



# LAW

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# FRONTLINE INSIGHTS

*Legal and policy briefs*

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**LEBANON** - Escalation of the Conflict in the Southern Region, Conduct of Hostilities, Forced Displacement, and Civilian Protection Concerns

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## I. Introduction

Since the escalation of hostilities on 2 March 2026, Lebanon has witnessed one of the most rapid and large-scale displacement crises in its recent history, with 1.2 million people forced to flee their homes in a matter of weeks. The scale, speed, and patterns of displacement – combined with continued attacks in populated areas – have generated severe humanitarian and protection consequences, particularly for women, children, migrant workers, and other vulnerable groups.

This paper draws on LAW’s operational presence in Lebanon, including direct legal assistance and field-based observations, alongside available protection data and open-source reporting, to analyse key legal and protection concerns arising from the on-going hostilities. It highlights patterns of harm affecting civilians and examines their implications under international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL), where applicable. In light of these findings, the paper sets out recommendations aimed at strengthening protection for affected populations, ensuring access to justice, and advancing accountability for alleged violations.

## II. Background

The escalation of hostilities in southern Lebanon in March 2026 is rooted in a chain of events spanning more than two years. Following the attack against Israel by members of Hamas and affiliated armed groups on 7 October 2023,<sup>1</sup> Hezbollah opened a second front from Lebanon the following day,<sup>2</sup> initiating an extended cross-border exchange of fire.

Israel responded with sustained airstrikes on southern Lebanon throughout 2024, culminating in a brief ground incursion after the assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in September 2024 during airstrikes on Beirut.<sup>3</sup> This represented a significant symbolic and psychological blow to Hezbollah’s leadership and morale, as it came only 10 days after Israel conducted a large-scale intelligence operation

resulting in thousands of handheld pagers and hundreds of walkie-talkies – intended for use by Hezbollah members – to explode simultaneously in two separate events across Lebanon and Syria.

A ceasefire brokered by the United States and France in November 2024 required Hezbollah to withdraw fighters north of the Litani River in southern Lebanon, and tasked the Lebanese Army with deploying approximately 5,000 soldiers to the south.<sup>4</sup> Both sides violated the terms of the ceasefire, however, and Israel continued near-daily strikes into Lebanon, killing an estimated 500 people (including 127 civilians) between November 2024 and March 2026, while Hezbollah rebuilt its military infrastructure and weapons arsenal.<sup>5</sup>

On 28 February 2026, the US and Israel launched joint attacks on Iran and assassinated Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei,<sup>6</sup> constituting an act of aggression under international law and marking a major escalation in the conflict. In response, Hezbollah fired at least six rockets into northern Israel on 2 March.<sup>7</sup> Israeli forces then retaliated with a massive air campaign across Lebanon, including strikes in the capital Beirut, the Bekaa Valley, and the south.<sup>8</sup>

On 16 March, the Israeli military launched a ground operation into southern Lebanon, announcing it as a “targeted ground operation against key targets” aimed at establishing a “forward defense area”<sup>9</sup> to prevent Hezbollah penetration.

On 8 April 2026, Israel launched “*Operation Eternal Darkness*” – reportedly killing more than 300 people and wounding 1,165 in a single day, according to an initial count by Lebanon’s civil defence – in strikes across central Beirut, southern Lebanon, and the Bekaa Valley – many without prior warning and in densely populated civilian areas.<sup>10</sup>

### III. Escalation and Civilian Protection Concerns

#### a. Conduct of Hostilities

Since the firing of rockets by Hezbollah into northern Israel on 2 March 2026, Israel has conducted an intensive air, artillery, and ground campaign across Lebanon. Numerous violations of IHL have been documented across Lebanon. These include the targeting of civilian infrastructure by the Israeli military, including the destruction of medical facilities.

