

Rhythms of Return

Photo Essay

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Abstract This photo essay documents Kfar Kila in March 2025, following the Israeli army's partial withdrawal from South Lebanon. The images and accompanying reflection examine the coexistence of devastation and the slow return of the living: demolished homes alongside spring vegetation, poisoned soil beneath green shoots, ruination as an ongoing condition rather than a completed past.

Résumé Ce photo-essai documente Kfar Kila en mars 2025, après le retrait partiel de l'armée israélienne du Sud-Liban. Les images et la réflexion qui les accompagnent examinent la coexistence de la dévastation et des reprises du vivant: des maisons démolies côtoient la végétation printanière, un sol empoisonné recèle des pousses vertes, la ruine y est une condition permanente plutôt qu'un passé révolu.

Keywords Lebanon; ecologies of resistance; ecocide; ruination



South Lebanon evokes green plains and banana fields, the taste of jreesh and kamounet banadoura, the warmth of Jabal Amil's hills and the hospitality of its inhabitants. South Lebanon also evokes neglect and siege: a region long marginalized by the state, scarred by two decades of Israeli occupation, devastated again in 2006, and once more in the assault that began in October 2023. Each war leaves its sediment of destruction, folding into the next. The landscape bears the marks not only of what was destroyed, but of how life insists on continuing despite it.

War here is not an event but has been made into a cyclical, invasive, and corrosive rhythm. It reshapes the landscape and those who inhabit it, weaving together ecologies of violence and endurance. In 1996, while the south was still occupied, popular singer Khaled el Habr released a tribute to the land and people of Kfar Kila: *the village sows a daisy in the earth, and plants a rifle in the land to protect the cause*.¹ The nostalgic song intertwined the themes of village life, destruction and dispossession, resistance and hope.

Decades later, anthropologist Muna Khayyat (2022) would eloquently describe a life in an adjacent village through the notion of ecologies of resistance. In the borderland areas, she writes, war and life are co-present and co-exist. Resistance is embedded both in everyday

¹ Translated from the original Arabic by the author.

practices and in more-than-human relations. Her fieldwork, conducted in the aftermath of the 2006 “33-day war,” echoes what has unfolded since: another invasion, another season of burning fields and uprooted trees, and another cycle for everyday forms of resistance.

I visited Kfar Kila in March 2025, soon after the Israeli army’s partial withdrawal from the borderland to help a friend salvage memories from the rubble of his house. As our van approached the edge of historical Palestine, all we could see were bombed-out and bulldozed landscapes. My first and obvious thoughts were for the sheer scale of demolition. The population remained displaced, many killed. What used to be a village filled with voices, movement, and life is now levelled to its foundation.

Devastation extends beyond homes: relentless digging, the uprooting of age-old olive trees, the incineration of groves and orchards with white phosphorus. Beneath the ruins, the earth itself is tainted with heavy metals, toxic chemicals, and residues left by depleted uranium weapons deployed by Israeli forces. What unfolds here is an act of ecocide — a deliberate assault on the elemental conditions that sustain life. The destruction of infrastructure and soil is not collateral damage but is constitutive of violence, reflecting what scholar Ali Kadri (2023) has called accumulation through warfare, where war itself becomes a form of value extraction, one that devalues both nature and human life.

As a drone hovered over our heads, I laughed at a stubborn cabbage that survived it all. Then looking further, I noticed damaged trees still sprouting, flowers pushing through debris, green shoots breaking the gray monotony of collapsed walls. In all the pain caused by the occupation forces, it felt obscene to wonder at the sight of verdure. It was spring and vegetation pays no heed to war. The plants hadn’t refused to wait; they had no choice. They were just growing. What struck me was not their resilience but my impulse to read meaning into it, to find comfort in biological processes while my friend dug through the wreckage of his childhood home.

Ruins are often thought of as static and silent remnants of the past. Ruins are more than inert wreckage: they are active traces of violence, reminders of loss, markers of interrupted lives, and terrains of symbolic contestation. In that sense, they are not ruin, but ruination: an ongoing condition rather than a completed fact (Y. Khayyat, 2023). Where ruins suggest finality, ruination exposes the continuation of violence through matter such as dust, soil, walls, air. In Kfar Kila, ruins do not fade quietly into the past; they remain as visible scars that carry both the weight of destruction and the question of whether regeneration is even possible. Following the Israeli withdrawal, accessing the village remains dangerous, but vegetation appeared first. Flowers and plants grew through the rubble, following the seasonal cycle

despite human devastation. Their presence across cracks and crevices marked the continuation of growth in spaces demolished in the assault. The blossoms emerging from broken stone do not erase the memory of violence; they simply coexist with it.

I hesitated to write about what I saw, out of fear of romanticizing the suffering this region and its people continue to endure. As an outsider witnessing spring, I felt time fracture as the cycles of nature and the timelines of war overlap unevenly. Plants grow before people can return. Biological processes resume, but people face conditions of ongoing threat that remain unresolved. Khaled el Habr sang of daisies and rifles, and flowers do push through rubble but that's not hope, it's botany. The continuity that matters is not only seasonal but human: the decision to return, to rebuild, to remain. That decision belongs to those who will make it, not to me, not to the flowers, but to those whose lives are rooted here.

















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