even as it suggested that ultimately no Lebanese institution, even a scientific laboratory, could be entirely trusted. In a traumatic and deeply politicized context, repetition of the test was thus meant to guarantee accuracy.

The DNA test results were announced on March 13, 2006. They showed that seventeen of the dead, instead of the eleven that Sami had counted, were soldiers who had fallen in battle on October 13, 1990. It is still unclear who moved the bodies onto the ministry grounds, and why and when the additional bodies were laid next to the original eleven. Although human rights activists urged the army to conduct other forensic tests, the army did not allow forensic experts to study the mass grave beyond DNA testing. Some relatives, having learned from human rights activists about other methods that might have been used to identify the exact time of death and the identity of perpetrators, drew the conclusion that other forensic tests, such as wound analysis, which often allows identification of the exact weapon used and even the material of which the weapon was made, would have revealed proof of the collaboration between the Lebanese army and Syrian army intelligence.

Ritual of silencing: The national commemoration

Even before the test results were announced, General Michel Suleiman, who would later serve as president of Lebanon from May 2008 to May 2014, laid a wreath at the mass grave site to honor the fallen soldiers on Independence Day, November 22, 2005. Was this a symbolic act, drawing a parallel between the end of French colonialism and the end of the Syrian occupation? Official discourse pointed at a different reading. Even though the army was theoretically a neutral institution, Suleiman himself had thanked the Syrian army for its presence and support before its withdrawal. The Yarze case was also shaped by the bifurcation of Lebanese political life between supporters and opponents of close ties with Syria and its army's presence. The March 14 alliance saw in Yarze an opportunity to publicize the Syrian army's brutal actions in Lebanon. The abovementioned Gibran Tueni, a Beirut MP and a prominent March 14 figure, compared the mass grave in Yarze to ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia and demanded an international investigation into the matter (Bakri 2005; LIC 2005). He directly accused President Emile Lahoud, widely considered close to Syrian military security and commander of the army at the time of the October 13 battle, of downplaying the mass grave as evidence of Syrian atrocities in Lebanon. Deploying the rhetoric typical of both sides, each of which blamed the other for its involvement in the war, Lahoud retorted that as Tueni knew of the mass grave all along, why had he not openly discussed it prior to the Syrian withdrawal? In response to Tueni's finger pointing, Lahoud in turn accused Tueni of collaboration with Syrian security forces (Bakri 2005).

The March 8 bloc, on the other hand, spoke of a "Syrian witch hunt" (LIC 2005) and framed the mass grave of Yarze as a humanitarian issue. For instance, George Haddad, a lawyer

for the Free Patriotic Movement party, described the exhumation not as an “intelligence file, but as a humanitarian, legal, medical, and scientific one” (Nasr 2005). A few months later, when Staff Brigadier Salim Abu Ismail was attending a dialogue forum to commemorate the beginning of the civil war, he was cornered by the mothers of the missing, who urged the opening of all other mass graves and accused former warlords and current politicians such as Nabih Berri and Walid Junblatt of involvement in the disappearances. Abu Ismail’s response was simple: “We do not want to talk politics” (Sha‘yā 2006).

In the midst of the heated debate over how the mass grave should be handled, who had known about it, and who had collaborated with the Syrian security at the time, the DNA results were announced, and the army organized a national commemoration. Ghazi Aad described the ceremony thus:

On 18 March 2006, at the military hospital in Badaro [a neighborhood in Beirut], General Hussein Hajjar, the army’s deputy chief of staff for personnel, headed the Lebanese army command’s delegation. The army ordered a Maronite priest and a Muslim shaykh to be present at the ceremony to recite their special prayers for the dead. The Lebanese national anthem was played, and each of the coffins was covered with the Lebanese national flag. After the event, army staff transported the coffins to their respective hometowns, where relatives commemorated them in a more personal atmosphere and they could be buried according to their own local and religious traditions.