At the time of writing (9 April 2026), Lebanese health authorities report that at least 1,784 people have been killed, including approximately 130 children, and at least 56 medical workers, with over 5,977 wounded. On 8 April alone, Israel launched “*Operation Eternal Darkness*” – described by the Israeli military as its largest coordinated wave of strikes since the start of the war – hitting over 100 targets across Lebanon within ten minutes, including densely populated residential and commercial areas of central Beirut without prior warning. Lebanese Civil Defence reported 300 people killed and 1,165 wounded in these strikes alone.<sup>11</sup> Overall, the strikes have hit residential buildings, hospitals, and other civilian infrastructure across southern Lebanon, Beirut’s southern suburbs (Dahiyeh), and the Bekaa Valley.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Incendiary weapons*

LAW is particularly concerned by reports on the use of white phosphorus munitions over residential areas. On 3 March 2026, for example, artillery-delivered white phosphorus was reportedly fired over Yohmor town in southern Lebanon, setting fire to at least two homes.<sup>13</sup> Credible reporting verified and geolocated images showing airburst white phosphorus munitions – identified as consistent with the M825-series 155mm projectile – were deployed over a residential neighbourhood.<sup>14</sup> Additional reports documented white phosphorus use over Khiam on the eve of the ground invasion.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Bridges*

Israeli strikes have also systematically targeted bridges. Between 13 and 22 March alone, the Israeli military struck at least four bridges over the Litani River, including the Qasmiyeh Bridge on the main coastal highway linking southern and central Lebanon.<sup>16</sup> On 22 March, Defence Minister Israel Katz ordered the destruction of all crossings over the Litani and the accelerated demolition of homes in border villages, explicitly citing the model used in Beit Hanoun and Rafah in Gaza.<sup>17</sup> The devastating effects of such an order are further isolating civilians remaining in the south, cutting access to food, medicine, and other necessities and generating a humanitarian catastrophe.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Healthcare*

In addition, attacks on healthcare infrastructure have been particularly severe. At least 56 medical workers have been killed, an additional 137 injured, and at least 6 hospitals and 49 health clinics have been forced to shut down, with over 100 documented attacks on healthcare since 2 March.<sup>19</sup> LAW notes in particular the devastating strikes on the Lebanese Red Cross and civil defence workers, including a fatal strike on a Red Cross volunteer in southern Lebanon.<sup>20</sup>

#### b. The Buffer Zone

Israeli officials have made clear their intention to establish a permanent military buffer zone in southern Lebanon. On 24 March, Defence Minister Katz stated that Israeli forces would control a “security zone” up to the Litani River – roughly 30 kilometres north of the Israeli border – until the threat from Hezbollah is removed.<sup>21</sup> The following day, Prime Minister Netanyahu confirmed that a “real buffer zone” had been created and that the military was expanding its control.<sup>22</sup>

Defence Minister Katz explicitly stated that displaced “Shiite residents” of southern Lebanon would not be permitted to return to their homes south of the Litani River until the security of northern Israel is “guaranteed.”<sup>23</sup>

LAW finds that such statements, particularly in invoking religious faith, are divisive and incendiary. They introduce a vague and subjective notion of what it means to “guarantee” a military outcome, thereby leaving unclear the scope and potential limits of military operations undertaken in its name. LAW expresses further concern that the systematic destruction of Litani River crossings, ordered demolition of homes near the border, and expansion of displacement orders suggest that the buffer zone is designed to create a depopulated strip of territory rather than a temporary security measure.

Israeli forces are now thought to have advanced more than one kilometre deeper into Lebanese territory from pre-existing positions, with plans to seize the entire area south of the Litani.<sup>24</sup> Israeli political figures, including Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, have urged that the Litani become a permanent “new Israeli border,”<sup>25</sup> in effect calling for the de facto annexation of southern Lebanon.

### c. Mass Displacement

The scale of displacement caused by the foregoing operations is outright staggering. More than one million people – nearly a fifth of Lebanon’s entire population – have been displaced since the offensives began on 2 March,<sup>26</sup> representing one of the most sudden and large-scale waves of mass displacement in the country’s history. This includes those displaced by the current escalation as well as 65,000 people who remained displaced from the 2024 hostilities.<sup>27</sup> Among the displaced are approximately 350,000 children and 13,500 pregnant women.<sup>28</sup>

On 4 and 5 March, the Israeli military issued displacement orders for the entire population south of the Litani River and all residents of Beirut’s southern suburbs. By 5 March, Lebanese authorities had opened 399 shelters across the country, with 357 already reported to be at maximum capacity. Since 12 March, these orders have been expanded, requiring residents of southern Lebanon to evacuate north of the Zahrani River—15 kilometres north of the Litani and 40 kilometres from the Israeli border.<sup>29</sup> According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), shelter capacity is under severe strain, with collective shelters filling rapidly and some exceeding safe occupancy levels.<sup>30</sup> LAW notes that hundreds of families have been sleeping in their cars or on roadsides, while others shelter in overcrowded schools. In one case, 1,200 people crammed into a single school, 15 per classroom, with only one toilet for every 23 people. There are no shower facilities or cooking gas, and only limited water.<sup>31</sup> It is estimated that at least 70 per cent of the population is displaced in informal settings<sup>32</sup> (eg, relatives’ houses, makeshift tents, cars), significantly increasing health and security risks. This unprecedented displacement takes place against a backdrop of general financial instability, with governmental resources severely overstretched.

