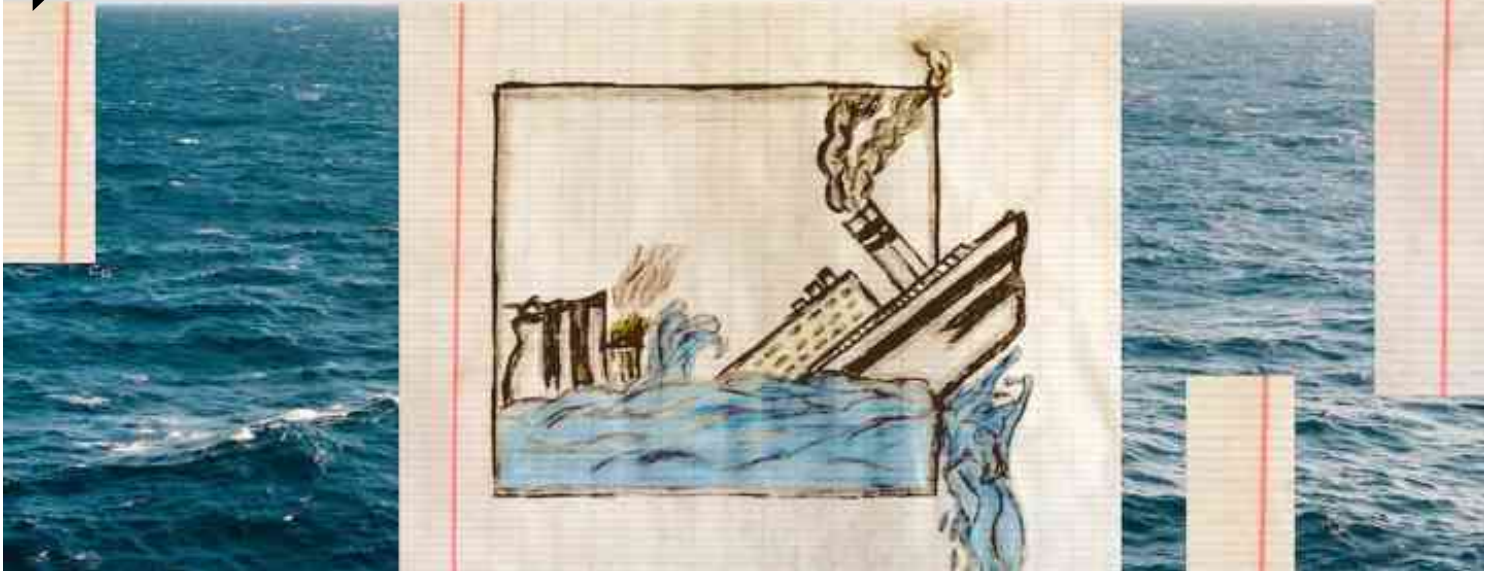




Menu



# Intercepted at Sea: The Deadly Reality of Border Control

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Chronicles of the Crisis

**Migration & Displacement**

**By Yara El Murr**

Edited by Annia Ciezadlo

Published on 6 February 2023

**Intercepted at Sea**

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**Part 1: Intercepted at Sea: The Deadly Reality of Border Control**

**Part 2: Intercepted at Sea: Anatomy of a Pullback**

**Part 3: Intercepted at Sea: The Drowned, the Saved & the Missing**

*Editor's Note: The black dots (●) in the text are clickable to display documents sourced in this article.*

**This is Part 1 of a three-part series examining the human cost of border enforcement.**

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## **The Decision**

“My brother and I boarded the death boat together.”

In March 2022, Alaa Methlej al-Dandashi decided to leave Lebanon. Her husband’s family had bought a boat. It was small, but powerful enough to take them across the invisible but increasingly deadly border that separates Lebanon from the European Union.

Alaa was hoping to reach Italy first, and then move on from there to the Netherlands. She planned to finish her education and find work as an accountant. She was pregnant at the time; she didn’t know it yet, but she might have sensed it, because her dream, she said, was to provide a good life for her future children.

“I don’t want my children to tell me when they grow up: ‘Why did you bring us into this world?’” said Alaa, a 24-year-old with a long oval face and tired eyes underlined by dark circles. “I can't provide for them here in Lebanon.”

Alaa’s younger brother Hashem, who was 22 at the time, asked if he could join her on the journey. Hashem had always been a lighthearted boy, an artist who loved to sing and act and draw. But since Lebanon's 2019 financial collapse, which plunged 80 percent of the population into poverty, he had been depressed. Like many people in Tripoli, Lebanon’s second largest city, he was unemployed and growing more and more desperate. Maybe he could build a life overseas.

**Since Lebanon's 2019 financial collapse, Hashem Methlej had been**


**depressed, unemployed, and desperate.**

At first, Alaa liked the idea of Hashem coming with them on the journey to Europe.

The two siblings were close: during the World Cup finals, Hashem and his cousin Mos'ab would cheer for Germany's team, while Alaa rooted for Brazil. In 2014, when Germany beat Brazil, the boys teased Alaa relentlessly. Hashem was also close to his two younger sisters Mariam and Rahaf.

Hashem's friends and family described him as gentle, humorous and affectionate. He was famous for his good-natured catchphrases: "Rawaz, rawaz" (it's chill, it's chill) and "it's okay." He was soft-spoken, mixed Arabic and English a lot, and jokingly called his friends "baby" or "qalbeh" (my heart). If Hashem came with her, they could be support systems for each other — first on the stressful journey by sea, and then in establishing their new lives abroad.

In the days before the departure, however, Alaa began to feel uneasy. The boat trip was too dangerous for her baby brother. She was willing to risk it because her husband and his family were set on going. Hashem had no such obligations.



**He was soft-spoken, mixed Arabic and English a lot, and jokingly called his friends "baby" or "qalbeh" (my heart).**

Alaa brought up her misgivings with her mother. Maybe she could help Hashem get a visa instead, once she got settled in Europe?

But Hashem overheard the conversation. "If you don't take me with you," he told her, with finality, "assume that you

don't have a brother.”

“I was afraid to lose my brother if I asked him to stay here,” Alaa told *The Public Source*, with tears in her eyes, in December. “And I was afraid for him to join me.”

## The Voyage

On April 23, 2022, a little before sunset, Alaa and Hashem Methlej boarded the small yacht with her husband, Louay al-Dandashi, and around 22 others from his extended family. All told, 81 people crammed into the little boat. They packed into the deck, the upper deck and the small cabin below. As the boat pulled away, it was so crowded that people were standing on the gunwales.

The boat set sail from Qalamoun, a small seaside town five kilometers south of Tripoli. The weather that night was perfect: clear and not too windy, around 20°C. Hashem sent his parents a selfie from the boat. His face, lit by the blue light of his phone, glows with anticipation as the lights of Lebanon's coastline recede behind him. o

Around 9:30 p.m., just minutes before the migrants would have reached international waters, the Lebanese navy intercepted their boat. All dispute what happened next. Survivors say the navy rammed into them. In a press conference the following day, Colonel Haitham Dinnawi said the captain of the migrant boat caused the collision by trying to evade the navy. All agree that the two boats collided: the small, overloaded civilian boat and the larger, more powerful naval vessel. The civilian boat sank within minutes.



**“I was afraid to lose my brother if I asked him to stay here. And I was**

**afraid for him to join me.” —Alaa  
Methlej, survivor**

By the time they were rescued, around half the boat’s passengers had drowned. Many of those who died were women and children who had taken shelter from the chilly, humid sea air in the tiny cabin. “It was hard to see children dying in front of you, and you can’t even swim, and you don’t know when God will take your soul,” said Alaa, her eyes growing glassy as she remembered.