For the army, the national commemoration ceremony was the final step in closing the case and declaring the puzzle of the missing soldiers resolved. According to Aad, however,

Among the relatives, a strong sense of ambivalence, rather than relief, prevailed, because they didn't know whether the government had been correct all those years in claiming that their loved ones had never been held in Syria and that there were no Lebanese political prisoners in Syria. Was the idea of Syrian detention only wishful thinking, a product of the hope that the victims were still alive?

What about other soldiers whose bodies had not been found in Yarze? Were they still being detained across the border, or were they buried in another mass grave in Lebanon?

To Violette Nassif, the answer was clear: she had seen her son Johnny with her own eyes in 1991 in the Syrian Military Interrogation Branch (Branch 248) in Damascus. Therefore, even if Johnny were dead, he could not possibly be buried in Yarze, and she consequently refused to take a DNA test. However, by 2009, only one soldier's body remained unidentified, and Violette was the only mother of a October 13 soldier who had not yet submitted to the test. After four years of resistance, she finally relented. To her shock and that of other families who had heard her story, as well as the media and human rights activists, her DNA matched that of the unidentified dead soldier. When I interviewed her, Violette said that she had been devastated by the DNA match. She remembered arguing with the army officer responsible, insisting on additional tests to determine the time of Johnny's death, given her conviction that she had seen him alive in 1991:

The army commander dismissed my demands and told me that "for years you blamed us for not supporting you in the search for Johnny and claimed that he was in Syria. Now he is identified, and you also receive monetary compensation, so your case is closed." My older brother, who also attended the meeting, asked

me in front of the commander, “What difference does it make when he died? What matters is that you know he died. What is this insistence on the time of death?” Army staff told me to “calm down” and to accept my “fate,” arguing that knowing the exact date of my son’s death would not change the fact that he would never come back. Later, the commander sent an additional message to my brother saying: “Make sure Violette drops the case now. She should not cross a red line.”

Indeed, the exact timing of the soldiers’ deaths was another major bone of contention between the families and the army. When eyewitnesses are absent or refuse to speak out, time becomes a key factor in tracing the perpetrators. If the soldiers could be shown to have died after 1990, the theory that they had been first detained in Syria and then later buried in Lebanon would gain plausibility, especially since the mass grave that was exhumed was not in the location that the 1990 gravedigger had indicated. There was also an emotional aspect to the families’ desire to determine the timeline of events: had all the years that they had devoted to searching and waiting, with their occasional small successes and gleams of hope, been completely in vain? To what extent had the Syrian officers whose help the families had sought in the course of their search toyed with their suffering? In spite of the tragic and immutable fact that their sons were dead, the meaning that the families could ascribe to their years of searching and agony mattered a great deal to them, even if this meaning was itself structured by painful ambiguities. The closer the time of the soldiers’ death to the day of their disappearance, the greater, the families felt, was their wasted effort. On the other hand, the shorter the time between disappearance and death, the less their sons would have had to suffer in Syrian detention.

The information thus appeared of vital importance for the families, and they considered the state’s reluctance to provide it significant. According to Aad,

The families believed that the army was withholding this precious information. In my view this information could have been obtained with the help of forensic anthropologists and pathologists. For instance, the Carbon 14 dating procedure could have determined the year of death quite precisely, and wound analysis could have pinpointed the exact weapon and bullets used, which might then have been traced to the perpetrator.

However, such findings might have revealed more about the ties between Lebanese army intelligence and Syrian military security than either of these parties wished. In any case, the only forensic information the army gave to the families concerned *how* their sons had been killed—all of them with a shot to the neck, a classic method of execution—but not when or why it had happened, nor who the perpetrators were.

