Forced Displacement by Any Other Name: Unmasking the Myth of 'Voluntary Evacuation' in Lebanon's Protracted Warfare

Jasmin Lilian Diab

Introduction

> [...] Hezbollah has been using you as human shields. It placed rockets in your living rooms and missiles in your garage. [...] To defend our people against Hezbollah strikes, we must take out these weapons. The IDF has warned you to get out of harm's way. I urge you to take this warning seriously. [...] Please get out of harm's way now.
>
> —Benjamin Netanyahu, September 24, 2024

In the language of modern warfare, the phrase 'calling on civilians to evacuate' has become a common refrain used by both state and non-state actors to justify mass population movements. On the surface, this suggests a humanitarian gesture, a protective measure to shield civilians from the dangers of conflict. It evokes images of governments and military forces safeguarding lives by urging people to leave battle zones. However, this seemingly benign language often conceals the reality that such calls amount to forced displacement, forcible relocation, or even population expulsion. These actions are not protective measures; they are deliberate warfare strategies designed to uproot populations.

In a toxic cycle of reinforcement, the language of war has been softened to the point of distortion, particularly in Western media. Reports on the mass exodus of civilians from conflict zones, especially in Lebanon and Gaza, are cloaked in

terms like 'evacuation' and 'warning', masking the brutal reality of forced displacement behind a veneer of humanitarian concern. Beneath these sanitised words lies a darker truth: families driven from their homes at gunpoint, entire communities emptied through bombing, coercion, and fear, and lives shattered under the guise of 'protective measures.' By refusing to call it what it is—forced displacement, population expulsion, forcible removal and a violation of international law—Western media minimises the trauma of those affected and perpetuates a system that thrives on euphemisms. This distortion allows war crimes to be reframed as acts of mercy, blurring the lines between protection and persecution and contributing to the erosion of accountability in the face of human suffering.

The ongoing conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, beginning in October 2023, has been marked by significant asymmetry in both the frequency and intensity of attacks. According to reports, Israel, Hezbollah, and other Lebanese groups exchanged more than 10,200 attacks between October 2023 and September 2024, 8,300 of which were launched by Israel. This imbalance intensified after September 2024. On September 23, Israel launched approximately 1,600 attacks on Hezbollah positions in Lebanon, including southern regions, the Beqaa Valley, and suburbs of Beirut. These strikes resulted in over 700 Lebanese deaths and more than 5,000 injuries in just four days, marking the deadliest period in Lebanon since the end of the 1975–1990 civil war.

Understanding this imbalance is crucial for accurately assessing the dynamics of the conflict and the resulting humanitarian consequences. It emphasizes the importance of precise language in describing such situations to ensure accountability and a clear recognition of the realities faced by affected populations.

The Language of Evacuation: Masking Coercion

The term 'evacuation' traditionally evokes a sense of responsibility and concern for civilian welfare, implying a voluntary, precautionary action to protect people from harm. However, in conflict zones, the reality is far more coercive. When civilians are called to evacuate under the imminent threat of military violence, bombings, or advancing forces, they are forced to decide between staying and risking death or injury or fleeing into the uncertainty and trauma of displacement. This false dichotomy exposes the coercive nature of such evacuations, revealing them not as voluntary actions but as forced displacement.

The coercion embedded in these evacuation calls is critical to understanding why this language cannot be viewed as inherently protective. Civilians are not making a free decision; they are reacting to overwhelming violence and the threat of death. What is presented as a humanitarian measure is, in fact, a wartime tactic—one designed to empty territories, alter demographics, and assert

control. By framing these actions as humanitarian, military actors obscure their true nature and often evade international accountability.

In the politics of wartime mobility, forced displacement has been used to achieve political or military goals—whether to permanently alter territorial claims, consolidate ethnic dominance, or weaken the opposition by removing civilian support. In modern conflicts, such as the ongoing escalating armed confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah, the language of evacuation is wielded strategically. Israeli evacuation orders often deprioritize the safety of Lebanese civilians and serve broader military objectives like creating buffer zones, asserting control or depopulating areas critical to Hezbollah. In these instances, the call to evacuate is not a protective measure but a calculated tactic to leverage civilian displacement for strategic gain, cloaked in the guise of humanitarian concern.

International Legal Principles on Forced Displacement

The protection of civilians during armed conflict is central to international humanitarian and human rights law, with forced displacement standing as one of the most egregious violations. These legal frameworks, particularly the Fourth Geneva Convention, are designed to prevent civilians from being arbitrarily uprooted from their homes. Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention explicitly prohibits the forcible transfer or deportation of individuals or entire populations from occupied territories, allowing for exceptions only when absolutely necessary for civilian security or imperative military reasons. Even in such cases, displacement must be temporary, and civilians are guaranteed the right to return once conditions allow.

Beyond the Geneva Conventions, instruments like the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement further reinforce these protections. These principles emphasise that internal displacement must never be arbitrary or unjustified, underscoring that those displaced retain fundamental human rights, including the right to return to their homes. Displacement should only be a last resort when no viable alternatives exist to protect civilians, and the destruction of civilian homes and infrastructure is recognized as an international crime.