That night, after the boat sank, the military pulled survivors out of the sea and took them to the port. From there, the Lebanese Red Cross and other ambulance services took most of the survivors to hospitals in Tripoli. Much later that same night, Alaa and Louay finally made it home. From then on the Methlej family sat up waiting for Hashem to join them from the hospital.

They were sure he had made it back to shore. Alaa and Hashem had been shouting back and forth to each other as they swam in the sea, waiting to be rescued. A neighbor who knew the family well told *The Public Source* that he saw Hashem in the port, wrapped in a blanket, with the other survivors. Mos’ab Methlej, Hashem’s cousin and childhood best friend, was at the port that night too, and one of the other survivors told him Hashem had made it. Most convincing of all: unofficial lists that began circulating on WhatsApp around midnight showed “H. Methlej” as one of the survivors.

But ever since that night, Hashem Methlej has been missing.



Hashem Methlej has been an actor and puppeteer with Shababic theater group since 2018. He used to always joke around in shows to engage with the audience and make them laugh. Tripoli, Lebanon. March 28, 2021. (Photo courtesy of Shababic)

Nine months since the sinking of vessel J-1580, the Lebanese government has yet to release an official list of those who survived and those who drowned on the night of April 23. The government's indifference is compounding the agonizing limbo of all the families: those who know their loved ones drowned, and those who believe they might have been saved.

To this day, 33 bodies lie on the seabed. The families of those who drowned are waiting for anything — a bone, a piece of cloth — to bury their loved ones. Without that, they cannot grieve properly, let alone learn how to survive without their loved ones in one of the Mediterranean's poorest cities.

**The families of those who drowned are waiting for anything — a bone, a piece of cloth — to bury their loved ones.**

One family doesn't even know if they should mourn. Hashem's parents believe their son survived. The thought that he might have drowned has crossed their minds. But they are adamant that he is alive. They suspect that the military rescued him, and is holding him in detention for some undisclosed reason.

Their hearts believe the latter. But the government has repeatedly rebuffed their desperate attempts to find out what happened to Hashem that night. Until they know the truth, the uncertainty is destabilizing their relationships, weakening their health, and gnawing at their souls. Without answers, and without justice, they cannot heal.

### **Nights and Days**

Alaa and Hashem were living in poverty long before Lebanon's financial crisis. Born and raised in the Palestinian Beddawi refugee camp, they attended schools run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). In grade eight, Hashem earned a scholarship to attend the High School and Technical School of the North. He specialized in interior design, because he loved to draw.

Hashem also loved to sing: he would play music and sing late into the night, recording love songs by George Wassouf, Tamer Hosni and others, and sending them to his girlfriend. Alaa, who could hear him from her bedroom, would ask him

to keep quiet so she could sleep. When he didn't stop, she would unplug the Wi-Fi router or bombard him with text messages to stop him from singing.

## **One family doesn't even know if they should mourn.**

When the family moved to the Baqqar neighborhood in Qobbeh, eight years ago, Hashem met Hadi Saab. Saab, who is now 23, was part of [Shababic](#), a Tripoli-based theater group that specializes in interactive theater, puppet shows and plays about social causes. Hashem joined Shababic in 2018, and learned puppetry and acting.

On the stage, he would play the good wise friend, guiding Saab's character away from drug use and other troubles. He loved to joke around in rehearsals and during sections of the plays that engaged the audience. "Shababic were like a family to him," said Mos'ab, who was also part of the group.


He played the wise friend offstage as well. Omar Merhi met Hashem in the Baqqar neighborhood four years ago. The two quickly became best friends. Hashem, said Merhi, was the person he trusted most. "I used to tell him my secrets and feel relieved," Merhi told *The Public Source* in Hashem's living room one December evening after work. "When I lost that, I felt a big gap."

About a year and a half ago, Hashem's family could no longer afford his school. With only one year left to finish his education — an ambition his friends and family all said was important to him — he had to drop out.

When he had to quit his studies, and give up the dream of a job in his field, Hashem became depressed. He started sleeping in until 5 p.m. He stopped leaving the house. When



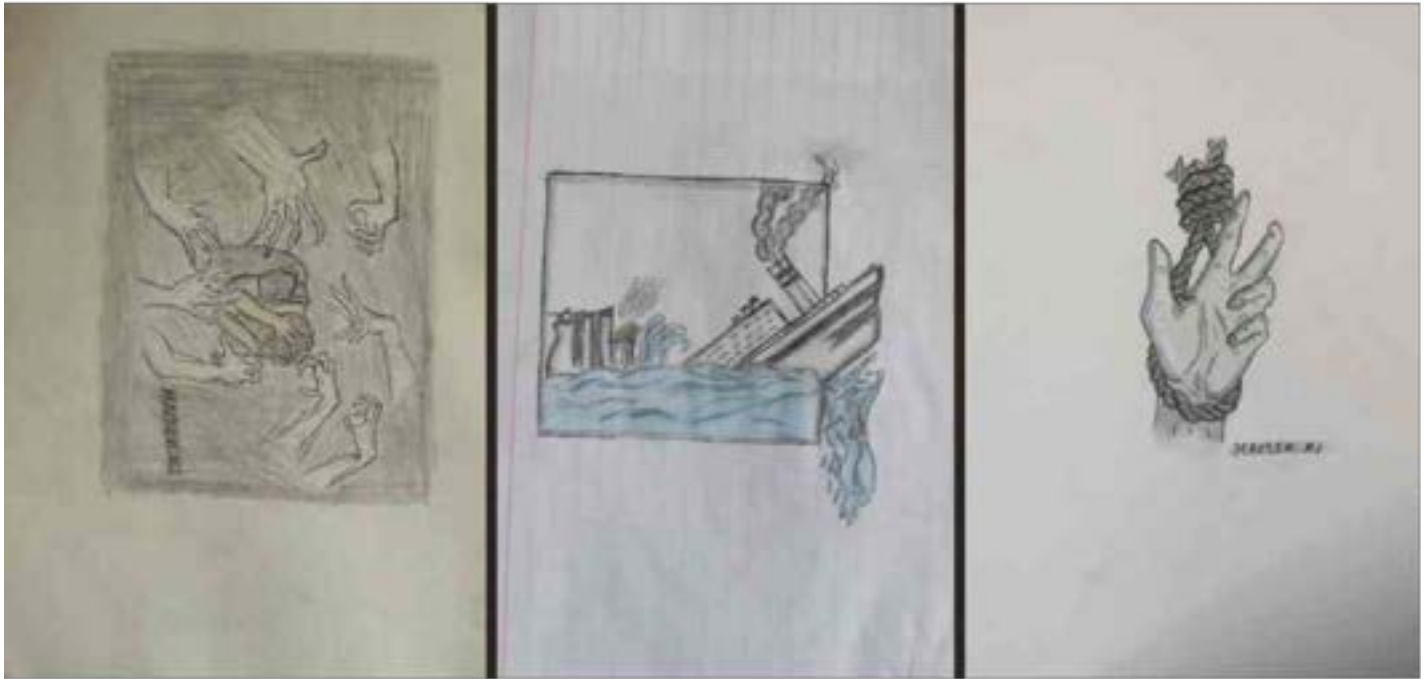
Alaa encouraged him to go out, he would respond “I'm not in the mood to be around people.” When friends came to visit him, he would apologize and tell them that he wanted to sleep. Hashem was talented and confident, said Merhi, but he was feeling down and defeated.