The destruction of the Litani River bridges has further trapped civilians remaining in the south, cutting off supply routes and preventing safe evacuation.<sup>33</sup> LAW notes that Syrian refugees, already among Lebanon’s most vulnerable, face particular hardship: approximately 140,000 have crossed back into Syria since the escalation, while non-Lebanese displaced persons face significant challenges accessing shelters.<sup>34</sup>

### d. Risks of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV)

The current crisis is not simply a case of “displacement increases SGBV.” Lebanon was

already in the grip of a severe economic crisis, with public services strained and gender-based violence endemic. Bombing and displacement are now layered on top of this reality, which is compounding the entire environment in which women, girls, and vulnerable populations live and making them structurally more vulnerable to violence and structurally less able to access protection.

On 4 March, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) warned that the escalation is placing women and girls at acute risk and frequently cutting them off from maternal healthcare. On 7 March, OCHA confirmed that displacement under these conditions significantly increases protection risks for women and girls, including harassment, SGBV, exploitation, and trafficking. The response, however, is severely underfunded as UNFPA's \$30 million appeal for 2026 is only 16 per cent funded.

### The specific pathways of SGBV-related harm are well-documented:

- ⇒ Overcrowded shelters with no privacy, no safe reporting mechanisms, and no separation between families create environments where harassment, assault, and exploitation are structurally enabled.
- ⇒ Economic dependence is heightened as women lose homes and livelihoods, including through landlords who refuse to rent to women alone, and exploitative arrangements that blur the line between housing and coercion, particularly in a preexisting context of financial crisis.
- ⇒ Migrant domestic workers who are predominantly women from African and Asian countries, already trapped in the kafala system, have been abandoned by employers fleeing conflict areas, left without wages, documentation, or safe accommodation. The displacement crisis strips away whatever thin protections they had and increases their susceptibility to further harm.
- ⇒ Loss of identity documents creates a series of additional barriers. Without documentation, women cannot access shelters, humanitarian services, medical care, or legal remedies. For survivors of SGBV, this means no protection orders, no ability to file complaints, and no overall path to safety.
- ⇒ Children are experiencing family separation, disruption of education, psychosocial distress, and increased exposure to exploitation. Over 180,000 displaced children are of school age; hundreds of schools are being used as shelters. UNICEF has trained 90 facilitators to conduct GBV safety audits in shelters and is scaling up the POWER4Girls initiative to reach 3,500 displaced girls,<sup>35</sup> while the IRC is providing emergency case management with a focus on more than 300,000 displaced children and GBV survivors.<sup>36</sup>
- ⇒ LAW's legal teams are already observing clear and consistent patterns emerging across affected areas. A significant proportion of cases relate to the loss or confiscation of identity and civil documentation during displacement, preventing individuals from accessing shelters, humanitarian assistance, healthcare, and legal remedies. There are increasing reports of eviction, housing exploitation, and discrimination, particularly affecting displaced families residing outside collective shelters, where rental prices have surged and informal arrangements leave individuals with little protection. Women and girls are facing heightened risks of violence in overcrowded and unregulated settings, with limited access to safe reporting mechanisms or protection services. These

patterns reflect a broader protection environment in which displacement, lack of documentation, and limited access to services intersect to significantly increase vulnerability and exposure to abuse.

#### e. LAW's presence in Lebanon

LAW has been operational in Lebanon since 2018, with a main office in Beirut and an experienced team of Lebanese and international lawyers and legal information officers. We have supported more than 13,000 individuals with legal information and provided legal assistance or representation to over 3,500 people, including nearly 3,000 migrant domestic workers, with a 100 per cent success rate in obtaining protection orders in cases involving sexual violence.

