

# Israel's war on Hezbollah takes terrible toll on Lebanon's children

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An emergency worker picks up suspected body parts and puts them into a plastic bag as a member of the Lebanese civil defense searches for human remains in the rubble of a residential building where eight people were killed in an early-morning Israeli airstrike in the Lebanese village of Aramoun on Nov. 13. (Ed Ram for The Washington Post)

ARAMOUN, Lebanon — Scattered throughout the wrecked apartment was evidence of how particularly

vulnerable children are to the effects of explosive weapons. A day and a half after Israel fired the missile through the building, the bodies of the adults had long since been retrieved and identified. Pieces of the children, though, were still being found everywhere.

The main recovery effort in this village south of Beirut was over, but this stage was infinitely more delicate: A civil defense worker, using just a small trowel and his hands, picked carefully through the concrete that had collapsed into the second-floor apartment, searching for what remained of Mohamad, 11, and Elia, 7. An ambulance worker followed with a plastic bag to collect bits of their charred flesh for DNA identification. Each chunk was so small it could fit in the palm of his hand.

The missile struck without warning at 4:30 a.m. Wednesday. It killed Dana Makki's grandparents, aunt and her three young cousins. By Sunday afternoon, Dana still had no idea when or how the family would be able to bury Mohamad. The rescuers identified enough of Elia's remains to release her for burial, but they'd been unable to find any significant parts of Mohamad.

Israel's war against Hezbollah is exacting a terrible toll on Lebanon, where the militant group is based. More than a quarter of the dead registered by Lebanon's Health Ministry have been women or children. At least 231 children have been killed and 1,330 injured, according to the ministry.

Over the past three weeks, an average of 3.5 children have been killed and 9.5 wounded per day, according to a review of Health Ministry data. In the past two months, at least 400,000 children have been displaced from their homes, the U.N. children's agency estimates.

The village of Aramoun is seen on Nov. 14 from where a wall once stood in a home where eight people were killed in an Israeli strike the day before. (Ed Ram for The Washington Post)

A child's stuffed animal lies in the rubble of a residential building where eight people, including three young children, were killed in Aramoun. (Ed Ram for The Washington Post)

The Washington Post spent the past month visiting sites in Lebanon where children have been killed, interviewing wounded survivors in hospitals and meeting with displaced families. For a country already brutalized by years of economic crisis, the war has brought new misery: Lives forever changed by airstrikes. Daily survival made more challenging. A population anxious about what comes next.

White House envoy Amos Hochstein was in Beirut on Tuesday to meet with Lebanese officials about a proposed cease-fire between Israel and Hezbollah, which he said is "now within our grasp." But across Lebanon there has been no letup in the violence.

The ruins of the apartment building in Aramoun, a mixed-religion village, were dotted with the children's effects: a pink jumper, a doll's head, stuffed toys, books. Also, shards of the weapon that destroyed their fragile bodies.

Omar, 13, stands amid ruined cars in Aramoun near where an Israeli airstrike killed eight people. Omar's 11-year-old best friend Mohamad was among those killed. (Ed Ram for The Washington Post)

A plastic bag containing suspected body parts lies on the floor as members of Lebanon's civil defense search the rubble of the residential building in Aramoun where eight people were killed. (Ed Ram for The Washington Post)

Omar, 13, said Mohamad was his best friend. Walking despondently around the rubble, he said he was lonely.

The Israel Defense Forces, given times, dates and locations for the strikes described in this report, did not provide answers to questions about specific incidents. "The IDF makes all feasible efforts to mitigate harm to civilians during operational activity," it said in a statement to The Post.

Neighbors said none of the eight people killed in the strike were affiliated with Hezbollah. The Makki family, like many in the building, had fled southern Lebanon in search of safety. Neighbors described them as a quiet, loving family with whom they'd visit at night and play cards.

# One family is fortunate, in relative terms

At the American University of Beirut Medical Center, a brief moment of levity broke the heaviness in Ali Khalifeh's hospital room: For the first time in two weeks, the 2-year-old laughed.

Normally, his family said, Ali was chatty and boisterous. Then an airstrike destroyed his home in Sarafand, and he was trapped under rubble for 14 hours. With his face swollen and his right hand amputated, he had eaten little and said less since. But now he was wolfing down pizza, and when his aunt played peek-a-boo with him, he even broke into laughter for a moment.