**“We are leaving,” Hashem told his father. “Pray for me. I will buy you our apartment to relieve you from rent. I will help you, and continue pursuing my dream.”**

Hashem’s friends and family all said he felt particularly depressed that he couldn’t support himself and his parents. “Hashem was feeling that as a man, he needs to support his father, not rely on his parents,” Diya’ al-Rmeihi, known as Umm Hashem, told *The Public Source*. “He no longer wanted to be a burden on his parents.”

Months before he boarded the death boat, Hashem filled his sketchbook with ominous drawings that reflected his deep hopelessness: A hand tied in a noose. An empty grave. A sinking boat. o



A photo collage of three undated drawings by Hashem Mthlej. The first shows a man hiding his face from distorted hands. The second shows a sinking boat next to silos on fire. The third shows a hand trapped in a noose. Tripoli, Lebanon. (Marwan Tahtah/The Public Source)

When Hashem heard about the trip to Italy, it rekindled his hopes for a future. He would buy an apartment, get engaged, and marry the girl he loved. He knew he couldn't do any of this in Tripoli. "He felt there was no hope here, and it's true," said Mos'ab. "He told me he wanted to leave, and he had already built his dreams."

One thing made the journey especially appealing. In Lebanon, people pay up to \$8,000 for such risky attempts to reach Europe. But as Alaa's brother, Hashem could go for free. He could never have afforded it otherwise. This was his chance.

Both his parents were against his going. "I had a lump in my throat at the thought that my son would travel this way," Abu Hashem said.

Umm Hashem opposed the trip too. But she couldn't bring herself to ask him to stay. "I have nothing to lose," he told her. "I will miss you and Baba, but I want to leave."

A month before his departure, Hashem asked his cousin Mos'ab to look after his parents and girlfriend while he was gone. He knew Mos'ab wanted to open his own business instead of working at a phone shop. He promised to send Mos'ab money once he established himself in Europe.

Merhi was surprised when Hashem told him about the trip, almost two weeks before the departure. He knew his best friend didn't like to travel, and that he was attached to his home. He took it as a joke.

"You won't leave me," he told Hashem. "I know that."

The night before his departure, Hashem asked Merhi to hang out with him. They stayed up talking all night until the morning call to prayer. True to his role as the wise confidant, Hashem spent the night giving Merhi recommendations and advice. "He told me things that gave me goosebumps," Merhi said, speaking slowly, and pausing periodically, as if the memory of this last encounter with his best friend weighed heavy on him.

Umm Hashem did not expect her son to go through with the plan, she told *The Public Source*. But Hashem insisted. "I am depressed, mama," he told her. "My nights and days are the same."

### **The Death Boat**

On April 23, 2022, a little before sunset, Hashem and Alaa bid their mother goodbye. They called their father, who was still at work. "We are leaving," Hashem told his father, Jihad Methlej. "Pray for me. Hopefully we will arrive at our

destination. I will buy you our apartment to relieve you from rent. I will help you, and continue pursuing my dream.”

Hashem and most of the men sat or stood on the deck of the yacht. The deck felt cold and wet, so women and children descended into the cabin, a couple of steps below the deck. But Alaa felt like she was suffocating in the tiny, overstuffed cabin. She went outside to sit with her husband and her brother, a decision that probably saved her life.

When they sailed, around 7 p.m., Alaa felt scared. But Hashem laughed. “Shut up, we’re going to make it,” he told her. “Don’t jinx it.”

When the navy vessels appeared, around 9:30 that night, Hashem called Abdel Rahman al-Rmeihi, his maternal uncle, on WhatsApp. Hashem told his uncle they were being chased. A little later, he told Rmeihi they had been hit.



PM 23 April 2022 (approx. 2 hours before departing)

The report by AusRelief Sons of Lebanon Submarine Mission shows images of the migrant boat taken two hours before its departure.

The army's directorate of orientation declined an interview request from *The Public Source* about the boat accident. *The Public Source* conducted separate interviews with three survivors from vessel J-1580: a boat mechanic named Ibrahim al-Jondi; al-Jondi's mother, Bari'a Safwan; and Alaa. The following account of that night comes from their testimony.

Alaa told *The Public Source* that four navy vessels pursued the small yacht. Soldiers called on the captain of the migrant boat to stop. When he didn't, one of the bigger navy boats

started circling the smaller civilian boat, making waves that sloshed in over the sides of the migrant boat. The water beneath them began to swirl and roar, said Alaa, spiraling her finger to show a whirlpool.

When the migrant boat kept going, the navy vessel circled around in front of the migrants and cut them off, al-Jondi told *The Public Source*. The smaller civilian boat, unable to stop or turn in time, collided into the larger military one. At this point, Alaa said she heard someone shout: “I want to bury you in the water, die like this, you dogs.”

By now, said Safwan, the smaller boat was swinging left and right. Frantically, the passengers began to run from side to side to try to balance it. Like Alaa, Safwan was also on the deck of the boat instead of inside the cabin. The men started jettisoning suitcases full of clothes, only keeping food and other items they deemed necessary for life.

It was at this point, according to al-Jondi, that the naval vessel circled around behind the migrant boat and rammed the back of it. The front of the migrant boat lifted up, and the back sank, said Alaa, raising one hand and lowering the other to demonstrate the way the tiny boat tilted into the sea.

Al-Jondi ran into the cabin to find his two sisters. The migrant boat sank so fast that he had to break the cabin window to swim out of the wreckage. Most of the women and children who were inside the cabin died before they could make it out. Months later, when a submarine mission photographed the wreckage, they found the body of a woman trapped half in, half out of the cabin window, clutching an infant to her chest to protect it. Among those who did not make it out of the cabin in time were al-Jondi’s sisters, Salam and Ghania.

**Months later, they found the body of a woman trapped in the cabin window, clutching an infant to her chest to protect it.**

When the boat sank, Alaa and Hashem, al-Jondi's mother Bari'a, and most of the other men were on the deck. They all tried to swim and help each other stay afloat.

Alaa was clinging to her husband Louay. But she lost her grip when she hit the freezing water and fainted. She woke up to find herself on top of a barrel that Louay had lifted her on. He was holding her with one arm and swimming with the other.

"Hashem!" she screamed. She heard him shout back from a distance, but she couldn't see him in the dark.

"Where are you?" he told her. "Don't choke, I'm coming to you."

"I'm okay," she shouted back. "Where are you?"

He shouted that the army vessel was coming towards him. She could see the army vessel, but it was far away from her. She told him to get on it.

Both Alaa and Ibrahim, interviewed independently of each other, said they were swimming for almost an hour before the navy rescued them. *The Public Source* was unable to independently verify this. If true, it would be a violation of international maritime law, as well as long-standing maritime tradition, both of which require captains to proceed with "all possible speed" to rescue anyone in distress.

Eventually, soldiers helped lift Alaa and Louay into a small army boat. One of the soldiers hit Alaa on her back. But

another one stopped him, saying: “We have an order to save them.”

Once aboard, Alaa asked for her brother by name. “Was he wearing a red shirt?” one of the soldiers asked. “Does he have long hair and a scab on the nose?”


She said yes. “He went on the first vessel,” they told her.

*The family name Methlej (مثلج) can be transliterated in many different ways. Hashem spelled it “Mthlej” on diplomas and social media. We used “Methlej” as it is among the most widely used.*

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### Chronicles of the Crisis

#### Migration & Displacement

**By Yara El Murr**

Edited by Annia Ciezadlo

Published on 13 February 2023

### Intercepted at Sea

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**Part 1:** Intercepted at Sea: The Deadly Reality of Border Control

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**This is Part 2 of a three-part series examining the human cost of border enforcement.**

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*On April 23, 2022, a little before sunset, siblings Hashem and Alaa Methlej boarded “the death boat” together (see Part 1). Minutes before they reached international waters, the Lebanese military intercepted the boat. It sank, killing half the 81 people on board. Hashem's family are adamant that he survived. But ever since that night, Hashem Methlej has been missing.*

Where is Hashem?

