

## **To what extent do Israel's large-scale evacuation orders in Lebanon comply with the rules of international humanitarian law (IHL) on effective warnings and the prohibition of forced displacement?**

*Since early March 2026, the escalation of hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah has been accompanied by the issuance of large-scale evacuation orders by the Israeli military across Lebanon. These orders have reportedly affected more than 100 towns and villages, home to tens of thousands of people, and risk impacting many more. Similar evacuation calls have also targeted Beirut's southern suburbs and parts of the Bekaa, generating widespread fear and uncertainty among civilians.<sup>1</sup>*

### **1. Legal Framework**

#### **1.1 What is IHL?**

International humanitarian law (IHL) governs situations of armed conflict. Once triggered, it regulates the conduct of hostilities and the treatment of civilians and other persons not involved in the fight. A fundamental principle of IHL is to strike a balance between military necessity and humanitarian protection. It permits force to achieve legitimate military aims, but imposes limitations to protect civilians, preserve human dignity, and prevent unnecessary suffering.

#### **1.2 Does IHL regulate the conflict in Lebanon?**

Yes. The situation in Lebanon involves overlapping conflicts that may apply to different actors or locations. First, hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah meet the threshold for a non-international armed conflict (NIAC), based on the intensity of violence and the organisation of Hezbollah as a non-State armed group. Second, any use of force by Israel on the territory of Lebanon without its consent constitutes an international armed conflict (IAC), regardless of whether Israel frames its operations as directed solely at Hezbollah. Third, where Israel exercises effective control over territory, the situation amounts to occupation, a subset of IAC.

#### **1.3 Which IHL rules apply to Israel's mass evacuation orders?**

IHL regulates evacuation orders through two intersecting frameworks: the conduct of hostilities and the prohibition on forcible displacement.

##### **1.3.1 Conduct of hostilities**

Under IHL, parties must only target military objectives. Disproportionate and indiscriminate attacks are prohibited, and parties must comply with the obligations to

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<sup>1</sup> OHCHR, [Lebanon: Israeli blanket displacement orders bring more misery to civilians](#), March 6 2026.

take all feasible precautions in attack, including by giving effective advance warning and choosing means and methods that minimise civilian harm.<sup>2</sup> Evacuation orders may constitute an advanced warning if preceding lawful military action but cannot be used as a pretext to simply remove civilians from an area or to engage in attacks that would otherwise be unlawful under IHL.

### 1.3.2 Prohibition on forcible displacement

Evacuation orders may constitute a violation of the prohibition on forcible displacement. IHL rules regulating forced displacement differ depending on conflict classification.

Under the **law of occupation**, which applies to those parts of Southern Lebanon under Israel's effective control,<sup>3</sup> the forcible displacement of civilians is prohibited, regardless of motive. Temporary evacuations are permitted if the security of the population or imperative military reasons so demand,<sup>4</sup> but this is a measure of last resort and cannot be relied upon where less harmful options are available.<sup>5</sup> Evacuated persons must be permitted to return back to their homes as soon as hostilities in the area have ceased.<sup>6</sup>

For the parties to the **NIAC**, a similar obligation applies.<sup>7</sup> The critical difference is that “effective control” criterion is not required.<sup>8</sup> Rather, the focus is on whether civilians are in fact compelled to leave and whether a party is in a position to enforce such displacement.

For **IACs not amounting to occupation**, there is no treaty provision explicitly prohibiting forcible displacement. To address this gap, it has been argued that IHL should adopt a “functional approach” by reference to a party's capacity to cause or prevent

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<sup>2</sup> API I, Articles 48, 51, 52, and 57; ICRC Study on CIHL, Rule 1 (the principle of distinction); Rule 12 (prohibition on indiscriminate attacks), Rule 14 (prohibition on disproportionate attacks), Rule 15 (Principle of Precautions in Attack) and Rule 20 (obligation of advance warning). These obligations have also acquired customary status, applying in both NIACs and IACs: Diakonia IHL Centre, [Basic principles of IHL](#).

<sup>3</sup> Israel has maintained a continuous presence and established effective control over at least five areas in Southern Lebanon since 2024, amounting to belligerent occupation within the meaning of Article 42 of the 1907 Hague Regulations and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949.

