



## The “Hoax” That Wasn’t: The July 23 Qana Ambulance Attack

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## Introduction

During the Israel-Hezbollah war, Israel was accused by Human Rights Watch and numerous local and international media outlets of attacking two Lebanese Red Cross ambulances in Qana on July 23, 2006. Following these accusations, some websites claimed that the attack on the ambulances “never happened” and was a Hezbollah-orchestrated “hoax,” a charge picked up by conservative commentators such as Oliver North. These claims attracted renewed attention when the Australian foreign minister stated that “it is beyond serious dispute that this episode has all the makings of a hoax.”

In response, Human Rights Watch researchers carried out a more in-depth investigation of the Qana ambulance attacks. Our investigation involved detailed interviews with four of the six ambulance staff and the three wounded people in the ambulance, on-site visits to the Tibnine and Tyre Red Cross offices from which the ambulances originated to review their records and meet with supervisors, an examination of the ambulances that were struck, an on-site visit to the Qana site where the attack took place, and interviews with others such as international officials with the International Committee of the Red Cross who were involved in responding to the attack on the night it happened.

On the basis of this investigation, we conclude that the attack on the ambulances was not a hoax: Israeli forces attacked two Lebanese Red Cross ambulances that night in Qana, almost certainly with missiles fired from an Israeli drone flying overhead. The physical and testimonial evidence collected by Human Rights Watch disproves the allegations of a “hoax,” made by persons who never visited Lebanon and had no opportunity to assess the evidence first-hand. Those claiming a hoax relied on faulty conjectures based on a limited number of photographs of one of the ambulances.

## **Claims of a Hoax**

On July 23, 2006, at approximately 11:15 p.m., in the midst of the Israel-Hezbollah war, Israeli drones struck two clearly marked Red Cross ambulances, numbered 782 and 777, in the village of Qana. The ambulances had spotlights on top of their vehicles identifying their Red Cross flags and flashing blue strobe lights. The ambulance crews had just transferred three wounded Lebanese civilians from one family – Ahmad Fawaz, 41, his mother, Jamila, 80, and Muhammad, his son, 13 – from ambulance 782 to ambulance 777 when the missiles struck. The first attack hit ambulance 777, and a second attack struck ambulance 782 a few minutes later, injuring all six of the Red Cross crew; their three patients suffered additional injuries. Ahmad Fawaz lost his leg in the ambulance strike, while his mother was partially paralyzed, and remains bedridden because of nerve damage to her leg. His son received multiple shrapnel wounds to the head. Most media accounts featured pictures of ambulance 782 with its Red Cross roof emblem penetrated by a missile.

Shortly thereafter, on August 3, Human Rights Watch issued its first report on the war, “Fatal Strikes,” including an account of the attack on ambulances in Qana. The report noted that international humanitarian law prohibits attacks on personnel or objects involved in humanitarian assistance.



Ahmad Fawaz, who lost his right leg in an Israeli strike on the Qana ambulances.  
© 2006 Nadim Houry/Human Rights Watch.



Jamila Fawaz, 80, sustained injuries to her leg as a result of an Israeli strike on the Qana ambulances, and has been bedridden since. © 2006 Nadim Houry/Human Rights Watch

However, some commentators claimed that the ambulance attack was nothing more than a Hezbollah-orchestrated hoax. Zombietime, a website based in California, asserted that the attack “never happened.” Oliver North, a former US official of the Reagan administration and now a conservative commentator, claimed that a

Hezbollah “disinformation” campaign had misled Human Rights Watch and the “mainstream news” about the true nature of the attack on the ambulances. Writing in the *Washington Times* on September 3, 2006, North argued that:

The 33-day Israeli military operation against Hezbollah in Lebanon is rife with examples of how disinformation has become “mainstream news.” One of the most egregious examples was the claim, widely circulated in the Western media, that IDF [Israel Defense Forces] aircraft intentionally targeted a Red Cross convoy of clearly marked ambulances in Qana on July 23. *Though photographs clearly show no such attack occurred*, both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch used published accounts of the attack as evidence of Israeli “war crimes.” Bloggers – like Powerline and Zombietime – who reported this incident as disinformation were dismissed as “right-wing extremists.” (emphasis added)<sup>1</sup>

North’s claims challenged the credibility of one of the most widely reported attacks during the Israel-Hezbollah war. Major media outlets such as the BBC and Independent Television News in Britain, and the US cable station MSNBC, as well as newspapers, weeklies, and wires, including the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Associated Press*, and *Time Magazine*, had carried the story of Israel’s attack on the Qana ambulances. North’s allegations, and the websites cited by him, also challenged the credibility of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Lebanese Red Cross, charging that they had been involved in an “anti-Israel hoax.” Their claims gained further credibility when Australia’s foreign minister publicly claimed that “it is beyond serious dispute that this episode has all the makings of a hoax.”<sup>2</sup>