Abdel Rahman al-Rmeihi, Alaa and Hashem’s maternal uncle, found out about the tragedy when he got a call from a Lebanese Red Cross volunteer. They had Alaa and Louay al-Dandashi, the volunteer said, and asked al-Rmeihi which hospital he wanted the Red Cross to transport them to. “When I got to the hospital, Alaa was crying and breaking down,” al-Rmeihi said.

When the Methlej family and their friends heard about the boat wreck, and learned that survivors were arriving back to the shore, they rushed to the port looking for Hashem and Alaa. From that moment on, their lives became a hellish cycle of sifting through contradictory information, weirdly detailed rumors, and mysterious sightings of Hashem by both strangers and close friends.

When Mos’ab Methlej arrived at the port, he saw some of the survivors who had just made it back to the shore. More than one person assured him that they had seen Hashem alive. One even told him: “He made it out.” (*The Public Source* was unable to independently verify this claim, as Mos’ab didn’t know the survivors he spoke to that night.)

A neighbor and distant relative of the Methlejs swears that he saw Hashem in the port after the accident. “He was wrapped

in a blanket and was taken in the Red Cross vehicle,” he told *The Public Source*. When asked if he was positive the person he saw was Hashem, he replied: “Of course it was Hashem. I’ve known that boy for a long time.”

**Hashem’s parents, his uncle, and his cousin all saw his name on the list. They were relieved: Hashem had made it out. But where was he?**

After the port, Hashem’s parents and friends rushed to the different hospitals where the Red Cross was taking survivors. When Umm Hashem got to the hospital, she was in such a panic that she pushed Alaa and shouted: “How could you make it out without your brother?”

Compounding the family’s confusion was the unofficial list of survivors, with “H. Methlej” on it, that families were circulating on WhatsApp. Hashem’s parents, his uncle, and his cousin all saw his name on the list. They were relieved: Hashem had made it out. But where was he? (*The Public Source* attempted to trace the WhatsApp list; as far as we could tell, it seems to have originated with the news website Lebanon24 in the confusion of that night. Reporters at Lebanon24 were unable to confirm the source of the list.)

**“Hashem is with the state ... He is good. He was in the governmental hospital, and they took him out the back door. Don’t say I told you anything.” —WhatsApp voice note**

Later that night, Abu Hashem posted a picture of Hashem on his Facebook account and asked people to contact him if they

had seen Hashem. A stranger forwarded him a voice note from someone who claimed to be a nurse at the governmental hospital in Qobbeh. “Hashem is with the state,” the voice said. “He is good. He was in the governmental hospital, and they took him out the back door. Don’t say I told you anything.”

### Departure States

In recent years, Lebanon’s government has refused to respond to numerous crises, such as the 2020 explosion of ammonium nitrate at the Beirut port that killed at least 263 people and left vast swaths of the city in ruins. But there is one area of crisis management where the government excels: the Lebanese military and its Western partners are growing more and more aggressive — and successful — in their efforts to prevent people from leaving Lebanon.



**Between 2021 and 2022, the number of migrants fleeing Lebanon by sea almost tripled.**

Ever since the 2019 financial collapse, more and more people living in Lebanon have become desperate enough to risk the dangerous journey by sea. Between 2021 and 2022, the number of migrants fleeing Lebanon by sea almost tripled, from 1,570 to 4,629, according to data from UNHCR.

As people grow more and more desperate to leave, the Lebanese government and its international donors are working harder and harder to prevent them. Since 2012, the European Union has funded a €19 million project to beef up Lebanon’s border management in order to "fight against terrorism and serious cross-border crimes" and manage “any additional influx of refugees.” In 2020, as more people fled Lebanon’s crisis, the Cypriot and Lebanese governments

signed an agreement to intercept migrants and refugees fleeing by boat and return them to Lebanese authorities. o

**As people in Lebanon grow more and more desperate to leave, Lebanon's government and its international donors are working harder and harder to prevent them.**

Lebanon's government has so far refused to publicly disclose the agreement's implementation protocols. But both countries have already returned people to Lebanon on many occasions — including many who had successfully reached Cyprus and attempted to claim asylum. “We know that Lebanon and Cyprus have updated this agreement to basically help each other out in terms of not having individuals exercise their right to leave and claim asylum elsewhere,” said Nadia Hardman, a researcher on refugee and migrant rights.

The secret agreement also led to an increase in the number of unlawful pushbacks from Cyprus to Lebanon. A “pushback” is the act of pushing refugees or migrants back across a border, usually just after they crossed it, and before they can exercise their legal right to seek asylum. Pushbacks violate the 1951 Geneva Convention and Protocol on the Status of Refugees, as well as human rights law and customary international law. They also systematically violate international prohibitions on collective expulsion, pointed out Emilie McDonnell, UK advocacy and communications coordinator at Human Rights Watch.

Nonetheless, pushbacks are common practice in EU countries: last year, a Guardian analysis found that illegal pushbacks by EU member states had killed at least 2,000

migrants since the beginning of the pandemic, when the number of pushbacks increased dramatically.

### **The secret agreement also led to an increase in the number of unlawful pushbacks from Cyprus to Lebanon.**

As pushbacks between Lebanon and Cyprus increased in the wake of the bilateral agreement, people trying to leave Lebanon by boat increasingly tried to circumvent them. Many of them did this by attempting the longer and far more dangerous route to Italy — the same journey that Hashem and Alaa were trying to make in April. A consortium of Lebanese and European human rights groups estimates that at least 182 people died trying to leave Lebanon in 2022 alone.

But pushbacks aren't the only way to keep migrants from reaching Europe. In recent years, countries in the global north have increasingly begun outsourcing migration control to so-called "departure states" like Moldova, Mexico, Libya, and Lebanon. Instead of carrying out pushbacks themselves, higher-income countries are now relying more and more on so-called "mobility partnerships" with "third countries" politely referred to as "countries of transit or origin" for migrants.

In these bilateral agreements, high-income countries promise to give their lower-income partner states funding, training and equipment for border control. Depending on the country, they might also dangle development assistance, trade agreements or temporary labor migration. For upper-middle-income countries, like Turkey, the EU will lavish billions of Euros for migration control; for majority-white countries like Moldova, they might even offer visa waivers. Countries that don't cooperate, said McDonnell, might be

threatened with cuts to development aid. The agreement between Lebanon and Cyprus is part of this larger trend.

**In recent years, countries in the global north have increasingly begun outsourcing migration control to so-called “departure states” like Moldova, Mexico, Libya, and Lebanon.**


In exchange, departure states agree to prevent migrants from leaving in the first place. Often this “departure prevention” can take the form of pullbacks: when a country forcibly prevents people — including, sometimes, its own citizens — from leaving. Often carried out just inside or outside the departure country’s borders, pullbacks violate fundamental human rights. “What we see is systematic violations of the right to leave, and the right to seek asylum, of individuals who are trying to flee,” said McDonnell.



Approx. 2130 23 April 2022

The Australian Relief Report shows an image of the migrant boat during the boat chase around 9:30 p.m.

It's not clear what Lebanon is getting in exchange for preventing migrants from leaving. But in July 2021, as Lebanon's people faced an unprecedented crisis in food and fuel, the government announced that it was negotiating a [\\$488 million loan](#) from France in order to purchase four 65-meter offshore patrol vessels. And in February 2022, U.S. Coast Guard ships visited Beirut's naval base in order to train Lebanon's navy for three 25-meter [Protector-class coastal patrol boats](#) that the US pledged to donate.



