

A Cascading Crisis: Looming Threats of Mass Internal Displacement from South Lebanon in the Wake of the Israel-Hamas Armed Conflict

This article examines the beginnings and rapid escalation of internal displacement from South Lebanon in the wake of the spill-over of the Israel-Hamas armed conflict into Lebanon - now, between Israel and Lebanese armed group Hezbollah. Through tracking the increase in numbers amid conflicting estimates, the article further puts into question the possibility for an inclusive emergency strategy, the extent to which the Lebanese government has the resources to respond in case of a mass internal displacement, while also drawing from the 2006 War experience, and how that may have informed and shaped next steps by the government and humanitarian actors.

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The 2023 Israel-Hamas [armed conflict](#) has brought about another wave of painful [internal displacement](#) in the Gaza Strip impacting more than 1.4 million people. Repercussions are certainly not limited to, nor only felt, in these immediate conflict zones, however. At the outskirts of this conflict and its regional spill-over, Lebanese armed group Hezbollah and Israel's military have [exchanged artillery fire](#) and other attacks across their shared border, escalating fears that a regional war could erupt.

Israel initiated hostilities against Hamas on October 8, 2023, one day after the Palestinian group [launched an attack](#) from Gaza, resulting in an estimated [1,400 Israeli casualties](#), many of whom were civilians, and the kidnapping of at least [240 people](#), who were taken back to Gaza.

Following Israel's aerial, land and airspace bombardment of Gaza, the number of Palestinian casualties has surged to close to [10,000](#) at the time of writing. More than [62 percent](#) of casualties are women and children. While Israel has been condemned for its [collective punishment](#) of Palestinians, and the UN Chief insists that clear [violations of international humanitarian law](#) have taken place in Gaza, a ceasefire remains out of reach after multiple failed [UNSC meetings](#), and a non-binding [UNGA resolution](#) calling for an immediate and sustained 'humanitarian truce'. For its part, the Cairo Summit [failed](#) to contain or halt the armed conflict fifteen days in as well. Israel maintains that there will be [no humanitarian pause](#) unless all Israeli hostages are released. UN officials continue to warn of [mass ethnic cleansing](#) in Gaza, as well as that Palestinians are at [grave risk of genocide](#).

The violence has prompted Hezbollah to express [its "solidarity"](#) with the Palestinian people. Subsequent hostilities by Hezbollah and Israel's retaliatory actions have resurrected memories of a conflict between the two entities that had remained relatively subdued [since 2006](#). In the case of Lebanon's southern regions, ones that have already borne the burden of a fifteen-year [Israeli occupation](#) and multiple conflicts over the years, the repercussions of this latest round of violence have been particularly pronounced, leading to [internal displacement](#), upheaval, and a need for government intervention and [humanitarian assistance](#).

Lebanon's South: A Story of Conflict and Neglect

Lebanon, a nation with a population of approximately six million, shares a [Blue \(demarcation and withdrawal\) Line](#) across its southern border with Israel. Of the Lebanese populace, approximately [600,000 people](#), constituting roughly one-tenth of the country's inhabitants, reside in close proximity to this border. While Israel and Lebanon have technically been ['at war'](#) since 1948, a relative calm has prevailed since the last [direct military confrontation](#) in 2006, with the exception of sporadic [border tensions](#) occasionally surfacing.

Local residents of Christian and Muslim border towns continue to harbor concerns that any escalation in hostilities could result in a more devastating outcome than witnessed in 2006. During the 2006 War, [1,109 Lebanese individuals](#), predominantly civilians, lost their lives, in contrast to [43 Israeli civilians](#) and [12 soldiers](#). The current potential for conflict appears even more perilous. Hezbollah's leadership insists that the group now boasts a force of [100,000 fighters](#). Meanwhile, Israeli officials have issued ominous threats, suggesting the possibility of returning Lebanon ["to the stone age"](#) if Hezbollah were to expand its involvement and attacks. As the rapidly worsening armed conflict next door persists, the [collective memory](#) of the 2006 War continues to haunt border residents, prompting an ongoing migration from the towns and villages in the south towards the capital, Beirut, and its surrounding suburbs. However, this time around, there is an additional layer contributing to the increased vulnerability experienced by many in Lebanon, and that is the country's and residents' current [dire economic circumstances](#).