However, the gap between these legal protections and the reality on the ground is often stark. Military actors—both state and non-state—frequently invoke security concerns or humanitarian pretences to legitimise evacuations, even when these justifications are tenuous or exaggerated. In many cases, security threats are manufactured or inflated to force civilians out of strategic areas.

Human rights law affirms the fundamental right of individuals to remain in their homes unless confronted with life-threatening circumstances. When civilians are evacuated under duress, they lose their agency, and this loss of autonomy is a defining characteristic of forced displacement. Those displaced

under such conditions are often unable to return, resulting in long-term or permanent displacement and compounding the human cost of these practices.

Israel's Evacuation Warnings in Lebanon Are Forced Displacement

Israel's 'evacuation warnings' to civilians across multiple regions in Lebanon are framed as efforts to prevent civilian casualties. Delivered through leaflets, text messages, and phone calls, the warnings instruct residents to leave areas that Israel claims are being used by Hezbollah for military purposes. These messages create widespread panic, leaving civilians with no real choice but to flee—an unmistakable form of forced displacement.

Despite evacuating, civilians are rarely guaranteed safety. As of this writing, 3,500 civilians have been killed, more than 14,000 injured, and 1.2 million internally displaced. The time allocated for evacuation is often grossly insufficient. Some residents receive warnings in the dead of night, leaving them scrambling to flee while vulnerable, confused, and afraid. The logistical challenge of evacuating a home under duress is immense—families must gather belongings, secure the safety of children, the elderly, or those with disabilities, and find transportation, all while navigating unsafe roads and damaged infrastructure. The idea of a 'sufficient' evacuation time becomes absurd under such circumstances.

The warnings themselves are often impractical. Strikes follow almost immediately after warnings are issued, with civilians given mere hours—or even minutes—to evacuate. In one instance, residents in a district in Beirut's southern suburbs were given just 15 minutes to flee at 1 AM before the area was bombed. Similarly, the IDF's Arab media spokesperson tweeted at 3:30 AM that one strike would occur in one hour, marking a specific target. Such notices, more often than not, appear to provide legal cover. The brief window between warnings and strikes renders evacuation nearly impossible, further undermining the purported humanitarian intent.

More so, since late September 2024, Israel has systematically issued evacuation orders across southern Lebanon as well. Ostensibly, the pretext is to target Hezbollah military installations, but the reality is widespread civilian displacement, with designated evacuation zones eerily reminiscent of Israel's actions in Gaza. A published map by the Israeli army's Arabic spokesperson shows 35 towns marked for evacuation, stretching from Tyre on the coast to Marjayoun and Deir Mimas inland, reflecting a clear strategy to displace civilians *en masse*.

Compounding the issue, these warnings are applied selectively, further calling into question their purpose. While some areas receive notice to evacuate, others are bombed without any prior warning, resulting in civilian casualties. This inconsistency highlights the arbitrary and strategic nature of these warnings, revealing that they are not genuinely designed to save lives but to achieve broader objectives and deflect international criticism.

Conclusion

The invocation of 'evacuation' as a humanitarian measure blurs the line between lawful and unlawful displacement, allowing states and military actors to mask forced relocations under the guise of protection. In modern warfare, this language serves as a convenient veneer, shielding those responsible from legal and moral accountability. By framing coerced displacements as voluntary or protective, perpetrators obscure the harsh realities of population expulsion and forced relocation, undermining the very protections that international humanitarian and human rights laws are meant to provide. This rhetorical manipulation not only distorts the truth but perpetuates cycles of suffering that often go unrecognised by the international community. As these legal principles erode through the manipulation of language, the long-term consequences of displacement ripple across generations, leaving deep social, economic, and psychological scars.

The case of Israel's evacuation warnings in Lebanon offers a painful example of how this dynamic unfolds. Far from protecting civilians, these warnings have contributed to a humanitarian crisis marked by panic, forced displacement, and widespread destruction. This case illustrates the profound gap between the language of evacuation and the grim realities on the ground, where inadequate notice, selective targeting, and the destruction of homes render the notion of 'protection' hollow.

This is not merely a matter of semantics but a profound moral and legal failing. By accepting sanitised rhetoric like 'evacuation', we risk complicity in a system that justifies human suffering. Forced displacement is not an unfortunate by-product of war—it is often a deliberate strategy aimed at reshaping territories, erasing communities, and destabilising populations. The international community must recognize this for what it is: a violation of fundamental rights and a breach of international law that demands accountability.

The way we speak about displacement has real-world consequences. It shapes how we understand victims, hold perpetrators accountable, and advocate for justice. We must stop allowing the language of evacuation to shield war crimes and human rights abuses. Instead, we must call forced displacement by its true name, acknowledging the profound human toll it exacts. Only by confronting this reality can we begin to dismantle the technicalities that have long been used to justify unimaginable suffering and build a more accountable framework for protecting civilians in conflict zones.