**In response to the current crisis, LAW has deployed a legal protection team providing legal information, individual assistance, and rapid response interventions for urgent protection cases.**

We are conducting outreach in collective shelters and host communities and operating a mobile rapid response mechanism for emergency cases. LAW's confidential hotline (+961 81 351001) provides a resource for individuals to report incidents of fraud, corruption, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, abuse, and any form of gender-based violence (GBV). The hotline also provides information on exit requirements and border crossing procedures, particularly for migrant workers and Syrian refugees.

We are also training community intermediaries from displaced and migrant communities to disseminate information and safely refer individuals to the legal protection team – the same model we use with Survivor Advocates in the

Rohingya camps and with community first responders in Sudan.

We work in coordination with the Ministry of Social Affairs, local police stations, municipalities, and specialised GBV actors to ensure survivors have access to representation at the earliest stages of reporting and investigation.

In addition to providing legal assistance and protection services, LAW has also been actively documenting violations arising from the current escalation. Building on its experience during the 2024 hostilities, where LAW collected and analysed information on violations affecting vulnerable populations, the organisation is continuing to gather information on patterns of harm in the current crisis, including forced displacement, barriers to accessing protection, and risks of exploitation and abuse.

This documentation is essential not only to inform LAW's legal assistance and advocacy, but also to support future accountability efforts.

While certain monitoring mechanisms are in place, notably the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) led by UNICEF, which focuses on grave violations against children, these are limited in scope. At present, there is no comprehensive, coordinated documentation effort covering the full range of alleged violations in Lebanon in line with international investigative standards.

This gap is particularly concerning given the scale and speed of the current escalation, and underscores the need for systematic, survivor-centred documentation to ensure that violations are recorded, analysed, and ultimately addressed through appropriate legal and accountability mechanisms.

**In an emergency, legal protection is not a second-phase response. When women cannot access shelters, when migrant workers**

are abandoned without documents, and when displaced families have no way to report violence, legal assistance is a protection need as urgent as food and shelter.

#### IV. Preliminary Legal Findings

The conduct of hostilities in southern Lebanon raises serious concerns under multiple branches of international law and involves overlapping armed conflicts.

First, there is an international armed conflict (IAC) between Israel and Lebanon, triggered by Israel's use of military force on the sovereign territory of a neighbouring state – including airstrikes on the capital, systematic destruction of infrastructure, and a ground invasion. Under Common Article 2 of the Geneva Conventions, an IAC exists whenever there is a resort to armed force between two states, regardless of whether a formal declaration of war has been made or whether either party recognises the state of war. Israel's military operations in and against Lebanon – directed not only at Hezbollah but also at Lebanese state infrastructure including bridges, electricity networks, and civilian areas – satisfy this threshold.

Second, there is a non-international armed conflict (NIAC) between Israel and Hezbollah, an organised armed group that has engaged in sustained hostilities against Israeli forces, meeting the intensity and organisational criteria established by the ICTY in *Tadić* and consistently affirmed in subsequent jurisprudence.

This dual classification has significant legal consequences. The full body of the four Geneva Conventions applies to the IAC between Israel and Lebanon. In addition, many of the key rules reflected in Additional Protocol I are also binding as rules of customary international law. Common

Article 3 to the Geneva Conventions and customary IHL govern the Israel-Hezbollah dimension. Critically, many of the key rules – including the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution; the prohibition on attacks against civilians and civilian objects; the prohibition on forced displacement; and the prohibition on collective punishment – are binding in both IAC and NIAC, including as rules of customary international law.

Israel is a State party to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 but has not ratified Additional Protocol I, Additional Protocol II, or Protocol III to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) on incendiary weapons. Lebanon is a State party to all four Geneva Conventions, both Additional Protocols, and the CCW, including Protocol III on incendiary weapons. Regardless of treaty ratification, the rules discussed below reflect customary IHL binding on all parties to the conflicts.

##### a. Forced Displacement: The Central Legal Question

The mass displacement of 1.2 million Lebanese civilians is arguably the most consequential legal issue arising from the current escalation. The central legal question is whether the Israeli military's evacuation orders, combined with the pattern of airstrikes and infrastructure destruction that accompanied them, constitute lawful advance warnings or unlawful forced displacement.

Israel's position is that evacuation orders are precautionary measures designed to protect civilians – in other words, advance warnings issued in compliance with ICRC Customary IHL Rule 20, which requires parties to give effective advance warning of attacks that may affect the civilian population. The legal character of an evacuation directive depends on the totality of the circumstances in which it is issued, not on the label attached to it by the issuing party.