**As Lebanon's people faced an unprecedented crisis in food and fuel, the government announced that it was negotiating a \$488 million loan from France to purchase four 65-meter offshore patrol vessels.**

Pullbacks can be [just as deadly](#) as pushbacks. But because higher-income countries have outsourced migration control to lower-income countries, these destination countries can wash their hands of responsibility for migrants who are killed [outside the reach](#) of their own jurisdiction. As a result, pullbacks tend to get less media coverage and legal scrutiny than pushbacks. "In the context of Lebanon, these kinds of pullbacks have not been subjected to enough investigation and analysis," Hardman told *The Public Source*. "They take place in areas which are not well patrolled by human rights documenters."

The April boat tragedy could be considered a pullback, said McDonnell, if the Lebanese navy engaged in dangerous maneuvers — like destabilizing the migrant boat, or ramming into it, as survivors say — and if the migrants were returned to an unsafe place on land, where they faced detention and



human rights abuses. Despite the lack of scrutiny, Hardman pointed out, the Lebanese state still has the duty to investigate the wreck and the events of that night in a transparent manner.

**Three months after the April boat tragedy that killed 41 people, Dinnawi boasted that Lebanon's navy "showed unparalleled productivity in the process of border control."**

But instead of giving Lebanon's border enforcement critical oversight, government and security officials speak of it as a great success. Three months after the April boat tragedy that killed 41 people, Dinnawi boasted to a defense industry website that Lebanon's navy "showed unparalleled productivity in the process of border control, through the results achieved that began to appear from 2019 to date."

This kind of congratulatory language is not unusual. "What we see with cases of pullbacks is governments sometimes dressing up interceptions of boats at sea as saving lives," said McDonnell. "But in reality, what they're doing, and the maneuvers they're doing, are endangering life. And they're often accompanied with lots of other human rights violations."

Lebanon's partner states also speak of its border control as a glowing success. In December 2022, eight months after the sinking of vessel J-1580, the EU's Integrated Border Management program held a celebration at the Mövenpick in Beirut to mark 10 years of cooperation on migration control.

The EU's border cooperation with Lebanon "not only embodies our core values and security objective in supporting our host-country," said the the Head of

Cooperation at the EU Delegation, Alessandra Viezzer, “but it also serves to make Lebanese feel safe and secure, knowing that we have a solid presence in this country and we care.”

*The Public Source* reached out to Viezzer for comment on the April boat tragedy via email. “On the below, kindly note that before the completion of the investigation into the tragedy, we will refrain from commenting on the matter,” responded a press officer at the EU delegation.

### **Who Saw Hashem?**

After the message from the anonymous nurse, claiming that Hashem had been spirited out of the hospital and into detention, Hashem’s uncle, al-Rmeihi, went to the hospital and asked to see the security footage from the night of the accident. They showed him footage from the hallways and the entrance to the ER. But he couldn’t tell if Hashem had been brought in or not. *The Public Source* called the governmental hospital on at least five occasions, using different listed numbers, but they never responded.

The day after the shipwreck, the army announced that it had rescued 48 survivors. The army also announced that it had arrested one citizen, with the initials R.M.A., on suspicion of people smuggling. Later estimates would revise the number of survivors downward to 40. Nothing more was heard of the mysterious arrestee. These and other small but strange inconsistencies are enough to give the Methlej family hope: Could Hashem still be alive, perhaps in detention for some reason?



**Small but strange inconsistencies are enough to give the Methlej family hope: could Hashem still be alive,**

## **perhaps in detention for some reason?**

About three months after the tragedy, Tripolitan lawyer Mohamad Sabloun and a group of colleagues asked the United Nations to look into the April boat chase and collision. On September 21st, United Nations rapporteurs on migration, torture, detention, and other human rights issues wrote to the Lebanese government to bring attention to “the absence of effective and independent investigations to identify deceased or disappeared persons and to clarify the causes and circumstances of their death following the shipwreck off the coast of Tripoli on 23 April 2022.”


The UN rapporteurs also pointed out that the lack of will to investigate the deaths falls in a larger context of “endemic impunity for ship accidents involving displaced persons, including migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.”

On November 9, the Ministry of Social Affairs responded. The Ministry’s response listed the number of survivors and dead or missing people from the April boat collision by their nationalities: 26 Lebanese, 12 Syrians and 2 Palestinians survived, a total of 40; 25 Lebanese, 11 Syrians and 5 Palestinians died or disappeared, a total of 41. According to the Ministry’s response, the Lebanese Red Cross presented the numbers to the Ministry of Social Affairs, Tripoli Municipality, UNHCR, IOM, and UNICEF. o

If the Ministry of Social Affairs is aware of the nationalities of the dead and the survivors, it presumably knows their identities. But the Ministry has so far refused to release any list of names that would tell families who was drowned and who was saved. “As to the circumstances of the sinking and the investigations aimed at identifying the deceased or missing persons,” wrote the Ministry, “these are matters that

do not fall within the purview of the functions and responsibilities of the Ministry of Social Affairs.”

The Lebanese Red Cross was unable to comment on the identities of survivors and referred *The Public Source* to the Lebanese Armed Forces, who have not responded to date. (*The Public Source* filed a request to release the list of survivors to the Directorate of Orientation, the military prosecutor’s office, and the Civil Defense. None of them responded to the request.) But *The Public Source* spoke with several LRC employees off the record. One of the LRC employees told *The Public Source* that Hashem’s name is not in their databases.



**Any phone call or message is enough  
to rekindle a wild, desperate hope in  
the Methlej family: could this be  
news of Hashem?**

Because Lebanon’s government has so far refused to release any official list of survivors, any phone call or message is enough to rekindle a wild, desperate hope in the Methlej family: could this be news of Hashem?

A few months after the tragedy, a neighbor told Abu Hashem and al-Rmeihi that he had news about Hashem. The neighbor had an acquaintance who had been arrested by General Security. After the acquaintance was released, he told Abu Hashem’s neighbor that he had seen and spoken to Hashem in Tripoli's Palace of Justice.

According to Abu Hashem and al-Rmeihi, the neighbor’s acquaintance described Hashem’s phone and tattoo — details only his family would recognize. The acquaintance said that Hashem told him: “Tell my parents that I am detained in the army intelligence’s remand prison as an undocumented

person. They don't believe that I am Hashem and they are not allowing me to call my parents to bring my documents." The acquaintance told Abu Hashem's neighbor that he would record his testimony and send it to Hashem's family.

**But like all the other sightings of Hashem, the mysterious stranger dissolved into mist.**

But like all the other sightings of Hashem, the mysterious stranger dissolved into mist. According to Abu Hashem, he sent them a voice note saying: "I am traveling and I don't want to get into trouble with General Security. I didn't see anyone or speak with anyone." They never heard from him again.

It's common for families of missing people to receive these kinds of contradictory accounts about the fate of their loved ones, said Carmen Hassoun Abou Jaoudé, a member of the National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared in Lebanon. (Disclosure: this reporter also works with Abou Jaoudé on a project with Act for the Disappeared, a non-governmental human rights organization that works on disappearances from the Lebanese Civil War.)

Abou Jaoudé spent decades working with the families of the missing from the Lebanese Civil War. Over the years, she saw many cases of unresolved sightings of missing people, especially those who had disappeared into Syrian detention centers. A former detainee would approach a missing person's family and tell them he saw their loved one — even though the government had announced the person's death.


Once again, al-Rmeihi tried to follow up on the new lead: after hearing the former detainee's story, he went to the General Security office in Tripoli. They told him they didn't

have Hashem. But al-Rmeihi and Abu Hashem still suspect that the army intelligence could be detaining Hashem.