The regions on Lebanon's periphery have endured [a long history of marginalization and neglect](#) by the central government. Presently, poverty levels in south Lebanon [exceed the national average](#), salaries are lower, the private sector faces decline, and a significant portion of the local population heavily relies on remittances from family members residing abroad – as Lebanon remains the most [remittance-dependent country](#) in the world. Analysts assert that the potential outbreak of a conflict would further exacerbate the existing challenges in this already troubled southern region. Simultaneously, as residents grapple with apprehension, the Lebanese government has largely limited its response to managing security concerns at the border to some limited [coordination](#) with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), according to reports. Caretaker Prime Minister Najib Miqati and Lebanese Armed Forces Commander General Joseph Aoun [paid a surprise visit](#) to the country's southern regions to reiterate that they do

not want Lebanon to enter the war. While the [caretaker government created a Contingency Plan](#) in case war does break out, there is general scepticism that the largely immobilized and impoverished government can organize to support citizens if war spreads beyond south Lebanon. There has been [limited government coordination](#) with municipalities according to [testimonies](#), leaving [NGOs and IOs](#) as well as [Hezbollah](#) (the primary party in the conflict) to develop their own contingency plans to support those affected by a conflict.

The Beginning of Internal Displacement from South Lebanon

The absence of government data has once again made it difficult to ascertain the exact number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from south Lebanon. As the humanitarian space in Lebanon is accustomed to [a lack of comprehensive population data](#), local municipalities, humanitarian actors and local organizations have stepped in to piece together the estimates. Initial numbers circulating in the first two weeks of the armed conflict placed the numbers between [20,000](#) and [30,000](#) IDPs according to the UN Migration Agency (IOM). IOM said in an update that the figure [rose 37 percent](#) between October 23 and 28 alone.

Reports from just days later placed the number of those displaced anywhere between [40,000 and 60,000](#) according to the President of Tyre's municipalities (Tyre, also known as Sour, is one of the larger towns in southern Lebanon), who additionally stated that [6,236 people](#) with "nowhere to go" are spread across schools and shelters in Tyre, Nabatieh and Saida. Poor access to sanitation and medication has already caused [a scabies outbreak](#) in these shelters. Some southern towns have been almost completely abandoned. On October 17, after enduring several hours of Israeli airstrikes and a [white phosphorus attack](#), Dahayrah, a town situated approximately one hundred meters away from the Israeli border, was [nearly emptied](#) of its roughly 2,000 inhabitants. The Mayor of the village of Rmeich has reported that more than [60 percent](#) of the town's population has left amid "fear of the

bombing on the outskirts,” ultimately reducing the population of the village from 10,000 to 3,000 people.

Alarming, a security source reportedly confirmed that the number of displaced people from the south was close to [100,000 Lebanese](#) and not 29,000 as announced by the United Nations, counting all individuals that left the south, and not just those who took refuge in nearby schools or villages where they “could be clearly counted”. Conversations around exact numbers, as discussed, not only remain vague, but additionally fall short in unpacking the group of IDPs that is accounted for. Numbers across all sources have fallen short in disclosing whether or not these numbers are of Lebanese citizens solely, of both citizens and refugees, or whether these numbers are in fact estimates or recorded. [An official report](#) produced on October 15 by the UN Migration Agency, which reportedly relies on “[...] government officials, mukhtars [mayors], migrant community representatives and neighborhood focal points” currently serves as the only tracking document available. At the time of its publication, it accounted for a little over 8,000 IDPs, albeit failing to disclose any additional information on this number across nationality or gender. For its part, UNHCR has yet to publish any reports on the issue at the time of writing.