Several features of the Israeli displacement orders point decisively away from the “advance warning” characterisation and toward forced displacement:

First, the *scope*. The orders cover the entire population south of the Litani River (subsequently expanded to the Zahrani River), all residents of Beirut’s southern suburbs, and parts of the Bekaa Valley – approximately 14 per cent of Lebanese national territory. An advance warning under Rule 20 is tied to a specific anticipated attack; it does not require the permanent depopulation of an entire region.

Second, the *conditionality of return*. Defence Minister Katz stated that displaced residents “will not return to their homes south of the Litani area until the safety of Israel’s northern residents is guaranteed,” which is an undefined and open-ended condition that transforms the displacement from a temporary precautionary measure into an indefinite bar on return. As the ICTY established in *Karadžić*, the forced character of displacement is determined by the absence of genuine choice, and any consent or request to be displaced must be given voluntarily and as a result of the individual’s free will, assessed in light of the surrounding circumstances of the particular case.<sup>37</sup> Where return is conditioned on the displacing party’s subjective and unilateral satisfaction of its own security requirements, there is no genuine choice.

Third, the *coercive environment*. The evacuation orders were issued in a context of intensive bombardment of the areas subject to those orders, the systematic destruction of Litani River bridges (severing physical access to the south), the demolition of homes in border villages, and the reported use of white phosphorus in residential areas. As legal experts have observed – drawing on the ICC Appeals Chamber in Ntaganda – the “order” requirement for the war crime of forced displacement under Article 8(2)(e)(viii) of the Rome Statute (and the parallel ICRC Rule 129(B)) is satisfied when instructions are given to perform acts whose result would necessarily include the displacement of a significant proportion of the

civilian population.<sup>38</sup> The ICC Pre-Trial Chamber in Ntaganda further held that the conduct by which perpetrators force civilians to leave an area is not limited to an order in the strict sense.<sup>39</sup> Rendering an area uninhabitable through bombardment, destruction of essential infrastructure, and denial of humanitarian access is itself a form of coercion that vitiates any claim that civilian movement was voluntary.

Fourth, the *discriminatory framing*. Defence Minister Katz’s explicit reference to “Shiite residents of southern Lebanon” singles out displacement on a confessional basis, raising concerns not only of forced displacement but possibly of persecution as a crime against humanity under Article 7(1)(h) of the Rome Statute. Singling out Shiite residents indicates that the security of the displaced population may not be the entirety of the aim of the displacement.

Fifth, the *stated precedent*. The Israeli government’s explicit invocation of the “Beit Hanoun and Rafah models” – referring to the depopulation and wholesale demolition of areas in Gaza from which residents have been barred from returning – does not appear to be merely a rhetorical flourish, but rather a statement of method. As the ICTY held in *Naletilić & Martinović*, the deliberate destruction of civilian homes constitutes indicia of the intent to permanently displace civilians.<sup>40</sup> The announcement that the same model will now be applied to southern Lebanon, combined with the physical destruction already underway, provides strong evidence of the intent underlying the displacement.

Under the Fourth Geneva Convention (Article 49), forcible transfer of protected persons is prohibited except where the security of the population or imperative military reasons so demand, and even then, the evacuation must be temporary and the displaced must be transferred back as soon as hostilities have ceased. The exception cannot be invoked where the security threat is itself created by the displacing party’s own conduct – as the ICTY Appeals Chamber held in *Stakić*, displacement is not justified when the

humanitarian crisis causing it is itself the result of the accused's own unlawful activity.<sup>41</sup> Twelve independent UN human rights experts have characterised the Israeli displacement orders as “blatantly illegal,” warning that forced displacement combined with heavy and indiscriminate bombardment constitutes a war crime.<sup>42</sup>

#### b. Use of Incendiary Weapons in Populated Areas

The reported use of airburst white phosphorus over residential areas of Yohmor and Khiam raises distinct legal concerns. Protocol III to the CCW restricts the use of incendiary weapons against military targets within concentrations of civilians. Although Israel is not party to Protocol III, the deployment of airburst white phosphorus munitions over populated residential areas – dispersing 116 burning felt wedges over a diameter of 125 to 250 metres – violates the customary IHL prohibition on indiscriminate attacks (ICRC Rule 11) and could violate the obligation to take all feasible precautions to minimise incidental civilian harm (ICRC Rule 15). The availability of proven alternatives, including the M150 smoke projectile produced by Israeli manufacturers, further undermines any claim that white phosphorus use in populated areas was militarily necessary.

