



War's Ruin: The Toll of Human Rights and International Law Violations on Lebanese Lives and Infrastructure



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Introduction

The 2023-2024 Israel-Hezbollah conflict has led to severe and widespread human rights violations against Lebanese civilians. The toll has been immense, with loss of life, displacement, destruction of essential infrastructure, and breaches of basic human rights. Since late September 2024, Israeli airstrikes have escalated dramatically, with over a thousand strikes across Lebanon. As of October 21, 2024, these airstrikes have killed 2,483 people, including women and children, and displaced 833,391 others (OCHA, 2024). This review examines these violations through the lens of international human rights and humanitarian law, particularly the Geneva Conventions, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Drawing on reports from credible organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, the analysis focuses on violations of the rights to life, safety, housing, and access to essential services. Specific violations, including attacks on healthcare workers, peacekeepers, and journalists, as well as threats to UNESCO heritage sites, highlight the gravity of these breaches. This review evaluates these violations and provides insights into the human cost of the conflict in Lebanon, framed within the international legal structure aimed at protecting civilians during times of war.

Right to Life and Safety:

The right to life is a cornerstone of international human rights law, codified in Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)¹ and further safeguarded in the context of armed conflict under Article 51 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions². Despite these legal protections, the 2023-2024 Israel-Hezbollah conflict has resulted in severe violations of Lebanese civilians' right to life and safety. Multiple reports from international human rights organisations highlight the scale and impact of these violations, which have caused significant civilian casualties and widespread fear in affected communities.

- **Airspace Violations and Sonic Booms:**

Israeli forces repeatedly violated Lebanese airspace, distressing civilians by conducting low-flying operations that generated sonic booms overpopulated areas. Al Jazeera (2024) reported that these sonic booms, which produced deafening noise and vibrations, caused widespread panic and psychological trauma, particularly among children. These actions contravene Article 48 of Additional Protocol I³ to the Geneva Conventions, which requires warring parties to distinguish between military targets and civilians. The deliberate use of sonic booms as a form of psychological warfare exacerbates Lebanon's mental health crisis, constituting a violation of the right to mental well-being under Article 12 of the ICESCR⁴. Reports indicate that these events

¹ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966, Art. 6.

² Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 1977, Art. 51.

³ Ibid. Art. 48.

⁴ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), 1966, Art. 12.

may contribute to long-term psychological effects further emphasising the seriousness of these violations. (WHO, 2022).

- **Evacuation Orders with Insufficient Time to Escape:**

Numerous reports from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch documented instances where civilians received inadequate or misleading warnings before military strikes, particularly by Israeli forces. In many cases, civilians were notified only minutes before an attack, with warnings often sent via social media platforms during the night when most people were not monitoring communications. The warnings were frequently vague, with poorly defined or overly large evacuation zones, creating confusion and leaving civilians with insufficient time to evacuate, especially in densely populated areas.

Under international humanitarian law (IHL), specifically Article 57 of Additional Protocol I⁵ to the Geneva Conventions, parties to a conflict are required to take all feasible precautions to protect civilians and civilian objects from the effects of attacks. This includes the obligation to provide “effective advance warning” of attacks that may affect civilians, unless circumstances prevent it. The adequacy of these warnings is assessed based on factors such as the nature of the threat, the size of the affected area, and civilians' ability to respond. Warnings must be sufficiently clear and timely to allow civilians to take protective measures.

In these cases, the failure to provide adequate and clear warnings violates Article 57, which seeks to minimize civilian harm by ensuring they have enough time and information to protect themselves. The use of late, vague, or impractical warnings, as reported, falls short of IHL requirements, constituting a breach of the legal obligation to protect civilians during military operations.

- **Targeting of Healthcare Workers, UNIFIL, Civil Defense, and the Press:**

Throughout the conflict, deliberate attacks on healthcare workers, United Nations peacekeepers (UNIFIL), civil defence personnel, and journalists were recorded. As of October 2023, more than 163 Lebanese medical and emergency workers have been killed since October 8 of the previous year (OHCHR, 2023). These groups are given specific protections under international law, including Article 18 of Additional Protocol I⁶ to the Geneva Conventions, which ensures the safety of medical and humanitarian workers. Human Rights Watch reported several instances where these individuals were targeted, causing significant casualties and further straining humanitarian operations in Lebanon. These actions not only violate international humanitarian law but have also prompted calls for a UN inquiry to investigate potential war crimes. The targeting of these groups has hampered relief efforts and limited the ability of humanitarian organisations to respond to the needs of affected civilians, worsening the humanitarian crisis.

- **Weaponisation of Civilian Communication Devices**

⁵ Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 1977, Art. 57.

⁶ Ibid. Art. 18.

