

## **Families Yearn for News of Syria's Lebanese Prisoners**

By [DEXTER FILKINS](#)

Published: April 4, 2005  
EIRUT, Lebanon, April 3 - In the last glimpse that Violet Nasif had of her son, Johnny, he stood just inside the darkened corridor of a Syrian jail, in the shadows, a guard at each arm, behind a door of metal bars.

Then, after a few seconds, he was gone, pulled back into the darkness. Since that April day in 1994, Johnny Nasif, a 15-year-old Lebanese Army recruit when he was taken prisoner four years earlier, after this country's civil war, has officially ceased to exist.

"They say he's not there anymore," she said.

Ms. Nasif's son is one of hundreds of Lebanese men who, human rights groups say, were spirited across the border by Syrian agents after Syria first sent troops into Lebanon 29 years ago. Most of those taken prisoner were suspected of fighting for the Lebanese Army or one of the many militias that sprang up when the civil war began.

For years, mothers like Violet Nasif have been thwarted not just by the Syrians, who deny the existence of the prisoners, but also by Lebanon's leaders, who have responded with passivity and silence.

The apathy of both the Syrian and Lebanese governments before the families of the disappeared has long stood as a testament to how thoroughly the Syrian government came to dominate this tiny country on the Mediterranean.

But Lebanese leaders here say that may be coming to an end. With the Syrian Army compelled by Lebanese popular opinion and international pressure to end its 29-year military occupation, calls are rising here for Lebanese leaders to demand an accounting of their citizens held in Syrian jails.

The issue is likely to be one of the first tests of the Lebanese opposition, which is expected to win parliamentary elections in May and take over the government. By then, the Syrian troops, who first came to the country in 1976, are supposed to be gone.

"Times are changing," said Fouad Saad, a member of the Lebanese opposition and of Parliament. "It's very possible that a new government will reopen this issue and say to the Syrians, 'Where are these people?'"

Two years ago, Mr. Saad headed a commission that looked into the Lebanese prisoners in Syria and determined that 120 Lebanese were probably either in Syrian jails or had died there.

Yet so intimidating was the Syrian presence, Mr. Saad said, the commission's report was rejected by the Lebanese president, Émile Lahoud, and Rafik Hariri, then the prime minister.

It was Mr. Hariri's murder on Feb. 14 that galvanized Lebanese popular opinion against the Syrian occupation. Many Lebanese believe that the Syrian government was behind the killing.

The report was never published.

Syria's leaders say they released the last of their Lebanese prisoners in December 2000. But human rights groups, as well as the American government, do not place much credence in the assertion. A Lebanese group, Families of Lebanese Held in Syria, has compiled a list of 280 Lebanese who they say were taken to Syrian jails and never released.

Nicole Choueiry of Amnesty International said her organization believed that Syria was still holding an undetermined number of Lebanese prisoners. One prisoner, Josef Huways, died under torture in a Syrian jail in June 2003, the organization said, long after the Syrian leaders said all had been released.

"It's impossible to know how many people are there," Ms. Choueiry said.

Through doggedness and bribes, a few mothers like Ms. Nasif have found their sons and purchased a few moments together. The other families have been left to wonder whether their sons and husbands are alive or dead, and, if they are alive, whether they are among the many who, according to human rights groups, are being tortured in Syrian jails.

If her son is alive, Ms. Nasif notes, he will turn 30 in May.

"We are all dying slowly," Ms. Nasif said of her family. "He is not the only one."

The Syrian government has continued to turn over Lebanese prisoners even as it denies that it is holding any, human rights groups say. Since 2000, the Syrian government has quietly released at least a dozen more prisoners, according to Ghazi Aad, the director of Families of Lebanese Held in Syria.

Mr. Aad said there was good reason to believe that the Syrians were holding even more than the 280 people whose names his organization had compiled. Most of the Lebanese who the Syrians have released, he said, are not on the organization's list.

"That tells us there are more Lebanese in those prisons than we know about," he said.

Bushra Kanafani, a Syrian official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, did not respond to a request for an interview.

The Lebanese lucky enough to be freed from Syrian prisons take with them tales of torture and deprivation. Ali Abou Dehn, a 55-year-old driver in Beirut, was taken into custody in 1987 by Syrian intelligence agents as he left the Australian Embassy in Damascus, where he had gone to apply for a visa.

"Just a few questions," he said they told him.

A dozen years before, Mr. Dehn said, he had joined a predominantly Christian militia, called the Lebanese Forces, at the beginning of the country's civil war. But he said he quit in 1979, when his militia, which had been battling the Palestinian forces that were then operating in Lebanon, started fighting other Lebanese.

"I was a soldier," he said. "But this was not my fight."

The Syrian agents who interrogated him accused him of being a spy for Israel and of killing four Syrian soldiers in 1987. Mr. Dehn said he denied the charges. But as his torturers bore down on him, day after day, week after week, he said he finally decided to offer an empty confession.

"All kinds of torturing," Mr. Dehn said in halting English.

Mr. Dehn lay face down on the Persian rug on the floor of his Beirut apartment to demonstrate an especially painful technique known as the German chair. One interrogator would press a prisoner's lower body to the floor, while another, using an iron chair, pried the prisoner's torso upward and back.

"You will feel that your body, your stomach, is out of life," he said.

Mr. Dehn offered other details of his ordeal: live cockroaches forced down his throat, beatings and electrical shocks, the screams of women in the next room who he was told were his wife and daughters. Mr. Dehn shared a cell with 148 other inmates, he said; they slept "head to foot."

In December 2000, 13 years after he was arrested, Mr. Dehn was on his knees scrubbing a prison latrine when a Syrian guard approached and told him he was free. A photograph of Mr. Dehn on the front page of An Nahar, a Beirut daily newspaper, shows him walking out of Lebanon's Justice Ministry, where the Syrians had handed him over.

Even today, Mr. Dehn is so enthralled by his freedom that he can recite the exact amount of time that has passed since his release.

"Four years, three months, 15 days, and two hours," Mr. Dehn said.

The families of those still missing do not have even Mr. Dehn's consolations. Many seem stricken and wrecked by their vigil.

Marilyn Shalawite, whose brother, George, disappeared in March 1994, sat on the couch of her Beirut home, sedated, hardly uttering a word. Her parents, who seem older than their years, spare their daughter the details of George's disappearance.

In a whisper, the father, Ayub, recounted that his son was taken away by Syrian intelligence agents in March 1994, on suspicion of being a member of a Christian militia.

Mr. Shalawite said he saw his son only four months ago in Sidnaya prison just north of Damascus. He said he paid a Syrian middleman \$500 for the privilege. A guard, he said, even

allowed him to squeeze through a small visitor's window to hug his son.

"He was so skinny," Mr. Shalawite said.

Ms. Nasif said she paid a similar bribe to a cousin of the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, to see her son, Johnny, shortly after his capture in 1990. The second and last time she saw him, in 1994, she was stopped before she got to the prison door. Ms. Nasif, like others whose families have gone missing, seems half-crazy with longing.

"I think about him every instant," she said.

On a bookshelf in her Beirut house, she keeps a color photo of Johnny, taken when he was 15, just before his capture. In the photo, he is wearing a white T-shirt emblazoned with English letters.

"Hurry UP," it says.....