The army succeeded in silencing Violette by refusing to conduct further forensic tests that might have thrown light on the timing of Johnny's death and offered clues as to whether his body had indeed been transferred from Syria to Lebanon. Instead, the army officer who told her to stop asking further questions alluded to cultural stereotypes of suffering mothers (Volk 2010), of hysterical women whose memories cannot be trusted—a common trope in Lebanon (Moghnieh 2015).¹³ Violette's insistence on determining the date of Johnny's demise was framed as a psychological coping mechanism, as denial of the finality of her son's death. The officer, and the army on whose behalf he spoke, presented themselves as the rational, masculine agent and Violette as the irrational, feminine one. Gendered truth telling succeeded in marginalizing Violette's claim and in preventing exposure of the army's deep ties to Syrian army intelligence. The army invoked scientific expertise only as far as was necessary for the dead to "speak" authoritatively about their fate (Dziuban 2017), before being shut down. Against the weight of

scientific authority, the authority of Violette's personal experience of having witnessed her son alive in Syrian detention was minimal.¹⁴

Violette rightly thought of Yarze as a key chance to open up a discussion about victims and perpetrators, to contextualize Johnny's mysterious story within wider domestic and international politics, and to take issue with the Lebanese justice system. However, as the army officer made clear to Violette in his meeting with her and her brother, the aim of the exhumation was identification and proper reburial only. For the army, the disappearances were an individual issue, and the army's role was merely to support the families as they dealt with their trauma. The decision to allow the families to rebury the soldiers individually in their own hometowns and according to their own religious traditions instead of interring them together in a national cemetery for fallen soldiers reflected this approach: it emphasized the interpretation of the mass grave as a personal rather than a national tragedy (Laqueur 2015).

In fact, the recovery of Johnny's body helped the army immensely, as it allowed the families' cross-border search for the soldiers to be portrayed as mere wishful thinking on their part. The commemoration ceremony was a performance that presented the army as the loyal organ of a state that was genuinely concerned about its citizens. The purpose of the ritual was not, for instance, to mark a break with the past and to announce, implicitly or explicitly, the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Lebanon.

Concluding remarks

The central argument of this article has been that the Lebanese army's efforts to locate, identify, and commemorate missing individuals in the aftermath of the Syrian occupation (through DNA testing of remains, for example) were not motivated by a desire to generate truth

about the disappeared. Instead, the army used forensic science to close off further inquiry into the truth, seeking to obscure the fact that mass graves and forensic testing are never apolitical, despite the claims that scientists or international tribunals might make to impartiality and autonomy. Divergences and disputes between the state and victims' families, between the state and human rights activists, and among the families themselves are common features of post-atrocity politics; Argentina and Spain are prominent examples (Dziuban 2017, Renshaw 2011). But even in these cases, despite contestation of official narratives and disagreements about strategy, a sufficient number of the principal actors have managed to agree on some form of narrative involving attribution of responsibility, as exemplified by the 2002 Spanish parliamentary motion on the illegality of Franco's uprising (Araguete-Toribio 2017, Ferrandiz 2006). In Lebanon, the use of DNA identification tests allowed the Lebanese state to declare the case of the missing soldiers solved. Instead of prompting a historical inquiry into the past, the DNA tests provided legitimacy for the army and allowed the latter to cast human rights activism as baseless anti-state agitation and the mothers as hysterical and irrational women. By limiting the application of forensic methods to the narrow task of identifying the bodies, state authorities dismissed calls for the recognition of past violence and loss and closed off avenues of inquiry that might have brought to light the evidence that these bodies could supply of the murky collaboration between the Lebanese and Syrian armies and their intelligence apparatuses. The Lebanese state, through the army, therefore acted as if all along it had been protecting its citizens, who wrongly and unfairly blamed state functionaries for cooperating with the authoritarian Syrian regime. The army carefully managed the configuration of this overlap to its own advantage, using a "national" commemoration that papered over the divisions of the war

and the postwar period and scientific tests deployed to support but the production of an official memory that silenced an inconvenient past, one filled with corpses.