Staunch defenders of IDF and Israeli policy like Dr. Avi Bell of Bar-Ilan University quickly joined in, using the hoax claims to question other reports of Israeli abuses during the war: “If one looks at the photographs of the ambulances in question, it is quite clear that they were never struck by any missiles and that such damage as they

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver North, “Masters of Manipulation,” *Washington Times*, September 3, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Misha Schubert, “Downer Attacks Lebanon Coverage,” *The Age* (Australia), September 1, 2006.

suffered occurred long before the war....How many others of Human Rights Watch's claims are hoaxes may never be known.”

The hoax theorists based their conclusions on the analysis of Zombietime, whose authors never visited Lebanon, but reached their conclusion by reviewing photographs and stories about the attack in the media. Specifically, they purported to refute the media accounts of the ambulance attack with the following claims:

- It was not an Israeli missile that pierced the Red Cross emblem on the roof of the ambulance. Instead, Hezbollah propagandists removed a pre-existing circular air vent in the roof of the ambulance to make it appear that a missile pierced the ambulance.
- The attack could not have happened on July 23, as reported, because photographs taken about a week after the incident show the presence of rust on the roof of the ambulance where shrapnel had scraped the paint away. Such rust would not develop so quickly “in dry climates such as Lebanon in the summer.”
- Reports of a “huge explosion” inside the ambulance are false, because the damage to the ambulances should have been worse. The windshield of the ambulance is caved inward (whereas a large explosion inside the ambulance would have projected the windshield outward), and the metal frame of the ambulance is pretty much intact, showing much less damage, comparatively, than vehicles targeted by Israel in Gaza. Reports of “an intense fire” inside the ambulance are also false, as the equipment inside the ambulance was not burned.
- A missile could not have sheared off the leg of the man inside the ambulance because the gurney inside the pictured ambulance is undamaged and there is no blood on its floor. Also, media accounts are inconsistent, with some claiming he lost his left leg, others his right, and still others both his legs. While two ambulances were hit, they are confident that they are analyzing pictures of the correct ambulance – numbered 782 – because that is the one reported to have been transporting the wounded man.

- Reports that the attack injured all six ambulance crew are false: one ambulance driver (Qasim Cha`lan), pictured with a bandaged ear and chin right after the attack, appeared without bandages and visible wounds a week later.
- The ambulance drivers were “apparently sympathetic to Hezbollah and could have staged the incident.” Citing a Lebanese Red Cross worker who was not present during the Qana ambulance attack who said, “whether they are civilian, a resistance fighter or an Israeli soldier, our policy is to help any human who needs help,” the bloggers argue that the use of the term “resistance fighter” rather than “Hezbollah militant” shows a political bias in favor of Hezbollah and hence a proclivity to staging a hoax.

## **The Hoax that wasn't: Human Rights Watch's in-depth investigation**

Human Rights Watch returned to Qana to re-examine its initial findings on the ambulance attack in light of the “hoax” claims.

Human Rights Watch is always willing to correct its findings upon discovering new and inconsistent evidence. For example, soon after its initial report of the attack on a civilian home in Qana on July 31, Human Rights Watch revised its death toll downward, based on a revised count of bodies brought to the Tyre public hospital's morgue.

To establish exactly what happened to the Qana ambulances on the night of July 23, Human Rights Watch on September 13 visited the Tibnine Red Cross office (the origin of ambulance 782) and on September 15 visited the Tyre Red Cross office (the origin of the second ambulance, number 777). The wounded were first transported by ambulance 782 and then transferred to ambulance 777; the vehicles met in Qana, the half-way point between Tibnine and Tyre, so that the second ambulance could take the wounded to Tyre hospital.

Between September 13 and 16, Human Rights Watch researchers conducted detailed, separate interviews with four of the six ambulance workers, as well as with all three of the wounded persons in the ambulance. While the ambulance staff and the wounded were aware that their claims had been challenged as a “hoax,” they were not aware of the specific claims of falsehoods made against them. Human Rights Watch researchers



also conducted a detailed examination of both ambulances that were reported hit. On September 14, Human Rights Watch researchers visited the scene of the alleged attack and found physical evidence there corroborating the accounts of the eyewitnesses. Human Rights Watch has also met with representatives of the ICRC to discuss their role in the incident.