<sup>4</sup> GC IV, Article 49(1); ICRC Study on CIHL, Rule 129.

<sup>5</sup> International Review of the Red Cross 88, Jean-François Quéguiner (2006), [Precautions under the Law Governing the Conduct of Hostilities](#), p. 818. See also: Diamond, E., Nohle, E. (2026). [Humanitarian Displacement? The \(Mis-\)Appropriation of Humanitarian Principles to Justify Mass Displacement](#) in: Krieger, H., Kalmanovitz, P., Lieblich, E., Sexton, J.P. (eds) Yearbook of International Humanitarian Law, Volume 27, 2024. Yearbook of International Humanitarian Law, vol 27. T.M.C. Asser Press, The Hague; ICTY, Prosecutor v Blagoje Simić, Miroslav Tadić, Simo Zarić, Trial Judgment, 17 October 2003, Case No. IT-95-9 (Simić 2003), paras 125.

<sup>6</sup> GC IV, Article 49(2); ICRC Study on CIHL, Rule 132.

<sup>7</sup> APII, Article 17; ICRC Study on CIHL, Rule 129.

<sup>8</sup> Another difference is that the treaty states the displacement to have been “ordered”, though this has been argued to have the same application in substance: Willms J (2009), [Without Order, Anything Goes? The Prohibition of Forced Displacement in Non-International Armed Conflict](#) *International Review of the Red Cross* 91, pp. 547–565.

displacement, even if the full occupation regime is not triggered.<sup>9</sup> In our opinion, there is no principled reason why the prohibition on forcible displacement should depend on the exercise of territorial control. The law of NIAC and international criminal jurisprudence both recognise that parties forcibly displace civilians without controlling territory.<sup>10</sup> There are strong policy reasons for adopting this position in contexts where a party uses its technological superiority to force civilians to leave, including through remote strikes and indirect means of coercion, despite not exercising territorial control.

Irrespective of whether one subscribes to the functional approach, civilians in non-occupied territory who find themselves “in the hands of” the occupying power benefit from the applicable protections under GC IV.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Assessing Israel’s compliance with IHL

### 2.1 Do Israel’s evacuation orders comply with IHL rules on the conduct of hostilities?

A key aspect of precautions in attack is the obligation to give effective advance warnings.<sup>12</sup> The mere issuance of an evacuation order does not suffice to discharge this obligation; rather, its effectiveness is central to the lawfulness of the attack.<sup>13</sup> The attacking party must ensure that the methods used to communicate the warning were capable of reaching and being understood by the affected population.<sup>14</sup> Warnings that do not give civilians adequate time to leave for a safer area would not be considered “effective”.<sup>15</sup>

For a warning to be “effective”, it must be timely, specific, actionable and communicated in a manner that is accessible and understandable to the affected population,<sup>16</sup> taking into account factors such as language, literacy levels, age, and disability.<sup>17</sup> UN Commissions of Inquiry have identified criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of warnings,<sup>18</sup> including whether they reach and are understood by affected civilians, provide sufficient time to take

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<sup>9</sup> Diamond and Nohle, *supra* note 5, p. 61.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* pp. 65-66.

<sup>11</sup> GCIV, Arts 4(1).

<sup>12</sup> API, Article 57(2)(c); ICRC Study on CIHL, Rule 20. This is a customary rule of IHL that is applicable in both IACs and NIACs. IHL accommodates for the possibility of derogation from this rule, only “...when the element of surprise in the attack is a condition of its success.” See, Commentary on AP I, Article 57 para 2223.

<sup>13</sup> OHCHR, [Amid protection crisis in Lebanon, UN experts warn bombing civilians to force displacement is unlawful](#), 13 March 2026.

<sup>14</sup> Diakonia IHL Centre, [The principle of precautions in attack](#).

<sup>15</sup> See: Human Rights Watch, [Israeli Military Calls for Evacuating Southern Lebanon: Displacement Calls Raise Serious Risk of Laws of War Violations](#), March 05, 2026. See also: [Reliefweb, Israeli Military Calls for Evacuating Southern Lebanon](#), March 05, 2026.

<sup>16</sup> *Supra* n 14.