"We thought he was dead," said Hussein Khalifeh, his uncle. Ali's tiny body was spotted in the shovel of the bulldozer, scooped up as it clawed through concrete slabs. "When his hand moved, I couldn't believe it."

Ali's physical wounds were healing. His psychological wounds would take time. His only words since he was rescued had been to ask for his mom. The next challenge would be to figure out how to tell him he was the only member of his immediate family to survive. His parents, his 5-year-old sister and his grandmothers were killed.

"He was always a little devil," his aunt Sobhie said. "A troublemaker. ... He loved his sister so much; they were always playing. He is going to be devastated."

Relatives were deciding who Ali would live with once he's discharged. His treatment is being covered by British Palestinian reconstructive surgeon [Ghassan Abu Sittah's](#) children's fund, which was also ensuring the family has psychological support to help Ali.

That makes the family fortunate, in relative terms. Others are grappling with how to break similar news to children without any help.

With their homes destroyed, parents are also struggling to find appropriate places for their children to recover. Many have gone to overcrowded shelters, where doctors fear the risk of reinfection.

## **'Throwing my children out of the window'**

Ivana Skakye was just shy of 2 years old when Post journalists visited her this month at the Lebanese Hospital Geitaoui. She had sustained third-degree burns over more than 40 percent of her body.

Her family's home in Deir Qanoun al-Nahr was severely damaged in a strike on Sept. 23, when Israel launched a surprise wave of airstrikes that killed over 500 people. It was a sharp escalation in the conflict provoked by Hezbollah after  [Hamas](#) attacked Israel on Oct. 7, 2023. The family were packing their belongings to flee when the strike hit.

The area remains unsafe. In a shelter, the family fears, the



infections she has battled for weeks could return. But they have few options.

Wrapped from head to toe in white gauze, with only her eyes and pacifier showing, Ivana tried to cry, but couldn't quite muster the strength to get the tears out.

"Why did they do this?" asked Fatima Zayoun, 35, as her daughter whimpered. A doctor reassured her that the morphine was working and she was not in pain.

"I will never forget it," she said. "Throwing my children out of the window of the building to save them as the flames spread."

Children have suffered traumatic brain injuries, loss of limbs, shrapnel wounds and burns. The health-care system, inundated with patients, is treating and releasing them as quickly as possible. But for some, recovery will be long.

At Rayak Hospital in the eastern Bekaa Valley, Nour al-Musawi, 6, was being fed through a tube. She, too, was wounded on Sept. 23, the [bloodiest day of the war](#).

She had been playing with friends outside in nearby Nabi Chit, her mother said, when a strike hit. Shrapnel pierced the back of the head and entered her brain. She no longer eats, walks or speaks.

Now, according to her mother, "she is terrified of touch.

She is terrified of even me touching her."

The disruption suffered by children in Lebanon goes far beyond the physical, emotional and psychological ravages of war. Economic crises and conflict have interrupted public schooling for a sixth straight year. Aid agencies report significant anxiety among children in shelters. Concern is growing that more children will be forced to enter the workforce to survive. The United Nations has warned of a "lost generation."

Mohammad, 7, is the sole earner for his struggling family. Having fled his home in Beirut's southern suburbs, he now sells water and coffee to customers out of a small shop on Beirut's Hamra Street.

He spoke on the condition that his last name be withheld out of concern for his safety. Working from 7 a.m. to midnight, with a two-hour break to rest at the abandoned building where his family now squats, he earns \$2.70 in a day.

He takes a quarter of it each day to buy himself a manouche, a Lebanese flatbread, and saves the rest for his mother and sisters. He doesn't miss school, he says, and grins. But the manouche is the only food he eats each day, unless the shop's owner gives him something.

Even such basic work is hard to find. Down the street, Mohammed, 13, and Bassem, 12, brothers from Baalbek in northeastern Lebanon who have been orphaned in the

war, spend their days rifling through the dumpsters outside a popular sandwich shop. A sandwich thrown out after one bite would feed them for the night.

Mohammed, 13, and Bassem, 12, second from right and right, respectively, are brothers from Baalbek in northeastern Lebanon who have been orphaned in the war. They spend their days rifling through dumpsters in Beirut for food. (Ed Ram for The Washington Post)

*Ed Ram and Mohamad El Chamaa in Beirut contributed to this report.*