In September 2024, reports emerged of Israeli forces using civilian communication devices, such as pagers and radios, as booby traps across Lebanon. This resulted in civilian deaths, including those of medical workers. The deliberate placement of booby traps in devices intended for civilian use constitutes an indiscriminate attack, in violation of international humanitarian law, particularly Article 51(4) of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions⁷, which prohibits attacks that are not directed at a specific military objective and may affect civilians without distinction. It also breaches the Protocol on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Mines, Booby-Traps, and Other Devices⁸, which explicitly prohibits the use of booby traps that exploit civilian objects. Such actions significantly worsen the already precarious humanitarian situation for civilians in Lebanon, further violating their right to life and security under Article 6 of the ICCPR.

Displacement and Loss of Housing:

The conflict has led to the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Lebanese civilians, with widespread destruction of homes and critical infrastructure. The targeting of civilian residences and essential facilities has left many families without shelter or the means to rebuild, deepening the humanitarian crisis in the country. These actions violate several key provisions of international law, including Article 11 of the ICESCR⁹, which guarantees the right to adequate housing, and Article 53 of the Fourth Geneva Convention¹⁰, which prohibits the destruction of civilian property unless absolutely necessary for military operations.

According to Human Rights Watch, Israeli airstrikes disproportionately affected residential areas, forcing families to flee their homes and seek shelter elsewhere. Many civilians were displaced multiple times as the conflict escalated, compounding the challenges of finding safe refuge. The destruction of homes and civilian infrastructure has not only displaced families but also hindered their access to basic services, such as water, electricity, and healthcare, creating a cascading effect on their overall well-being. The loss of housing increases the vulnerability of displaced populations, particularly women, children, and the elderly, who face greater risks of exploitation and violence in overcrowded or insecure environments.

Access to Essential Services:

The destruction of hospitals, schools, water systems, and other vital infrastructure has severely limited civilians' access to essential services, deepening the humanitarian crisis in Lebanon. While more than 70 schools have been damaged as of September 24, 2024 and 55 attacks on healthcare facilities have been documented as of October 16, 2024; no official reports detail the number of water systems that have been directly targeted or damaged by this date (WHO, 2024; UNICEF USA, 2024). Access to healthcare, education, food, and clean water are fundamental human rights, enshrined in Articles 12 and 13 of the ICESCR, and their protection is crucial during

⁷ Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 1977, Art. 51.

⁸ Protocol on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Mines, Booby-Traps, and Other Devices (Protocol II to the 1980 Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons), 1980.

⁹ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), 1966, Art. 11.

¹⁰ Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (Fourth Geneva Convention), Art. 53.

times of conflict. However, repeated Israeli strikes on these critical facilities have left civilians struggling to meet their basic needs.

Human Rights Watch reported that Israeli forces targeted healthcare facilities, including hospitals and ambulances, in direct violation of the Geneva Conventions, which mandate the protection of medical services and civilian access to humanitarian aid during armed conflicts. These strikes not only resulted in the deaths of medical personnel but also severely limited the ability of remaining healthcare workers to provide life-saving treatment to the injured. The destruction of water infrastructure has similarly deprived civilians of clean water, increasing the risk of disease outbreaks and further jeopardising public health.

The closure or destruction of schools has also denied children their right to education, compounding the psychological toll of the conflict and potentially creating long-term developmental challenges. In addition to this, the disruption of food supply chains, exacerbated by the destruction of agricultural lands in the South, has resulted in widespread food insecurity. This has severely impacted livelihoods and will cause lasting environmental damage to the soil itself. These combined factors have created a humanitarian catastrophe, leaving civilians to navigate the conflict without the support of essential services.

Cultural Heritage Violations:

The conflict has also endangered Lebanon's rich cultural heritage, particularly the Baalbeck ruins, the old souk of Nabatieh, and the coastal city of Tyre—three UNESCO World Heritage sites. The destruction or damage to cultural property during conflict is prohibited under Article 53 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions¹¹ and the 1972 UNESCO Convention concerning the Protection of Cultural Heritage during Armed Conflict¹². Despite these protections, bombings near Baalbeck have raised concerns about the potential destruction of irreplaceable cultural heritage, which holds historical significance for Lebanon and is part of humanity's shared legacy.

The Middle East Forum (2024) reported on the proximity of airstrikes to the Baalbeck ruins, highlighting the risks to Lebanon's cultural sites. The targeting or endangerment of cultural objects during armed conflict constitutes a violation of international law and undermines efforts to preserve historical landmarks for future generations. The potential destruction of such sites is not only a loss for Lebanon but also a violation of international agreements aimed at protecting the cultural heritage of all humanity.

Legal Framework:

The protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure during armed conflict is a core principle of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, particularly Protocol I, establish the framework for protecting civilians, prohibiting attacks on civilian targets, and ensuring that military operations distinguish between combatants and non-

¹¹ Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 1977, Art. 53.

¹² Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, 1972.

combatants. However, despite these clear legal frameworks, the 2023-2024 Israel-Hezbollah conflict has witnessed widespread breaches of these principles.