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¹ Personal interview with Violette Nassif, Beirut, October 4, 2014. I also draw on several informal conversations with a Lebanese army general in the presence of the well-known human rights activist Ghazi Aad between 2012 and 2015. Information about collaboration between the Syrian and Lebanese armies is sensitive data that even this general, who was rather open about the events of October 1990, would not discuss. Until the emergence of a different political climate in Lebanon and Syria, much of this information can be obtained only through interviews with the few people who are willing to speak about the events they have witnessed. Many of the written sources on this issue have been produced by the same activists and by supporters of Michel Aoun, and their written statements do not differ greatly from their oral statements provided in interviews. Likewise, newspaper articles are often based on interviews with the same group of people, and journalists lack access to independent sources to contextualize the material presented in the interviews.

² The families could have received this compensation a decade earlier had they declared their missing soldiers dead; since 1995, Law 434 has made such declarations possible, without proof or evidence, for any person who has been missing for longer than four years (CSKC n.d.).

³ Kovras distinguished three levels of truth recovery, the lowest of which was the “institutionalized silence” that, in his view, Lebanon clearly exemplified.

⁴ It is worth paying attention also to the variety of responses to Benghazi's 2004 article because it demonstrates how the issue of the detainees polarizes society. The responses range from demands that the government take responsibility to wishes that the detainees rot in the detention centers indefinitely.

⁵ Jamil al-Sayyid was a member of the Judicial Security Committee along several other Syrian military security officers that interrogated Lebanese detainees upon release from Syria.

<https://www.dailystar.com.lb/ArticlePrint.aspx?id=26526&mode=print> June 2, 2020.

⁶ Personal interview with Asaad Chaftari, Beirut, June 7, 2011. Chaftari was the former head of the intelligence services of the Lebanese Forces and collaborated with the Syrian intelligence service in Zahle (Beqaa) from January 1986 to October 1990.

⁷ This testimony provides an example of the collaboration between Syrian military security and the security organs of the Lebanese ministry of defense. Although the testimony is published on a clearly right-wing Christian and anti-Syrian website, I do not doubt its authenticity as it is almost identical both to the experiences of former Lebanese detainees whom I interviewed personally and to the accounts of former Syrian detainees whose testimonies have recently surfaced on social media.

⁸ In Lebanon both US dollars and Lebanese liras are used. My interlocutors mentioned the USD amounts during interviews.

⁹ The author is in possession of a digital copy of this permission.

¹⁰ Personal interview, Beirut, June 8, 2011. See also Dory's testimony published in *al-Najwa* on December 12, 2005, under the title 'Al-Sūriyyūn tarakūh "jussa" fī Dayr al-Qal'a' [The Syrians left his body in Deir al-Qalaa].

¹¹ Two other soldiers who do not wish to be identified were also able to escape and survived the massacre. In total, then, of the approximately thirty soldiers involved, three survived and only one, Dory, is outspoken in public about the experience.

¹² Adam Rosenblatt identified four groups of “stakeholders” necessary for a successful investigation: national or international courts, the families of the missing, transitional governments rebuilding society, and forensic teams committed to science, truth, and autonomy. The Lebanese situation did not even remotely correspond to this international standard, whose very technocratic blandness (“stakeholders”) seriously underestimates the political and moral issues at stake.

¹³ Drawing on her recent PhD dissertation research, Lamia Moghnieh has argued that psychiatry in Lebanon draws on older Western models of the hysterical woman and even maintains that Lebanese and other Middle Eastern women are exceptionally susceptible to this “condition”; she suggests a link between the diagnosis of hysteria and the increasing activity of NGOs.

¹⁴ Scholars studying post-atrocity situations talk of a shift from witnessing as the paradigmatic form of truth creation (about the Holocaust, or in the immediate postwar decades) to the scientific expertise that emerged as a new form of truth-making in the 1980s and 1990s in Argentina, Yugoslavia, and Rwanda, among others (Dziuban 2017).