<sup>17</sup> IHL Centre, [Inclusive IHL: Closing the Gaps in Humanitarian Protection](#), 9 January 2026

<sup>18</sup> See for an analysis of elements that contribute to an effective warning to civilians, [Report of the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict, Executive summary](#), 23 September 2009, para 37.

protective action, clearly indicate the measures civilians should take, are credible and unambiguous, and identify both the area at risk and safe destinations.

The obligation to take constant care to spare the civilian population remains valid throughout the attack, even if specific precautionary measures such as warnings have been implemented.<sup>19</sup> Issuing an effective advance warning does not alter the prohibition on launching of indiscriminate attacks or targeting civilians or civilian objects.<sup>20</sup>

Open-source reports suggest that Israel's mass evacuation orders have not met these criteria. For example:

- The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) observed that the orders expanded rapidly to broad geographic directives, covering approximately 1,470 square kilometres, around 14% of Lebanon's territory often demanding immediate movement, leaving civilians with little or no time to plan safe relocation.<sup>21</sup>
- Amnesty International noted that warnings were overly broad and repeated, generating panic and fear across multiple municipalities, including Beirut's southern suburbs, even when no attacks were imminent.<sup>22</sup>
- UNRWA reported that these orders contributed to mass displacement, overwhelming available shelters and further exacerbating humanitarian needs.<sup>23</sup>

The obligation to provide effective advance warnings is designed to enable civilians to evacuate from areas near military objectives that will be targeted. Israel's mass evacuation orders, at times extending to entire neighbourhoods, towns, and regions, do not constitute valid warnings or comply with IHL's fundamental rules. Towns and other densely populated civilian areas cannot be attacked indiscriminately, and the issuance of a warning does not make an otherwise unlawful attack lawful.

Critically, civilians who choose not to evacuate after receiving warnings retain their civilian status and continue to be protected under IHL.<sup>24</sup> Any attack that follows a warning must comply with the rules regulating the conduct of hostilities, including the prohibitions on targeting civilians and launching disproportionate or indiscriminate attacks.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See: [Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Lebanon established pursuant to Human Rights Council Resolution S-2/1 \(2006\)](#), UN Doc. A/HRC/3/2, para 94.

<sup>20</sup> ICRC study in CIHL, Rule 15

<sup>21</sup> NRC, [Lebanon: One in seven displaced, 1,500 square kilometres under evacuation orders](#), March 3, 2026

<sup>22</sup> Amnesty International, [Lebanon: Israeli military's overly broad mass evacuation orders sowing panic and fuelling humanitarian suffering](#), March 6, 2026

<sup>23</sup> [UNRWA Situation Report #1 on the Lebanon Emergency Response 2026](#), March 6, 2026; [UNRWA Situation Report #2 on the Lebanon Emergency Response 2026](#), March 12, 2026

<sup>24</sup> ICRC study in CIHL, Rule 20

<sup>25</sup> [Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Lebanon established pursuant to Human Rights Council Resolution S-2/1 \(2006\)](#), UN Doc. A/HRC/3/2, paras 151 and 158; [Report of the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the](#)

## **2.2 Do Israel's evacuation orders comply with the prohibition on forcible displacement?**

Assuming the prohibition on forcible displacement applies (see section 1.3.2 above), the question of whether Israel's conduct in forcibly removing civilians is lawful depends on whether such removal is temporary, justified by the security of those civilians or imperative reasons of military necessity, and complies with additional safeguards.

**Evacuations for civilian security.** Evacuations purportedly undertaken on grounds of civilian protection is not justified where feasible and less harmful alternatives exist to protect civilians from the effects of hostilities.<sup>26</sup> Evacuation cannot be relied upon when the underlying risks to civilians arise from unlawful conduct, such as indiscriminate attacks causing excessive civilian harm.<sup>27</sup> Warnings issued as an ultimatum to civilians, threatening harm unless they leave their home, could themselves amount to “acts or threats of violence the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among the civilian population”, which are strictly prohibited under IHL.<sup>28</sup>

**Evacuations for imperative military necessity.** To meet the threshold of “imperative military necessity”, there must be overriding military considerations making the displacement absolutely necessary in relation to the operation concerned.<sup>29</sup> It is not sufficient that a party would gain a military advantage by removing the civilian population.<sup>30</sup> Evidence that evacuation measures were anticipated or planned in advance may indicate that the displacement was not undertaken in response to an unforeseen and imperative military necessity, but rather formed part of a broader operational approach, thereby raising serious doubts over the purported use of this exception.<sup>31</sup>