The gaps in the data that does exist demonstrates a lack of attention to IDPs who are additionally vulnerable, such as women, children, diverse SOGIESC and refugees. Without gathering data that includes the intersectionality of the IDPs, adequate planning is virtually impossible. Furthermore, the gendered dimensions of displacement might again be under-resourced as was the case following the catastrophic August 4, 2020 [Beirut Port Explosion](#). Better data remains critically needed.

The Refugee Paradigm: What about the long-term displaced?

For the country’s Palestinian refugee community, the escalation of the armed conflict and the threat of it spilling over into Lebanon could mean

that their lives will once again be disrupted. According to UNRWA, [250,000 Palestinians](#) reside in the country, alongside [31,400 Palestinians](#) from Syria. For residents of the Ein el-Hilweh refugee camp in south Lebanon, [the largest](#) of the twelve Palestinian camps in the country, who are still recovering from very recent conflicts, a possible war between Israel and Lebanon adds yet another layer of re-traumatization and insecurity to a decades-long conflict. In July, armed [clashes](#) between Palestinian factions in the camp near the city of Saida in south Lebanon resulted in the displacement of at least [4,000 people](#) from their homes. Subsequently, in September, [another](#) bout of violence erupted that led to tens of casualties and hundreds of injuries, marking the most severe outbreak of violence witnessed in Ein el-Hilweh in decades. Ein el-Hilweh is home to nearly [80,000 residents](#), predominantly Palestinians from [Lebanon and Syria](#), along with [Syrians](#) and individuals from various other nationalities. [The camp](#) is desperately poor with substandard infrastructure and high density living quarters. The recent wave of violence has had a significant impact on children in Ein el-Hilweh. Approximately [11,000 Palestinian refugee students](#) in south Lebanon were unable to start school in early October. Frequent disruptions in classes have left many students lagging behind.

For Syrians in Lebanon, their difficult fate as a result of a possible war between Israel and Lebanon cannot be understated. Lebanon hosts approximately [1.5 million Syrian refugees](#), with [815,000 of them](#) officially registered by UNHCR. This data has not been updated for several years. With the possibility of a large-scale regional conflict on the horizon, numerous Syrian refugees in the country will be faced with either living through another war or returning home to Syria where the government enforces [mandatory military conscription](#), and is known for its rampant [human rights violations](#). Reports of torture, kidnapping and enforced disappearances upon return to Syria have been [widely documented](#). The [absence](#) of documentation, passports, as well as the anticipated strain on migration and asylum systems pose additional layers of concern for the community and limit their options for onward

migration from Lebanon. Irregular migration from Lebanon to the EU has also seen [very few successes](#), as Lebanese authorities have been reportedly carrying out [deportations](#) following rescues at sea. Syria has also [long-been unsafe](#) for critics of the Assad regime, sexual and gender minorities, and human rights activists – another concern for sub-groups within the Syrian community.

As refugees brace themselves for the possibility of yet another armed conflict in Lebanon, [ongoing anti-refugee sentiments](#) continue to bring added insecurity to the community – particularly when it comes to access to aid, services and protection. Human rights actors [have condemned](#) the Lebanese government's discriminatory practices against Syrian refugees who have been displaced by the deterioration of the security situation at Lebanon's southern border. The Minister of Social Affairs in Lebanon's caretaker government has [expressed concerns](#) about accommodating Syrian refugees in schools and state institutions. He cites unfounded fear that these refugees [may not leave](#) once the situation in Syria returns to normal as a reason. Municipalities in south Lebanon (and elsewhere in the country) have implemented restrictive policies towards Syrian refugees, even though they are open to hosting Lebanese families. According to a [report](#) from *The New Arab*, displaced Syrians avoided seeking refuge in the nearby southern city of Tyre because they had heard that shelters there were not accepting Syrians.

Has the 2006 Experience Informed Contingency Plans?

