

Historic Lebanese border village pays severe price for resisting Israel's aggressions

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Dimitri Lascaris: Good afternoon. This is Dimitri Lascaris coming to you from south Lebanon. Yesterday, my guide, Hadi and I were presented with an unusual opportunity. And that was a chance to visit the Lebanese border village of Ayta ash-Shab, which lies about a kilometre from the border between Lebanon and northern occupied Palestine and within a very short distance of one, if not more, Israeli military bases. The reason why this opportunity arose suddenly was because a fighter of the Islamic resistance, who comes from Ayta ash-Shab, was killed on the prior day in an Israeli airstrike. And although the town had been evacuated and was largely off limits to the media, particularly foreign media, for many months, the villagers of the town re-converged on the centre of the village in order to pay homage to the slain fighter from the Islamic resistance. So it was within that context that we had an opportunity to go into the town and to observe the funeral and also to gauge the extent of the extraordinary damage that has been inflicted upon Ayta ash-Shab during the last ten months. This village is extremely important from a historical perspective. The village was at the core of the 2006 war between the Israeli military and the Islamic resistance in South Lebanon. That particular round of hostilities, which ended in an ignominious retreat of the Israeli military from south Lebanon, was triggered by an incursion of Islamic resistance fighters into Israel, where they captured two Israeli soldiers and did so for the purpose of having leverage in negotiations to secure the release of Lebanese civilians and fighters who were in the custody of the Israeli military on the other side of the border. The Islamic resistance fighters who captured the Israeli soldiers took them back across the border into Ayta ash-Shab, at which point the Israeli military launched a major operation in order to secure the release of those Israeli soldiers, and the control of the town. The battle lasted for 33 days. Its initial phase consisted of two and a half weeks of intense bombardment of the village, followed by a couple of weeks of very intense ground combat. The Israelis deployed five brigades against a resistance force that is reported to have consisted of little more than half a company of men and failed utterly to secure control of the town or the release of the Israeli soldiers. The effect on the morale of the Israeli military was quite severe. A number of

officers were dismissed from their posts. The Israeli prime minister at the time, Ehud Olmert, and his defence minister were reported to have been incensed by the poor performance of the Israeli military. There was one account of how the Israeli defence minister was watching live the initial incursion of the Israeli forces, into the territory between the border and Ayta ash-Shab, a Merkava tank was blown to bits by a mine and the soldiers inside the tank were killed live before the Israeli minister. This is a community, Ayta ash-Shab, which is fiercely proud of its resistance and its record of resistance. And we got a strong sense of that when we attended the funeral of this fighter yesterday. So here's my report from Ayta ash-Shab.

Good day. This is Dimitri Lascaris coming to you from South Lebanon on August 23rd, 2024. I'm currently a few hundred metres away from the border between Lebanon and northern occupied Palestine, in a village by the name of Ayta ash-Shab. This village is well known for having incurred tremendous damage and destruction in past conflicts with the Israeli military, and this time is no exception. In fact, the situation is so dangerous here that the village has been evacuated. The reason why we were able to access the village today, and that's something that very few foreign media have been able to do during the course of the last ten months is because we were in the vicinity and a fighter from this village by the name Raid Khattab was killed in an Israeli strike within the past 24 hours.

Mass: Chanting and singing.

Speaker: From here...from Aita, the "mother of martyrs"... From the proximity of "Alraheb" Israeli base. We declare (that we are ready to give sacrifices) ... like Houssein (3rd Shi' a Imam) did.

Dimitri Lascaris: And so we attended the funeral and had an opportunity to survey the extraordinary levels of destruction here. I've been to a number of areas of Lebanon in the last ten months on my four visits here, both in eastern Lebanon and in the south, I have not seen anywhere near this level of destruction until this point in time. The worst I had seen was in the village of Hula, which was on my last trip. And that also is very close to the Israeli border. But this is really quite something. It's no exaggeration to say that the village is unlivable at this stage. There are electrical wires all over the place that have been knocked out by the airstrikes, the falling infrastructure. Many commercial businesses are destroyed. A lot of buildings are barely standing, on the verge of collapse.

Interestingly, when we were at this funeral, I've been to two others by the way in the past ten months, there was an overflight of an Israeli warplane, which generated a sonic boom. It doesn't appear that there was any strike conducted on the village at that point in time. But, I think it's fair to say that the Israelis were trying to send the villagers a message. And in fact, you can see over here, right down there, there is an Israeli military base, we're walking towards it, overlooking this village. And there may also be another one off in the distance which is viewable from here. Despite the extraordinary dangers, the size of the following, who came here today to pay homage to this young man, was quite large. It was larger than the

other two funerals that I had attended. And there were many shows of defiance during the course of the funeral. You'll see that in the footage I'm about to share with you. There were many women, many children. Hundreds of men, I would say. And this young man, to understand the strength of feeling, you probably would need to know a little bit about his personal history. He is the only son of a blind woman. And in the course of this war, he was already wounded. I believe it was in the first month of combat. And he returned to combat after healing from his wounds. And, there is a famous photo of him which – at least famous to the locals here – when he was a young man, he went to see an exhibition that had been mounted by the resistance of weaponry that they had – basically they were trophies of war in their combat with the Israelis – and there was an empty tank which had held a cluster munitions and he laid down in the tank and a photographer from Agence France-Presse shot a photo of him, and they used that photo to commemorate his martyrdom here today. I must say that, given the levels of destruction here, it really is quite extraordinary to see this many people come here in these conditions. We are unfortunately not going to be able to stay much longer. We did have an opportunity to see at least some of the damage that has been done on our way to the site of the funeral. But the conditions here are so dangerous that we're going to have to leave, I think, fairly precipitously. Despite these conditions, it was interesting just a moment ago when we were preparing to do this report, there was a family and friends seated outside of a small structure – I guess it was their home – and they were very kind, very jovial, as a matter of fact, they offered us coffee and water. One of them spoke fluent English. And we had a very friendly conversation about what's happening here.

So the spirits seem to be high despite the suffering. And we're going to move on from here. As I said, we don't have much time at this stage, and we'll have further reports to share with you as we tour the south of Lebanon in the days ahead. This is Dimitri Lascaris signing off from either Ayta ash-Shab on August 23rd, 2024.

END

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