

When Ali Abou Dehn was asked to meet a Syrian intelligence officer during a trip to Damascus in 1987, he expected a five-minute chat over coffee.

"That cup of coffee and five minutes of my time cost me 13 years of my life," says Mr. Abou Dehn, a Lebanese Druze.

Accused of spying for Israel, Abou Dehn became one of thousands of Lebanese from all religious backgrounds and political persuasions to disappear into the black hole of Syria's brutal prison system over the past 29 years.

The subject of Lebanese detainees in Syria has long been taboo here, given Syria's domination of Lebanon since the end of the 1975-1990 civil war.

But that fear is now fading. With Syrian troops close to completing a withdrawal from Lebanon in compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559, Lebanese human rights activists are redoubling their efforts to find more than 280 detainees in Syria who remain unaccounted for.

"Times are changing," says Ghazi Aad, the cofounder of the Support for Lebanese in Detention and Exile (SOLIDE). "Syria acted with impunity in Lebanon and the international community ignored these violations. But the international community's attitude is changing and Syria is being forced to clean up its act."

The formation of a new government in Beirut Tuesday, ending seven weeks of political deadlock, has raised hopes that parliamentary elections can be held as scheduled by May 31. The Lebanese opposition is confident that it will form the majority in the 128-seat parliament, possibly giving a boost to efforts to reveal the fate of the detainees in Syria.

Rights groups are rallying to ensure the issue isn't forgotten. Last week, they launched a sit-in and hunger strike outside the UN building in Beirut, saying that Resolution 1559 would be unfulfilled if the fate of Lebanese detainees in Syria is unresolved.

Mike Chokr, a Lebanese-American from Detroit, says he has eaten nothing for two days. "It's not easy but we have to fight," he says. His uncle, Hussein, was an employee of the Lebanon-based Middle East Airlines when he was kidnapped in 1981. The family later learned Hussein was taken to Mezzeh prison in Damascus.

The detainees include Christian militiamen, Lebanese soldiers, Iraqi Baathists, and Sunni radicals, reflecting the diversity of enemies facing Syria during its decades on Lebanese soil.

Many detainees have been freed, the last significant release occurred in December 2000 when 46 prisoners returned home. The Lebanese and Syrian governments then claimed there were no more prisoners being held in Syria.

"They always say the file is closed after each release," Mr. Aad says. Although SOLIDE has information on 280 detainees, the actual figure is thought to be much higher. Of the 46 detainees released in 2000, SOLIDE had information on only 12 of them. And with Damascus' influence waning in Lebanon, new cases are emerging.

"It took us 10 years to compile a list of 280 names and then when we launched our sit-in last week we had 45 new names in one day," Aad says.

Sitting inside a tent in a park opposite the UN building, mothers clutch photographs of missing husbands and sons. More photographs cover two stands in a collection of somber portraits. A banner in Arabic asks, "Until when?"

That's a question Marie Rawi often asks. Her son, George, was kidnapped in 1983 and, apart from a brief telephone call from him eight months later, she knows nothing of his fate. "I don't know if he's in Lebanon or Syria, alive or dead."

Despite being one of the 46 detainees released five years ago, Abou Dehn still carries the physical and mental scars of his 13-year ordeal in Syrian prisons. Accused of spying for Israel, he says he was tortured and sent to the notorious Tadmor prison in the Syrian desert.

"That place really was hell," he says. "There was a sign at the entrance saying, 'He who enters here is dead. He who leaves here is reborn.' "

In 1992, he was transferred to Sadnaya prison. But when he was released eight years later, he found Lebanon unwelcoming. A well-educated, multilingual former construction contractor, the

only work Abou Dehn can find today is as a driver. "Nobody has done anything for us detainees. We have been put on the shelf and forgotten about," he says.

His case is much different than the treatment received by former Lebanese detainees in Israel, most of them resistance fighters who were captured while battling Israeli occupation forces in the 1980s and 1990s. When Israel released almost all the detainees in a prisoner swap last year, they were greeted in Lebanon as national heroes and granted audiences with the president.

Although that treatment is a cause of some bitterness among former prisoners in Syria and their families, Abou Dehn values every minute of his freedom. "I have been out of prison for four years, four months, five days, and," he says, pausing to look at his watch, "two-and-a-half hours."