Believed to have displaced more than [one million persons](#), the 2006 War constitutes an important precedent as the country continues to dive deeper into uncertainty and fears of an Israel-Hezbollah escalation. While Lebanon was not prepared for the 2006 War, the country was in a drastically different standing – for one, the country was not in the economic and political crisis it is in today. Importantly, the 2006 emergency did not constitute, nor develop into, a humanitarian crisis. As

per the [framing](#) of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), it began as – and remained – a crisis of protection.

The prevention of a humanitarian disaster in the midst of the 2006 armed conflict could be attributed to several key elements. According to OCHA these included the proactive efforts of local Lebanese communities and organizations, who provided shelter and support to approximately [25 percent](#) of the displaced Lebanese population – predominantly hailing from southern regions. Alongside municipalities, humanitarian actors maintained a crucial role in responding to the crisis by mobilizing their own resources and efforts. The Lebanese Government intervened after the conclusion of the 33-day war in the form of [early recovery plans](#) designed to support rebuilding efforts, which coincided with the winding down of humanitarian interventions.

While the overall political and economic climates have drastically changed since 2006, the role of local municipalities and humanitarian actors has once again proven to be central amid preparations for a potential escalation of hostilities in south Lebanon. [Schools in Tyre](#) have been converted into aid stops for those displaced. Two weeks into the crisis, three school buildings had been repurposed by the local municipality to serve [as temporary shelters](#) for those impacted, including [900 refugees](#). All three school-based shelters quickly filled, with local authorities reportedly “actively searching” for a suitable site to set up [a fourth shelter](#). Already 52 of the 300 [schools in south Lebanon](#) are closed due to the hostilities, leaving more than 8,000 children out of education, in addition to those enrolled in the schools that are now being used as shelters. Demand for temporary shelter continues to outpace supply.

Caretaker Prime Minister, Najib Mikati, has overseen a [“National Emergency Plan”](#) prepared by the National Crisis and Disaster Management Coordination Committee, in cooperation with international organizations, while other ministries have sought to

prepare contingency plans for their sectors. The government indicated that the plan was developed with the potential scenario of “[one million](#) Lebanese people facing forced displacement in the first 45 days of the possible escalation,” necessitating collective shelter facilities capable of housing at least [20 percent](#) of those displaced. The objective of this plan is reportedly to “[...] reduce the strain on the healthcare system and offer essential humanitarian support to those residing in the shelter centers.” Main focus areas of [the plan](#) include: (1) converting public schools into shelters, (2) ensuring that food supplies remain sufficient, (3) ensuring the provision of medical supplies and medication, (4) maintaining networks and infrastructure, (5) maintaining power sources and water lines, as well as preparing for (6) search and rescue missions across the country where needed.

As part of the plan, Lebanon will also reportedly collaborate with United Nations agencies to address the needs of [three distinct non-Lebanese populations](#): Palestinian refugees through UNRWA, Syrian refugees through UNHCR, and foreign workers via the International Organization for Migration. Caretaker [Minister of Interior](#), Bassam Mawlawi visited Lebanon’s southern regions of Nabatieh and Tyre on November 2 to assess the situation of displaced persons from the border towns, as well as the readiness to respond in both districts as part of the emergency plan developed by the Cabinet.

The health sector, drawing on previous conflict experience as well as lessons learned from the August 4 Port Explosion, have updated their [emergency preparedness plans](#) and are implementing them as funding and staffing allow. While the Ministry of Health’s emergency plan has remained more theoretical than actual due to lack of funding for implementation, it is working together with private and public hospitals as well as NGOs and IOs to be as prepared as possible for an uncertain future. The President of the Lebanese Order of Physicians [confirmed](#) that while hospitals are equipped with the necessary medical personnel to treat patients, the cost of medication and equipment remains high – a

financial burden that medical facilities and hospitals cannot shoulder. In all sectors and in all regions, the dire economic crisis is preventing the government and many CSOs from addressing current public needs, never mind the needs of tens of thousands of IDPs.