### Survived and Arrested

Hashem's family's theory of detention is not entirely far-fetched: the Lebanese Army's Intelligence Branch did arrest and detain at least one survivor from the April boat tragedy.

On Sunday, April 24, the day after the boat tragedy, Ibrahim al-Jondi heard that he was wanted by army intelligence. In order to avoid further trouble, he turned himself in at Tripoli's port branch. His mother Bari'a went with him.



**The Lebanese Army's Intelligence Branch did arrest and detain at least one survivor from the April boat tragedy.**

At the port, army intelligence officers told Bari'a that they would be interrogating her son for a short while. Hours passed as she waited inside the port. Friends joined her to keep her company. At around 2 a.m., she went home. The next morning, she went back to the port to ask about her son. She told *The Public Source* the officers told her that al-Jondi was no longer there.

Al-Jondi said that officers first took him to an army intelligence office in Qobbeh before transferring him to the Ministry of Defense in Yarzeh, Baabda. A major offered to call his mother to inform her that they were moving him. But al-Jondi didn't have his phone on him, and he was so shaken by the trauma of the previous night that he couldn't remember her number. The major assured him that the interrogation would only last a couple of hours, and then he could go home.



**The move to frame one of the migrants as a people smuggler is not unusual.**

The officers interrogating him at the Ministry of Defense treated him well, al-Jondi told *The Public Source*. They even offered him cigarettes. They asked him to tell them everything that happened, from the moment the boat left the shore to the moment he was rescued. He and his mother believe they were trying to frame him as one of the smugglers who organized the trip.

The move to frame one of the migrants as a people smuggler is not unusual. In 2021, Alarm Phone and ARCI Porco Rosso, two European human rights watchdogs, analyzed hundreds of cases in which authorities across the Mediterranean detained people on false charges of being human traffickers. They found that in many cases, the so-called smugglers were migrants who had been pressed into steering, especially if they happened to have some previous knowledge of sailing. Some of them had actually saved the lives of their fellow migrants by taking the helm in emergencies. As a boat mechanic, al-Jondi was an easy target.



Bari'a Safwan looks over Tripoli's sea port from her balcony in Mina. Tripoli, Lebanon. October 28, 2022. (Marwan Tahtah/The Public Source)

While al-Jondi was in detention, a few days after the boat sinking, the Directorate of Orientation of the Army Command **announced** that the government's investigation of the wreck would fall under the army's Intelligence Directorate. The investigation would take place in a military court, a court system under the jurisdiction of the Minister of National Defense. The Lebanese military, in other words, would be investigating itself.

Internationally, legal experts increasingly agree that military courts should not have jurisdiction over members of the military who are accused of human rights violations or crimes against civilians. In 2018, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) **found** that the Lebanese Code of Military Justice and its system are inconsistent with international standards.



*The Public Source* filed an access to information request to the army's Directorate of Orientation, asking for the results of the investigation. The Directorate of Orientation responded that it had no jurisdiction over the investigation, and pointed to the military prosecutor's office. *The Public Source* filed the request to the military prosecutor's office. As of press time, we have received no response.

After the wreck, Lana, a self-described "social democratic" party organized meetings with survivors and families of the victims in Tripoli. A group of lawyers from the party volunteered to represent survivors and families. Other lawyers soon joined, and formed a committee within Tripoli's lawyers' syndicate.

**Today, almost nine months later, Abu Hashem is tormented by maybes.**

Bari'a Safwan heard through a friend about Diala Chehade, one of the volunteer lawyers. She reached out to Chehade and told her about al-Jondi's arrest a few days earlier. After the lawyers filed a forced disappearance complaint to the military prosecution, army intelligence informed Chehade of al-Jondi's whereabouts. In the end, the Ministry of Defense did not release al-Jondi until April 30, a week after the boat sinking.

Abu Hashem believes his own son might have been detained too, just as al-Jondi was. Today, almost nine months later, he is tormented by maybes. Maybe Hashem had an altercation with soldiers. Maybe Hashem filmed the whole accident, and they killed him and threw him in the water. Maybe they detained him, hoping they could blame him for the accident, and they are holding him, alive, to this day.

“Maybe they want to accuse him of terrorism to justify what they did,” he said. “We know how they treat the people of the north. If they are guilty, they accuse us of terrorism to hush everything.”

**“We know how they treat the people of the north. If they are guilty, they accuse us of terrorism to hush everything.” —Abu Hashem, father of missing migrant**

Deep down, he feels his son is alive. In another interview with *The Public Source*, two weeks later, Abu Hashem repeated his theory that the military could be framing Hashem of terrorism to justify the boat chase. “You didn’t stop when we asked, so we had to ram into you,” he imagined the army saying to the survivors and families. “We didn’t mean to kill you.”

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Yara El Murr is a contributing journalist at *The Public Source*.

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# Intercepted at Sea: The Drowned, the Saved & the Missing

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Chronicles of the Crisis

**Migration & Displacement**

**By Yara El Murr**

Edited by Annia Ciezadlo

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**Intercepted at Sea**

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**Part 1:** Intercepted at Sea: The Deadly Reality of Border Control

**Part 2:** Intercepted at Sea: Anatomy of a Pullback

**Part 3:** Intercepted at Sea: The Drowned, the Saved & the Missing

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**This is Part 3 of a three-part series examining the human cost of border enforcement.**

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*On April 23, 2022, a little before sunset, siblings Hashem and Alaa Methlej boarded “the death boat” together. Minutes before they reached international waters, the Lebanese military intercepted the boat. It sank, killing half the 81 people on board. Hashem’s family are adamant that he survived. After a series of mysterious messages, they suspect army intelligence may have detained him.*

### **A Pinch on the Ear**

In mid-November, Abu Hashem got a call from the army intelligence in Tripoli. Without offering any reason, they demanded to see him the next morning at 7 a.m. Hoping to hear news of his son, he headed alone to what he thought would be a friendly meeting. He told *The Public Source* his harrowing account of what happened next.

When he showed up, the officers kept him waiting for hours with no explanation. “No one asked me any question,” he said. “They put me in a room, closed the door, and locked it from the outside.”

Around noon — after five hours — he knocked on the door and asked why he was being kept. “We don’t know,” an officer responded. “You’ll know soon.”

Shortly after, an officer let him out and asked about the belongings he was carrying. “Why do you want to take my belongings?” he asked. “Am I a suspect?”

When they saw that he only had his wallet, a pack of cigarettes, and a lighter, they asked him why he didn't bring his cell phone to the meeting. He had nothing to hide, he responded, but kept private family photos on his phone. They

responded, mockingly: “Are we going to eat your family if we look through your phone?”

An officer told him to put his hands behind his back and to stand facing the wall. “Why are they treating me this way?” he thought to himself, surprised. Then they took his fingerprints, and photographed him from the front and both sides, like a suspect.

Around 1 or 2 p.m., they finally led him into a major’s office. The major welcomed him and asked him if he had filed a forced disappearance claim.

In fact, he had. On August 30, Abu Hashem had filed a claim with the same group of lawyers who had filed for al-Jondi’s release [see [Part Two](#)]. In the claim, Abu Hashem and the lawyers accused the Lebanese military of forcibly disappearing his son Hashem. o

The major told Abu Hashem he was going to the Ministry of Defense in Baabda. They handcuffed him and put him in the back of a Renault Rapid, a transport van, into something that looked like the cage they use for police dogs. When he asked if they were charging him with a crime, an intelligence officer told him this treatment was “routine.”

**Are we going to eat your family if we look through your phone?” army officers told Abu Hashem, mockingly.**

Abu Hashem arrived at the Ministry of Defense around 3 p.m. An interrogator asked him about the complaint he filed, the evidence he was relying on, and the people who brought him news of his son. Abu Hashem told the whole story, insisting that he believed his son had been detained.