Ambulances 782 (in the rear) and 777 (in the foreground) in the parking lot of the Lebanese Red Cross in Tyre.  
© 2006 Peter Bouckaert/Human Rights Watch

This second on-the-ground investigation of the July 23 ambulance attack in Qana, which relied on a review of physical evidence and eyewitness accounts, has confirmed and reinforced Human Rights Watch’s view that the initial account of an Israeli attack on the ambulances was accurate. The attack documented by Human Rights Watch and reported by the international media was no “hoax.”

### **Anatomy of an Attack**

The following is Human Rights Watch’s reconstruction of the incident based on the forensic and testimonial evidence researchers have collected and verified:

During the day of July 23, multiple attacks by Israeli Apache Helicopters and drones hit civilian vehicles on the roads of southern Lebanon. Among the attacks that day was one that hit the German-Lebanese Srour family fleeing from Mansouri, killing two and wounding four; an attack that hit the car of the Abad family, also fleeing Mansouri, that wounded nine; an attack near a taxi on the outskirts of Qana that killed a young Lebanese photographer, Loyal Najib; and an attack that hit a van carrying the Shaita family near Kafra that killed three and wounded 14.<sup>3</sup> Lebanese Red Cross ambulances were busy trying to make their way through the heavily bombed roads of southern Lebanon to evacuate the wounded.

At about 9:30 pm, Israeli forces fired artillery shells near the Tibnine home of Ahmad Fawaz, 41, a car mechanic. The family hid inside their hallway, but a shell exploded just outside the house, spraying shrapnel inside. The attack injured five members of the Fawaz family: Ahmad Fawaz received shrapnel wounds to his hip and arm; his son Muhammad, 13, received shrapnel in the toe of his left foot and in his stomach area; Ali, Muhammad's twin brother, had slight shrapnel wounds to his leg; Ahmad's wife Fatima had shrapnel wounds to her leg and left shoulder; Ahmed's mother Jamila, 80, had a nerve in her leg cut by shrapnel, and also had cuts on her body from glass shattered by the explosion.<sup>4</sup>

After the attack, Ahmad Fawaz put his family in his car – a clear indication both his legs were still functioning at the time – and drove them to the local gendarmerie (*serail*) building, where he arrived at about 10 pm. The civil defense officials based at the gendarmerie building first took the wounded to the Tibnine hospital, where they received first aid, but decided to move them to the better-equipped Tyre hospital for further treatment, since the Tibnine hospital had no pain killers available. The records of the Tibnine Red Cross office, located adjacent to the hospital, document the intake of the wounded members of the Fawaz family, as well as the nature of their injuries. Most important, the records confirm that Ahmad Fawaz had no major injuries to his legs.

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<sup>3</sup> See Human Rights Watch, *Fatal Strikes*, pp. 39-41; Anthony Shadid, "Terror Rains Down From Sky on Fleeing Lebanese: Several Refugees Killed by Missile-Firing Israeli Helicopters," *Washington Post*, July 24, 2006; Megan K. Stack, "'Unbelievable' Losses, Terror as Civilians Flee Missiles," *Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 2006; Tim Butcher, "Any Moving Car Becomes A Target, as Israelis Turn the Screw, Tactics Get Tougher," *Daily Telegraph*, July 24, 2006; Thanassis Cambanis, "For Fleeing Lebanese Families, Road to Safety Exact Heavy Toll," *Boston Globe*, July 24, 2006; Raed El Rafei, "'Good Samaritan' Survives Attack After Rescuing Wounded: 8 Passengers Barely Escape Burning Vehicle," *Daily Star* (Lebanon), July 25, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ahmad Fawaz, Beirut, September 16, 2006.

Husain Ayyad, 27, an eight-year veteran of the Lebanese Red Cross, and Husain Farhat, 21, a five-year veteran, recalled in separate interviews with Human Rights Watch that the local gendarmerie had contacted their office to alert them to wounded civilians; they immediately put their Tibnine ambulance, number 782, on standby.<sup>5</sup> Ambulance 782 was staffed by Ayyad, who drove the ambulance, Farhat, and Muhammad Burji. Shortly after 10:30 p.m., the Tibnine Hospital asked the Red Cross to prepare to transfer the three most seriously wounded – Ahmad Fawaz, his son Muhammad, and his mother Jamila – to Tyre. The Tibnine ambulance crew strapped Jamila into a wheelchair directly behind the driver’s cabin, and then put Ahmad and Muhammad on the two stretchers in the back of their ambulance.