#### c. Destruction of Civilian Objects and Infrastructure

The systematic destruction of Litani River bridges, electricity networks, residential homes, and healthcare facilities raises serious concerns under the prohibition on attacking civilian objects (ICRC Rule 7) and the prohibition on wanton destruction (Article 147 of Geneva Convention IV; Article 8(2)(a)(iv) of the Rome Statute). The military advantage of destroying each bridge must be weighed against the cumulative civilian harm of isolating an entire region from humanitarian access, medical care, and the possibility of safe evacuation. Where the destruction is explicitly ordered on a wholesale basis – as Defence Minister

Katz ordered the destruction of “all bridges over the Litani” – the proportionality analysis must account for the aggregate effect, not each strike in isolation.

In its March 2026 briefing, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) stated that some Israeli airstrikes and ground activities may amount to war crimes if evidence confirms that civilian infrastructure was intentionally or recklessly targeted.<sup>43</sup> The killing of healthcare workers and the forced closure of hospitals and health clinics also raise concerns under the specific protections afforded to medical personnel and facilities under IHL.

#### d. Protection of Civilians Who Remain

IHL is unequivocal in that civilians who do not comply with evacuation orders retain their full protected status. An advance warning does not transfer the risk of attack from the attacking party to the civilian population. The breadth of the Israeli displacement orders makes them practically impossible for many civilians to comply with – particularly the elderly, persons with disabilities, and the sick and wounded – which calls into question their effectiveness as a precautionary measure and strengthens the characterisation of the orders as forced displacement rather than advance warning.

Israeli military statements that the IDF “will not hesitate to target anyone who is present near Hezbollah members, facilities, or means of combat” effectively condition civilian protection on compliance with evacuation orders.<sup>44</sup> This inverts the legal framework: under IHL, a party conducting an attack bears the obligation to distinguish between civilians and combatants at all times and in all circumstances – not only in designated “safe” zones.

#### e. Domestic courts

The applicability of IHL and international criminal law (ICL) does not displace the

jurisdiction of Lebanese domestic courts over crimes committed on Lebanese territory. Lebanese criminal law – including provisions of the Penal Code on homicide, assault, and destruction of property, as well as Law 293 of 2014 on the protection of women and family members from domestic violence – remains in force throughout the current hostilities. For survivors of SGBV, domestic violence, exploitation, and housing-related abuse, Lebanese courts remain the primary avenue for obtaining protection orders, filing criminal complaints, and seeking remedies.

In practice, however, access to domestic justice has been severely disrupted by the escalation. The displacement of over 1.2 million people has separated survivors from the courts that have jurisdiction over their cases. Courts in southern Lebanon and parts of Beirut are no longer functioning or accessible. Judges, prosecutors, and court staff have themselves been displaced. The mass loss of identity and civil documentation – which LAW’s legal teams have identified as one of the most prevalent protection issues across affected areas – creates a fundamental barrier, in that, without documentation, individuals cannot file complaints, obtain protection orders, access legal aid, or participate in proceedings. For women and girls facing violence in overcrowded shelters or exploitative housing arrangements, the practical unavailability of domestic legal remedies means there is currently no functioning path to safety through the justice system in much of the affected territory.

This is not a new problem for LAW. Since 2018, LAW has provided legal representation to survivors of SGBV through Lebanese domestic courts, including the first criminal case alleging slavery and slave trading brought by a migrant domestic worker against a Lebanese employer under the kafala system. LAW has secured protection orders in 100 per cent of the sexual violence cases in which it has provided legal assistance. This track record demonstrates that Lebanese domestic legal mechanisms, when accessible and supported, are capable of delivering meaningful protection outcomes.

The current crisis demands that these mechanisms be sustained and adapted rather than abandoned. LAW calls on the Lebanese judiciary and the Ministry of Justice to take all feasible steps to maintain the functioning of courts in areas receiving displaced populations, including through the temporary reassignment of judicial officers and the establishment of simplified procedures for individuals who have lost documentation. Where domestic courts cannot function – particularly in occupied or depopulated areas south of the Litani – this gap must be documented as part of the broader accountability record, as the denial of access to justice is itself a protection failure with legal consequences.