“Prove me wrong,” he told the interrogator. “It’s impossible for me to live eight months not knowing if my son is alive or dead.”

“You're right,” the officer interrogating him replied. The officer then asked him if he wanted a lawyer. Since it was late in the evening, and he was eager to go home as soon as possible, Abu Hashem declined. He answered all of their questions. Most of what they asked about was why he believed his son was alive and detained: Who called him? What exactly did they say?

**Abu Hashem interpreted the interrogation as “farket adin,” a warning. “It was like someone telling you ‘Welcome’ and pinching you at the same time.”**

Around 9 p.m., an army driver picked up Abu Hashem from the ministry in Baabda. They dropped him off on the main highway, in an unfamiliar neighborhood that he had no idea how to navigate. He walked around, disoriented, for about an hour until he finally found a bus to Tripoli. He got home at about 10:40 p.m., more than 15 hours after he left. His family and friends were frantic after not hearing from him all day.

Abu Hashem interpreted the interrogation as “farket adin,” a warning (literally, an ear pinch). “It was like someone telling you ‘Welcome’ and pinching you at the same time,” he said.

The next day he went to Mohamad Sablough, the lawyer from the Tripoli group, and told him what happened. “The man came back to me broken,” said Sablough, pointing out that arresting a complainant is both a crime and an infringement on the freedom of his client. “It was heartbreaking.”

## A History of Obfuscation

On June 6, the group of lawyers filed a complaint on behalf of Bari'a Safwan, Ibrahim al-Jondi, and other survivors from their family accusing at least 13 members of the Lebanese Army's Naval Forces of homicide with probable intent and involuntary manslaughter. The lawyers filed the complaint to the cassation court, a civilian court. The public prosecutor then transferred the complaint to the military court. o

On June 16, the lawyers officially requested Lebanon's caretaker minister of justice, Henry Khoury, to transfer the investigation into the boat collision and all of the civilian complaints to the judicial council, a committee of judges that looks into crimes that threaten state security.

The lawyers want the case to be heard in a court where civilian complaints have a better chance of being heard. They also point out that the Lebanese military should not be in charge of the investigation into its own navy. "In our opinion, the military court — whose investigations we cannot see yet — is not serious," Diala Chehade, one of the lawyers on the case, told *The Public Source* in October. "Because six or seven months have passed since the crime, and there are still no results."

When they first met, Chehade thought Abu Hashem was in shock from the loss of his son. But after hearing the multiple accounts of people seeing Hashem, she and the team decided to take his case.

**"Prove me wrong," Abu Hashem told the interrogator. "It's impossible for me to live eight months not knowing if my son is alive or dead."**

The forced disappearance complaint on behalf of Abu Hashem, said Sablough, is not an accusation as much as it is asking for answers, given the contradictory information about Hashem. “We filed the complaint because there are question marks,” Sablough told *The Public Source*. “Has he really been disappeared by the security forces?”

The military and the state security forces both deny detaining Hashem. Sablough called the army about Hashem’s whereabouts and checked in person at General Security. Both responded they did not have Hashem in custody. General Security even looked up his name in their system.



Jihad Methlej has been looking for his son Hashem since April 23, 2022 when the migrant boat he was on sank off the coast of Qalamoun, Tripoli. Jihad believes his son survived the accident and is being held in detention. The inconclusive answers that he is receiving is keeping him and his family on edge, causing continuous suffering and uncertainty. Tripoli, Lebanon. October 28, 2022. (Marwan Tahtah/*The Public Source*)

[Listen to Abu Hashem's message to the army](#)




It's unusual for detainees to disappear completely. In previous cases of detentions without legal notice, said Chehade, the relevant judge would usually respond within a day to forced disappearance claims. That's what happened in al-Jondi's case. And even when the lawyer or the family don't know where the person is being held, they usually at least know that the person has been arrested.

In Hashem's case, his father doesn't even know if Hashem was arrested in the first place. "There's obfuscation," she said. "It's scary."

In November 2022, the lawyers obtained documents from the Ministry of Social Affairs revealing the nationality of all those who drowned or survived in the collision. If the government knows the victims' nationalities, it clearly knows their names. But the ministry has so far refused to reveal who lived and who died.

The Methlej family recognizes that there's a chance Hashem might not have survived. But given the accounts of seeing him alive after the wreck, and the absence of evidence to the contrary, they have to keep looking for him. The government's refusal to publicly share information is adding to Abu Hashem's suspicions that security forces might be holding Hashem.



**If the government knows the victims' nationalities, it clearly knows their names. But the ministry has so far refused to reveal who lived and who died.**

Abu Hashem's distrust is well founded, considering the long history of impunity and lack of transparency in Lebanon.

After the Lebanese Civil War, the state set up three committees to look into unsolved disappearances. None of them gave the families of the disappeared any meaningful answers. “The fate of thousands of missing people was not clarified,” said Carmen Hassoun Abou Jaoudé, who is a member of the National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared in Lebanon, the fourth and most recent attempt to investigate disappearances. “This is in the collective memory of people.”

Even when the authorities do release information, said Abou Jaoudé, people often don’t believe it. “Generally people don't trust the political leadership or the state institutions, in terms of protection or giving them the truth about what happened,” she said.

Today, nine months after the sinking of the “death boat,” the tormented father still maintains that his son is alive and in custody. He told *The Public Source* that he would be willing to withdraw his legal complaint if the authorities would let him see Hashem. “They can keep him if they want to, but give us information about him,” he said. “It is our right.”

### **Missing Bodies**

“I’ve always loved the sea,” Bari’a Safwan muses as she looks onto Tripoli’s seaport from her balcony one October morning. “Now I love it even more because it has my daughters.”

Safwan’s daughters, Ghania and Salam al-Jondi, 26 and 31, are among those who drowned. For a week after the accident, she would walk along the seaside, hoping for her daughters to return — or waiting for their bodies to be found, or wishing for even just a piece of their clothing to float back to the shore.

Because Safwan’s sons and daughters are Lebanese on their mother’s side, and their father was Syrian, they do not have

the right to citizenship. They have to apply for residency permits every year to live in their own country. To add insult to injury, this year the government issued the sisters' residency permits after the boat collision killed them.

**"The fate of thousands of missing people was not clarified. This is in the collective memory of people." — Carmen Hassoun Abou Jaoudé, a member of the National Commission for the Missing and Forcibly Disappeared in Lebanon**

“When I say they’re dead, I feel *ghassa*<sup>1</sup>,” said Safwan in October, shivering as she spoke. “I say they’re missing.” She smoked one cigarette after the other, often rubbing her eyes to stop herself from crying.

The families of a missing person always need proof and evidence when their loved ones are declared dead, said Abou Jaoudé, who spent decades working with the families of the missing from the Lebanese Civil War. “This is why we talk about ambiguous loss, because they don't know if they are dead or alive,” she said. “The ambiguity and the waiting and waiting is torture.”

### **Salvage the Bones**

Four months after the shipwreck, a submarine mission rekindled the Methlej family’s hopes. In the last week of August, a Lebanese-Australian immigrant named Tom Zreika hired a submarine through his charity, AusRelief Sons of Lebanon. Working closely with Lebanese authorities, Zreika announced that his team would descend to the sea floor to locate the death boat — and hopefully find some answers for the grieving families.


According to a report published by AusRelief, the mission's goals included documenting the death boat itself and the victims' bodies, bringing them back to the surface if possible, and reporting the findings to the families and authorities. But the team evacuated from Lebanon before completing its mission, citing "security concerns" and "anonymous threats," and left the families with more frustration than relief. o



**Four months after the shipwreck, a submarine mission rekindled the Methlej family's hopes.**

To make matters worse, the navy told Zreika and international media outlets that the bereaved families themselves were behind the threats to the crew. Zreika also blamed the migrant boat for the collision, telling Al Jazeera that the two boats had collided, but "it wasn't the bigger boat causing the damage."

