

Middle East war

Lebanon's displaced return to

find 'scorched earth' after

Israeli offensive



Invasion and intense bombing campaign has left a trail of destruction across Hizbollah's southern heartland

Raya Jalabi in Nabatiyeh YESTERDAY

As the guns fell silent at 4am on Wednesday, Ali Harb was already at his front door in the southern city of Nabatiyeh, his large set of jangling keys in hand.

His wife refused to come with him, not believing they would be safe amid intense Israeli air strikes in the hours leading up to the truce designed to end Israel's year-long conflict with Hizbollah. "It's good she didn't come with me or she would have seen there's nothing left," Harb said.

Harb, who slept in his car outside his collapsed five-storey building, spent the following morning picking out lavender fragments of the wooden door that once opened into the apartment where he raised his three sons. "I wanted to bring back a piece of our home for my wife," Harb said, "so we can always remember what we lost."

Harb was one of thousands of people who streamed into Nabatiyeh and other parts of southern Lebanon, Hizbollah's heartland and the frontline of combat that had been largely deserted, as soon as the US-brokered ceasefire went into effect.

What they found was a sobering trail of destruction. Entire neighbourhoods obliterated. Water and electrical infrastructure destroyed. Medical clinics damaged. Mosques and churches reduced to rubble. Historic markets razed. Cemeteries overflowing.





Diggers clear debris from destroyed buildings in Nabatiyeh, southern Lebanon © Wael Hamzeh/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

Barely a village has been left untouched, exposing a scale of civilian suffering that surpassed previous wars with Israel.

Driving through southern Lebanon, speaking with residents in the southern cities of Tyre and Nabatiyeh and a handful of villages in between, the Financial Times saw the devastating toll Israeli air strikes have taken.

“I knew things were bad, but I didn’t realise just how bad,” said Maha Ibrahim Bawab al-Sawi, a resident of the ancient city of Tyre who returned to find that her three-storey apartment block and family’s supermarket — just a few minutes from the picturesque corniche and once-vibrant commercial centre — had been levelled by Israeli air strikes two hours before Wednesday’s ceasefire.

“They just threw fire across this entire neighbourhood to teach us a lesson. But what do we have to do with anything?” she said. “It’s a residential area with only old houses — nothing military, no Hizbollah. [Israel] ruined generations of lives, for what?”



Maha Ibrahim Bawab al-Sawi's former home © Raya Jalabi/FT

What began as a grinding battle of attrition, with near-daily cross-border shelling after Hizbollah began firing into Israel following Hamas’s October 7 2023 attack,

erupted into full-blown war two months ago.

Israel ramped up its offensive against the Iran-backed Shia militant movement in September — [assassinating its leadership](#), pummelling Lebanon with a relentless barrage of air strikes and launching a ground offensive. Nearly 4,000 people were killed, according to Lebanon's health ministry, and more than 1mn people displaced.

The UN has said the patterns of destruction in Lebanon are akin to those in Gaza. Local government and Hizbollah officials say at least 10 per cent of buildings in southern Lebanon have been destroyed — much more than in the previous Israel-Hizbollah war in 2006. In an initial assessment, the World Bank estimated the cost of physical damage and economic losses due to conflict at \$8.5bn.

Earlier this month, [the FT documented](#) Israel's mass detonation of at least 30 ancient towns and villages in the border areas since the start of October.

Throughout the war, Israel has said it was only targeting Hizbollah militants and infrastructure in order to “degrade” it, accusing the group of embedding itself in civilian areas and using them as “human shields”.

But the damage done to civilian areas and infrastructure has been enormous, with local officials accusing Israel of waging a “scorched earth” campaign in the final days of the war to create lingering, “systematic” damage.

Most areas in the south are cut off from power and water, creating an immediate obstacle for returnees.

“Israel clearly wanted to cause as much harm to civilians as possible, to try and turn people against [Hizbollah],” said a local official in the village of Teir Debba, where a 100-year-old mosque and Shia seminary was left in ruins, its minaret delicately poking out of a giant mound of rubble. “It’s going to take a long time and a lot of money to repair the damage they’ve done.”



People gather near the ruins of the mosque in Teir Debba © Aziz Taher/Reuters

Hizbollah, despite suffering the most devastating battering in its history, has tried to spin the ceasefire as a victory, and has encouraged the displaced to begin returning with promises of imminent reconstruction.

But even those who largely support Hizbollah and its allies’ fight against Israel

have struggled to come to terms with the destruction.

“We suffered a catastrophe here, much more than we needed to,” said Hanan Shaeir, a 45-year-old resident of Nabatiyeh. “I guess we are supposed to call this a victory but . . . our lives, our memories, our homes have been destroyed. It’s hard to be positive right now.”

In October, Israel air strikes reduced broad tracts of Nabatiyeh to rubble, including the once-famous market shops in its historic centre as well as government buildings.

“We have a very long road ahead of us,” Shaeir said. “I know our leaders will take care of us and help provide, but still. It’s going to be very hard.”



The ruins of Hanan Shaeir's Nabatiyeh home © Adnan Abidi/Reuters

As part of the ceasefire, Hizbollah agreed to move its forces out of a large part of the south, handing over control to the Lebanese army and state.

Since the ceasefire took hold, the army has been visibly deployed, setting up checkpoints, handing out flyers about unexploded ordinance and patrolling areas where they have long been absent but now have the mammoth task of preserving the fragile truce.

On Thursday, Lebanon's army [accused Israel of violating the ceasefire](#) after Israeli forces launched an air strike and shelled several Lebanese border villages.

Israel has repeatedly warned it will continue to strike against Hizbollah to “enforce” the ceasefire if it decides the group is violating the deal. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said that returning 60,000 displaced people to their homes in [northern Israel](#) is a key goal. About 140 Israelis have been killed in the fighting.

The Israeli military also said anyone travelling below the 7km line from the contested border, known as the Blue Line, would “put themselves in danger” and has enforced a night-time curfew.

Despite everything, Hizbollah remains keen to assert its presence — taking journalists on daily tours of devastated villages and showing off its relief workers clearing rubble-strewn roads, clearing out the singed husks of rocket launchers destroyed by Israel, and handing out flags and sweets to returning residents.

The group’s non-military officials and social welfare network were in effect directing relief operations and access to parts of the south, demonstrating how difficult it will be to expel Hizbollah from areas where it has roots and where it enjoys tremendous support.

Yet the trauma of the past two months will be hard to overcome. In the nearby village of Maarakeh, whose name in Arabic means “battle”, groups of shell-shocked residents were walking through their village and filming videos for their neighbours who had yet to return.

“I’m still debating whether to send them videos of their homes . . . It’s just piles of stones. I’m worried it will make them decide never to come back,” said Mariam Ali, 17, who had returned home with her family to check on their home. “But we all have to come back and rebuild.”

Cartography by Aditi Bhandari

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