Just Security (2024) outlines the principles of proportionality and distinction, which require that military operations carefully weigh the military advantage against potential civilian harm and ensure that civilian harm is minimised. However, the scale of civilian harm during the conflict—exemplified by airstrikes targeting residential areas, medical facilities, and essential infrastructure—suggests significant breaches of these principles. Claims that military actions were conducted in accordance with IHL are called into question by the disproportionate impact on civilian life and infrastructure. The deliberate targeting of civilian communication devices, as documented by Human Rights Watch, further highlights the indiscriminate nature of some attacks, which violated international prohibitions on booby traps and indiscriminate weapons.

Conclusion

The 2023-2024 Israel-Hezbollah war has created a complex humanitarian crisis, with significant violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) and human rights that have deeply impacted Lebanese civilians. These violations extend beyond the immediate loss of life, affecting education, healthcare, housing, and essential services while also threatening Lebanon's cultural heritage. The scale and severity of these breaches illustrate the dire consequences of conflict on vulnerable populations, particularly women, children, and displaced individuals. This situation underscores the need for urgent international intervention to address the long-lasting impacts on Lebanon's social fabric.

Recommendations

1. **Strengthen Enforcement of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) Protections**

International bodies, particularly the United Nations and the International Criminal Court (ICC), must take more decisive action to enforce IHL protections during conflicts. The Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols provide clear guidelines for the protection of civilians, yet violations persist. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms, including the establishment of independent monitoring and reporting systems, will help ensure that breaches of IHL are documented and addressed. Furthermore, there must be a concerted effort to hold violators accountable through legal actions at international courts and tribunals, ensuring those responsible for breaches of civilian protections are prosecuted.

2. **Establish Independent Investigations**

Independent investigations are critical to assessing potential war crimes and human rights violations during the conflict. A UN-mandated inquiry, as called for by Human Rights Watch (2024c), should be established to investigate allegations such as the targeting of healthcare workers, UN peacekeepers, and journalists. These investigations should be transparent and impartial, focusing on gathering evidence, hearing witness testimonies, and documenting violations. This would not only ensure accountability but also serve as a deterrent for future violations. International cooperation with local civil society

organisations and human rights groups will be essential to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive investigation process.

3. Guarantee Access to Essential Services

During armed conflicts, civilians' access to essential services such as healthcare, education, food, and clean water must be prioritised. All parties to the conflict are obligated under the Geneva Conventions to allow for the unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid. To safeguard this, humanitarian corridors should be established, and warring parties should be compelled to respect these corridors to ensure civilians can receive the assistance they need. International humanitarian organisations, such as the Red Cross and UN agencies, should be provided with the necessary support and protection to facilitate the delivery of aid to affected populations without obstruction.

4. Protect Cultural Heritage Sites

Greater international oversight is needed to protect cultural heritage sites during conflicts. The 1972 UNESCO Convention and international humanitarian law mandate the protection of cultural property during armed conflicts. The Baalbeck ruins and other UNESCO World Heritage sites in Lebanon are part of humanity's shared cultural heritage, and their destruction would be an irreplaceable loss. The international community, through UNESCO and other relevant bodies, should increase efforts to monitor, report on, and prevent attacks on cultural heritage. Emergency safeguarding plans and interventions should be developed to protect these sites during periods of hostilities.

5. Support the Right to Adequate Housing and Protection from Displacement

The conflict has displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians, leaving many without shelter. Displaced civilians must be provided with immediate humanitarian assistance, including access to temporary shelter, food, and water. In the long term, international organisations and donors must prioritise reconstruction efforts, helping displaced populations rebuild their homes and ensuring they are not left in inadequate living conditions. The right to adequate housing, as outlined in Article 11 of the ICESCR, must be upheld, and efforts should focus on providing sustainable housing solutions for those affected by the conflict.

6. Strengthen Mental Health Support

The psychological impact of the conflict, particularly the use of sonic booms and other terror tactics, has caused widespread trauma, especially among children. The international community, including bodies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF, should prioritise mental health services for affected civilians. Comprehensive mental health programmes should be developed to address the long-term psychological effects of the conflict, including the provision of counselling, trauma support, and psychological first aid. Special attention should be given to children, who are particularly vulnerable to the mental health consequences of conflict, and efforts should be made to establish safe spaces for them to heal and recover.

7. Enhance Civilian Participation in Human Rights Advocacy

Local civil society organisations in Lebanon play a crucial role in advocating for human rights and holding warring parties accountable for violations. International organisations should work closely with these local groups to empower them to document violations, provide support to affected populations, and engage in advocacy efforts at both national and international levels. By amplifying the voices of civilians, particularly those directly affected by the conflict, the international community can better understand the human rights challenges on the ground and push for meaningful reforms and justice. Capacity-building initiatives should also be provided to help these organisations effectively participate in human rights advocacy and monitoring efforts.

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