## V. The Way Forward

The situation in southern Lebanon is a rapidly deteriorating crisis in which the humanitarian, legal, and protection dimensions are inseparable. In approximately five weeks, at least 1,784 people have been killed, over 1.2 million displaced, and entire communities south of the Litani River have been cut off from the rest of the country by the deliberate destruction of bridges, roads, and essential infrastructure. The conduct of hostilities raises credible allegations of multiple violations of IHL including forced displacement, the unlawful use of incendiary weapons in populated areas, wanton destruction of civilian property, and attacks that fail to respect the principles of distinction and proportionality.

On 8 April 2026, Israel launched “*Operation Eternal Darkness*” – reportedly killing more than 300 people and wounding 1,165 in a single day, according to an initial count by Lebanon’s civil defence – in strikes across central Beirut, southern Lebanon, and the Bekaa Valley – many without prior warning and in densely populated civilian areas.<sup>45</sup> Statements by senior Israeli officials explicitly invoking the Gaza model and conditioning the return of displaced populations on indefinite and subjective security guarantees deepen the concern that the displacement is not temporary but designed to be permanent.

## LAW calls on parties to the conflict, third states, and the international community to take the following urgent steps:

**Immediate cessation of hostilities and protection of civilians.** All parties must immediately cease attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, including homes, hospitals, bridges, water and electricity networks, and humanitarian facilities. Hezbollah must take all feasible precautions to protect civilians in its operations. Israel must halt the use of white phosphorus and other incendiary weapons in populated areas, where applicable, end the destruction of civilian infrastructure, and revoke blanket displacement orders that amount to forced displacement. Civilians who remain in areas subject to evacuation orders retain their full protected status under IHL. No party may condition civilian protection on compliance with such orders.

**Right of return.** Displaced civilians must be permitted to return to their homes voluntarily, safely, and in dignity as soon as active hostilities cease. Any evacuation carried out on grounds of civilian security or imperative military necessity must remain temporary, and displaced persons must be allowed to return voluntarily and in safety to their homes or places of habitual residence as soon as the reasons for their displacement cease.<sup>46</sup> Conditioning return on the indefinite satisfaction of one party's security objectives – particularly when framed in confessional terms – is incompatible with IHL and would constitute the war crime of forced displacement. LAW calls on the international community to monitor and ensure the right of return, and to reject any political arrangement that normalises the permanent depopulation of southern Lebanon.

**Humanitarian access.** Safe, rapid, and unimpeded humanitarian access to all affected areas must be guaranteed, including south of the Litani River. The destruction of Litani River crossings has severed supply routes and is trapping civilians

without access to food, medicine, or medical care. Humanitarian corridors must be established and protected, and the deliberate obstruction of humanitarian assistance – whether through infrastructure destruction, movement restrictions, or attacks on humanitarian workers – must cease immediately.

**Accountability.** LAW calls on the Government of Lebanon to take all necessary steps to enable and support international accountability efforts, including facilitating access for international investigators and preserving evidence. In this context, Lebanon should consider avenues to ensure jurisdiction over international crimes, including accepting the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court through an Article 12(3) declaration or through full ratification of the Rome Statute. At the same time, domestic legal avenues must be fully explored. Lebanese authorities should take all feasible measures to investigate and prosecute violations within their jurisdiction, including through existing criminal law frameworks, and ensure that victims have access to justice and effective remedies. Investigations should cover, at a minimum, the use of incendiary weapons in populated areas, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, attacks on healthcare workers and facilities, and the legality of Israel's mass displacement orders and stated policy of preventing civilian return, with particular attention to the war crimes of forced displacement, wanton destruction, and persecution. Third states that continue to supply Israel with arms while in possession of knowledge of the pattern of conduct documented in this paper risk complicity in serious violations of IHL. The obligation under Common Article 1 of the Geneva Conventions to “ensure respect” for IHL requires these states to suspend arms transfers and take all reasonable measures to bring violations to an end.

**Protection of women, girls, and vulnerable populations.** The international community must urgently scale up funding for protection services.

UNFPA's \$30 million appeal for Lebanon in 2026 is only 16 per cent funded – a level wholly inadequate to the scale of the crisis. Donors must prioritise GBV prevention and response, clinical management of SGBV, psychosocial support, reproductive health services, and legal assistance for survivors. LAW further calls on humanitarian coordination structures to integrate legal protection into the emergency response from the outset. When women cannot access shelters, when migrant workers are abandoned without documents, and when displaced families have no

mechanism to report violence, legal assistance itself becomes a frontline protection need.