The [World Health Organization](#) has offered what it describes as “crucial medical assistance” to the Lebanese Health Ministry to prepare for potential health emergencies. The Ministry has received two shipments comprising medication and surgical tools to cater to the requirements of 800 to 1,000 patients. The Ministry will designate specific hospitals to receive these supplies. The [Red Cross](#) centres across Lebanon have shared their preparation for a potential war, with a pre-emptive plan in place as part of a national emergency response strategy. The local branch of [Caritas Internationalis](#) has launched a food campaign for displaced families in the south as well.

But today, Lebanon also faces [strained relationships](#) with a number of international humanitarian organizations due to government inefficacy in addressing the needs of Syrian refugees while also using the refugee issue as a [domestic scapegoat](#) for the virtual absence of government action on the ongoing economic and political crises. Externally, Lebanon is also in a worse position than in 2006. [Arab countries](#) have tired of the lack of progress on reform as well as the strength of Iran-backed Hezbollah over the country, withdrawing tangible and intangible support to the government, while [Western nations](#) have largely rallied around Israel following the Hamas attack. International funding was [becoming scarce](#) before the start of the newest Israel-Hamas armed conflict; now it may dry up altogether – particularly if the perception continues that [Iran is calling the shots](#) in Lebanon.

Conclusions

Long-term recovery and rebuilding efforts in south Lebanon face considerable challenges in case hostilities and armed conflicts escalate.

While Lebanon has insisted that it “does not want a war”, this has begged the question of whether or not this decision is a strategic political position, or one more linked to the inability of Lebanon to respond to the humanitarian, economic, and political repercussions the war will yield amid its own ongoing layered crisis. As of November 2, Caretaker Prime Minister Mikati is publicly [calling for a cease fire](#) between Israel and Gaza and stressing that Lebanon “[...] does not seek and cannot afford a war”. Mikati is also said to have [a peace plan](#) for Gaza. Lebanon’s Army has [received warnings](#) from UNIFIL on the importance of not violating Security Council [Resolution 1701](#). Ministers and Ambassadors from UNIFIL countries of deployment have reportedly insisted that they are holding the Lebanese Government accountable for their troops’ safety, and that they would possibly [retract](#) their peacekeeping mission at the country’s southern border if their safety is not upheld. Two UNIFIL troops have sustained minor injuries following two mortar shells [hitting a UNIFIL base](#) in the vicinity of the village of Houla.

While Lebanese cannot seem to agree on many things currently (such as [electing a president](#)), there does seem to be [widespread agreement](#) that they do not want another war. Given how the political class has been able to evade accountability for a collapsing economy and rampant corruption for over four years, the Lebanese might not have a say in whether the country goes to war or not. In a long-awaited speech from someone who ultimately has a say, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah may have confirmed that Lebanon will not expand the war. In his speech on November 3, Nasrallah insisted that Hezbollah has “[already entered](#) the battle directly since October 8,” and that it continues to carry out strategic operations from the south that have diverted at least “one third” of Israeli Armed Forces’ attention away from Gaza. While his speech served as a sign of relief for many people across Lebanon, the truth of the matter is that south Lebanon has not received [any reassurances](#) about attacks at the border slowing down anytime soon – ultimately making one thing very clear: displacement from the southern

regions of the country are likely to continue. In Nasrallah's statement that "all scenarios are open," the Hezbollah leader further leaves the door open for the positionality of the armed group, and the fate of the country and its degree of involvement, changing in due course. For this reason, national emergency plans will most likely remain at bay while much of the focus now remains on south Lebanon.

While Hezbollah and Israel continue to exchange fire in [a calibrated manner](#), concerns are growing that one side will eventually miscalculate and the conflict will quickly spiral. Already, as of November 5, [civilians were killed](#), leading many to expect not only retaliation but intensification of hostilities. What is clear is that an IDP crisis in south Lebanon already exists, and that no one is quite prepared to address it.

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