These exceptions must be interpreted restrictively “in the interests of the protected persons themselves”.<sup>32</sup> Evacuations must be temporary and ensure that the civilians concerned are received under satisfactory conditions of shelter, hygiene, health, safety

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[Gaza Conflict, Executive summary](#) para 37; Diakonia IHL Centre, [Israel's Military Actions in Lebanon: Concerns Over IHL Compliance](#), November 2023, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> International Review of the Red Cross 88, Jean-François Quéguiner (2006), [Precautions under the Law Governing the Conduct of Hostilities](#), p. 818. See also: Diamond and Nohle, “Humanitarian Displacement”, supra note 5.

<sup>27</sup> ICTY, Prosecutor v. Radovan Karadzic, IT-95-5/18-T, Trial Chamber, 24 March 2016, para. 492. See also: Just Security, Khan YS (2023), [The Directive to Evacuate Northern Gaza: Advance Warning or Forced Displacement?](#) See also: See: Diamond and Nohle, “Humanitarian Displacement”, supra note 5.

<sup>28</sup> GCIV, article 33; API, article 51(2); and APII, article 13(2), ICRC study in CIHL, Rule 2. See also: Diamond and Nohle, supra note 5, p 16.

<sup>29</sup> For further reading on the notion of the military necessity, see: Diakonia IHL Centre, [The Protection of Housing, Land and Property \(HLP\) Rights in Armed](#), December 10, 2024.

<sup>30</sup> See: Diamond and Nohle, supra note 5.

<sup>31</sup> International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, Prosecutor v Radislav Krstić, Trial Judgment, 2 August 2001, Case No. IT-98-33-T, paras 526-527; Diamond and Nohle, supra note 5.

<sup>32</sup> Commentary on GCIV, Article 49, p. 280.

and nutrition and that family members are not separated.<sup>33</sup> Particular attention must be given to the needs of vulnerable persons, including older persons, children, women, and persons with disabilities.<sup>34</sup> Failure to comply renders the evacuation unlawful under IHL.

A critical obligation in this context is the right of the displaced persons to voluntary and safe return,<sup>35</sup> which cannot be fully realized unless the displacing authority respects their property.<sup>36</sup> Public statements attributed to Israel's Defence Minister Israel Katz appear to deny the right of return,<sup>37</sup> while Finance Minister Bezael Smotrich has actively promoted territorial annexation,<sup>38</sup> both of which violate international law.

### 3. Conclusion

Israel's broad, area-based evacuation orders do not constitute effective advance warnings. Such orders are unlawful and expose civilians to additional risks, particularly where they provide insufficient time, clarity, or means for civilians to seek safety.

Similarly, forcible displacement purportedly executed for civilian protection cannot be justified where the underlying risks stem from Israel's own unlawful attacks. Claims of imperative military necessity are not substantiated by mere military convenience and must also be judged by reference to the lawfulness of the military operations themselves.

The scale and the short timeframe provided for evacuation, alongside patterns of destruction and restrictions on civilian movement, further indicate that Israel is violating its obligations under IHL with respect to advance warnings and forcible displacement. It is worth emphasising that indiscriminate attacks, disproportionate attacks, and forcible displacement each constitute war crimes entailing individual criminal responsibility.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> ICRC study in CIHL, Rule 131.

<sup>34</sup> See: IHL Centre, Inclusive IHL, *supra* note 15.

<sup>35</sup> ICRC Study on CIHL, Rule 132.

<sup>36</sup> ICRC Study on CIHL, Rule 133.

<sup>37</sup> Reuters, [Israel says Lebanese displaced won't return until its own citizens are safe](#), March 16, 2026.

<sup>38</sup> Reuters, [Israeli minister calls for annexation of southern Lebanon](#), March 23, 2026.

<sup>39</sup> Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Arts 8(2)(b)(xx) (indiscriminate attacks in IAC); 8(2)(b)(iv) (disproportionate attacks in IAC); 8(2)(a)(vii) (unlawful deportation or transfer in IAC); 8(2)(b)(viii) (deportation or transfer by an occupying power); and 8(2)(e)(viii) (ordering displacement in NIAC).