According to the report, the team tried to recover the body of one of the victims, but it disintegrated as they lifted it in the water. "By the time the submarine was lifted onto the barge, all that was left was the clothing of the deceased," AusRelief stated. The charity did not clarify how, exactly, the team had attempted to lift the body, or why it fell apart, or if any attempt was made to identify the victim through the clothes. It's also unclear what happened to the bones, which do not spontaneously disintegrate; if they were scattered, that would make it more difficult for the victim's family to gather, identify, and eventually honor and bury their loved one.



**For a week after the accident, Safwan would walk along the seaside, hoping**


**for her daughters to return — or waiting for their bodies to be found, or wishing for even just a piece of their clothing to float back to the shore.**

On February 6, 2023, Anahon, a Tripolitan media outlet that is working with Sablough, published [a recorded call](#) that raises serious questions about the truthfulness of AusRelief’s report. In the call, two members of the submarine’s local crew — one who gave his name, and another who remained anonymous — discuss their dissatisfaction with the mission. The anonymous voice says that the team was instructed to put back the bodies they had tried to retrieve during the mission. “It means they were intact,” the voice says. “They didn’t disintegrate.” *The Public Source* reached out to AusRelief for comment on the criticisms of its mission; as of press time, we have not heard back.



Ghania and Salam Al Jondi’s matching purple beds have been empty for nine months. On Ghania’s side of the room, a “LOVE” wall sticker is starting to peel off; on her bed is tied an army scarf holding up a plastic red rose. The sisters both drowned on April 23, 2022 when their

According to [AusRelief's report](#), the team took high-quality photo and video of the wreck and some of the drowned for an unnamed U.S.-based production company that is making a film. But the army only shared low-quality images with the families and lawyers, raising their suspicions. The report also stated that AusRelief left the remaining bodies “as-is” on the ocean floor, after consulting with Lebanese authorities, Army General and Tripolitan member of parliament Ashraf Rifi’s office, the Red Cross/Red Crescent, and “Sharia advisers.”



**The charity did not clarify how, exactly, the team had attempted to lift the body, or why it fell apart, or if any attempt was made to identify the victim through the clothes.**

Bringing back the bodies would have been especially important for the Methlej family. If the submarine had retrieved the bodies, and the families could use DNA testing to identify their loved ones, at least they could know for sure whether Hashem had drowned or not, Abu Hashem told *The Public Source*. They are still holding out hope, even if the thought of Hashem’s death has crossed their minds.

“God forbid,” Umm Hashem said. “But if I could bury him peacefully next to his grandmother and cry on his grave, I would choose that over this torment.”

### “A Body Without Its Soul”

These days, the Methlej family is always on edge. The parents and their daughters are easily irritable. “No one has the patience to deal with the other anymore,” said Abu Hashem.

Both parents told *The Public Source*, on separate occasions: “Without Hashem, we are a body without a soul.”

Rahaf, the 10-year-old and youngest sister, was very attached to Hashem. Every day, she stands on the balcony staring out and crying. When Abu Hashem asks her what's wrong, she says: “Someone who looks like Hashem passed by.” When the doorbell rings, she runs to open the door. When he asks her why, she replies: “It sounded like the way Hashem rings the door.”

Rahaf’s principal called Abu Hashem to warn him that she was irritable and losing interest in her education. They are trying to support her by being patient and encouraging her to participate in school activities. But they cannot afford to take her to a psychiatrist.




**They are still holding out hope, even if the thought of Hashem’s death has crossed their minds.**

In the last few months of 2022, Abu Hashem sold off half of their furniture to be able to afford rent in their small apartment in the Baqqar neighborhood of Qobbeh. He was a day laborer; his latest odd job, which he started at the beginning of the year, was working as a security guard. He makes L.L. 600,000 per week at most and needs to provide for himself, his wife, his son Hashem, his 10-year-old daughter Rahaf, his recently-divorced daughter Mariam, and her baby.

“The days I work, we eat,” said Abu Hashem. “The days I don’t, we sleep like everyone else: without food.”

In the last week of November, Abu Hashem’s employer apologetically informed him that he might be let go soon

because of his absent-mindedness and irritability at work, Abu Hashem told *The Public Source*. He suspects his sudden disappearance the day he was arrested was the final blow. He told his employer what happened the next day at work. But he thinks his employer might fear that this would be a recurring issue, and that the legal complaint might lead to court dates and more investigations.



**“The days I work, we eat,” said Abu Hashem. “The days I don’t, we sleep like everyone else: without food.”**

To add to the family’s precarity, their rundown apartment building sustained structural damage during the 7.8-magnitude earthquake that hit Turkey and Syria on February 6, 2023. Cracks started to show and rocks fell off the facade and ceiling. “God forbid we lose our home, and end up thrown out in the streets,” he told *The Public Source*. “This is what we’re afraid of.”





Several families who were on the migrant boat that left on April 23, 2022 live in Qobbeh, including the Methlejs. Tripoli, Lebanon. August 2022. (Marwan Tahtah/The Public Source)

But Abu Hashem didn't want people to think he was using his son's cause to beg for aid. Hashem's absence weighs heavier than any other difficulty. "What is tormenting me," he said, "is much more important than the question of money."

"When you lose someone to death, you might forget with time," he said. "But if you are hoping for his return..." He trailed off and never finished the sentence.

**"If I could bury him peacefully next to his grandmother and cry on his grave, I would choose that over this torment." — Umm Hashem**

Lately, Abu Hashem has been suffering from hypertension and diabetes. He discovered this when the boat wreck

occurred, when he fainted and had to be taken to the hospital. The doctors told him that stress and trauma could make his conditions worse.

“I hope that the diseases I have developed don’t kill me before I see Hashem and make sure my little girl is taken care of,” he said. “Give me my son's news and take my whole life.”

In a recent interview, Umm Hashem said she believes that Hashem is still alive. “A mother knows,” she said, with confidence.



**That night, she saw Hashem in her dream. “I swear to God, mama, I am alive,” he told her.**

An hour earlier, she had burst into tears. “I wish for death rather than being deprived of Hashoume any longer,” she had said, choking. But now she had recovered, and was peeling potatoes to make dinner for Hashem’s cousins and friends, who had come to his home to talk to *The Public Source*.

One night, before going to bed, Umm Hashem did salat al-istikhara, the prayer for guidance, an invocation Muslims use before sleeping to ask God to help them resolve a particularly difficult question or dilemma.

That night, she saw Hashem in her dream. It felt real. “I swear to God, mama, I am alive,” he told her. She hugged him and kissed him.

“When I cry, I cry because I miss him,” she said, calmly, “because I'm not used to him being far from me.”

*The Public Source* asked Abu Hashem what he would tell his son if he could reach him. After a long pause and a deep sigh,

he said: “Baba, we are waiting for you. We will keep waiting for you.”

He stopped and fought back tears. “No matter how much time passes, we will do everything possible to bring you back safe,” he said. “Don’t you think we forgot you.”


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**Yara El Murr** is a contributing journalist at *The Public Source*.

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<sup>1</sup> ghasa: A sharp pain in the throat that makes it difficult to swallow



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## Do you know what happened to Hashem?

Bring comfort to his family by sharing information with us, securely and anonymously here.

وين هاشم؟ ساعدنا نطمئن بال أهلو وشاركنا أي معلومة عندك ياها من دون الإفصاح عن هويتك.