**Support for legal protection programming.** LAW has deployed a legal protection team providing legal information, individual case assistance, rapid response interventions, and community-based referral networks in collective shelters and host communities across Lebanon. We are operating a confidential hotline **(+961 81 351001)** and training community intermediaries from displaced and migrant communities to bridge the gap between survivors and services.

## About LAW in Lebanon

Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) is an independent, non-profit organisation of human rights lawyers and jurists that works to ensure access to justice for communities affected by conflict and human rights violations. LAW has been operational in Lebanon since 2018, providing legal aid, assistance, and representation to vulnerable communities impacted by the country's overlapping crises.

In Lebanon, LAW works on gender equality and gender-based violence (GBV), accountability and rule of law, and transformative justice. We provide legal protection for survivors of SGBV, civil documentation assistance, and legal counselling to women and girls of all nationalities, migrant domestic workers, LGBTQI+ individuals, and stateless persons.

LAW's work includes strategic litigation, including the first criminal case alleging slavery and slave trading brought by a migrant domestic worker against a Lebanese employer under the kafala system. LAW also conducts research and advocacy, including a landmark report with UN Women investigating gendered crimes during the Lebanese civil wars.

### LAW Key Impact Figures

- 194 GBV survivors have received legal representation
- 73% of LAW's clients are women
- 100% success rate in legal assistance for sexual offence cases
- Over 12,370 people have received legal information
- Over 3,220 people have received legal assistance

For more information, visit:

<https://legalactionworldwide.org/where-we-work/lebanon>

# Escalation in southern Lebanon

TIMELINE — OCTOBER 2023 TO APRIL 2026

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- 7 Oct 2023** ●  **Hamas-led attack on Israel**
  - 8 Oct 2023** ●  **Hezbollah opens second front**  
Cross-border exchange of fire begins from Lebanon, forcing Israel to confront threats on multiple fronts
  - 17 Sep 2024** ●  **Israeli "pager operation"**  
Coordinated detonation of communication devices targeting Hezbollah operatives across Lebanon
  - 27 Sep 2024** ●  **Assassination of Hezbollah leader Nasrallah**  
Hassan Nasrallah killed in Israeli bombing of Beirut, a significant blow to Hezbollah's leadership and morale
  - 1 Oct 2024** ●  **Israeli ground incursion into southern Lebanon**  
Israel launches a brief ground operation overnight across the southern border
  - 27 Nov 2024** ●  **US-brokered ceasefire takes effect**  
Hezbollah to withdraw north of Litani River; Lebanese Army to deploy 5,000 soldiers to the south
  - NOV 2024 – FEB 2026: BOTH SIDES VIOLATE CEASEFIRE**  
Israel conducts ~500 airstrikes, killing ~500 people including 127 civilians · Hezbollah rebuilds military infrastructure and weapons arsenal
  - 28 Feb 2026** ●  **US–Israel joint attacks on Iran**  
Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei assassinated, marking a major regional escalation
  - 2 Mar 2026** ●  **Hezbollah rockets; Israel retaliates**  
Hezbollah fires rockets into northern Israel; Israel launches massive air campaign across Lebanon — Beirut, Bekaa Valley, and the south
  - 4–5 Mar 2026** ●  **Mass displacement orders issued**  
Israel orders evacuation of entire population south of the Litani River and Beirut's southern suburbs
  - 16 Mar 2026** ●  **Ground operation launched**  
Israel begins "targeted ground operation" into southern Lebanon to establish a "forward defense area"

22 Mar 2026

### Bridges destroyed; homes demolished

Qasmiyeh Bridge destroyed; Israel orders destruction of all Litani crossings and demolition of border homes, citing "Beit Hanoun and Rafah model"

25 Mar 2026

### PM Netanyahu confirms "real buffer zone"

Buffer zone created and expanding across southern Lebanon

8 Apr 2026

### "Operation Eternal Darkness"

Hours after announcement of Iran ceasefire, Israel launches largest strikes of the war — 50 jets, 160 munitions, 100 targets in 10 minutes across Beirut, southern Lebanon, and the Bekaa Valley; at least 254 killed in a single day

1,500+ killed

3,100+ wounded

1M+ displaced

● Initial conflict (2023–24)

● Ceasefire (Nov 2024)

● 2026 escalation

## ENDNOTES

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