The Lebanese Red Cross officials in Tibnine made contact with their counterparts in Tyre; they decided to dispatch a second ambulance, number 777, from Tyre to meet ambulance 782 mid-way in Qana to take the wounded so that the Tibnine ambulance could return to its base. The Tyre ambulance was staffed by Qasim Cha`lan, as driver, Muhammad Hasan and Nadir Juda.

The ambulance crews interviewed by Human Rights Watch reported that both ambulances were clearly marked and identifiable as ambulances from a great distance. Painted white, they had large red crosses painted on their sides and roof. They each had a large Red Cross flag attached to the roof, illuminated by a spotlight mounted on the roof. The ambulances also had a piercing, flashing blue light designed to be visible at a great distance, even at night. The ambulance personnel confirmed that they had left their lights and sirens on during the entire operation, as standard procedure.

On the way to Qana, the Tibnine ambulance crew spotted Israeli warplanes flying overhead. They saw an Israeli warplane fire a missile just ahead of them, near the village of Haris, causing a huge explosion. Husain Ayyad, the driver, called the Tibnine Red Cross office to report what had happened and to ask for instructions, and was told to proceed cautiously.<sup>6</sup> The Tibnine operations room decided to hold off

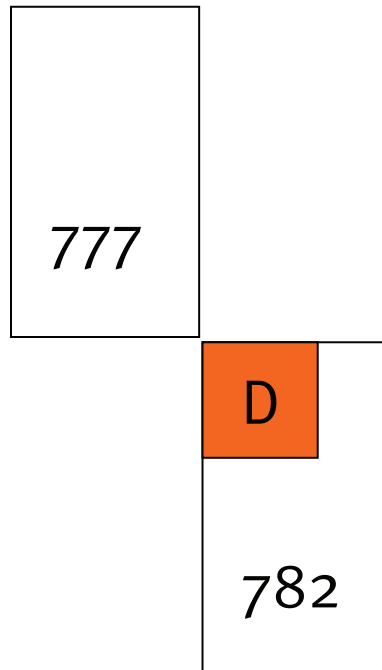
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<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Husain Farhat, Tibnine, September 13, 2006; Human Rights Watch interview with Husain Ayyad, Tibnine, September 13, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Husain Ayyad, Tibnine, September 13, 2006.

on sending a second ambulance with the other wounded family members because of the precarious security situation.

The two ambulances arrived in Qana around the same time and parked close to each other in the central square, adjacent to the large open public memorial. They chose the site because it was an open area, where they would be clearly visible from the air. Both ambulances left all their lights on during the transfer operation. They parked facing the same direction, with ambulance 777 just in front of ambulance 782 (so the rear door of ambulance 777 was just next to the driver's window of ambulance 782 on its right).



D notes the location of the driver seat in the ambulance.

The ambulance crews quickly transferred the three wounded from ambulance 782 to ambulance 777. All three of the Tibnine ambulance 782 crew and two of the Tyre ambulance 777 crew reentered their respective ambulances; Qasim Cha`lan of ambulance 777 remained outside, talking to Husain Ayyad of ambulance 782, to get information about the wounded. As Cha`lan was closing the back door of ambulance

777, a missile most likely fired from an Israeli drone (not from an Israeli airplane or helicopter, as earlier reported) struck the rear of the roof of ambulance 777, which was now holding the wounded, in the same positions as in the Tibnine ambulance (Jamila in the chair behind the driver, Ahmad and Muhammad on the stretchers in the back).

Human Rights Watch originally reported that the ambulances had been struck by missiles fired from an Israeli airplane, but that conclusion was incorrect. In its follow-up investigation, Human Rights Watch considered all of the possible sources for the missiles that hit the ambulances, including Israeli air plane fire, Israeli helicopter fire, Israeli drone fire, or Israeli artillery fire, as well as the possibility that the ambulances had been hit by a Hezbollah-fired Katyusha rocket or artillery.

A missile from an Israeli airplane can be ruled out, as such missiles would have caused much more massive destruction and have left a huge crater. The precision with which the vehicles were struck from the air, the limited damage caused, and the non-existence of heavy shrapnel, also rule out an artillery-fired round from Israel or Hezbollah, as well as an errant Katyusha rocket fired by Hezbollah. It is nearly impossible that two artillery rounds or two Katyusha rockets would have hit the ambulances with such accuracy, and they would have caused much more pronounced damage and left behind shrapnel as evidence.

The limited damage and the high precision of the strikes on the ambulances suggest that the weapon was a smaller type of missile fired from an Israeli drone or helicopter. Israel is in possession of an arsenal of highly precise missiles that can be fired from either helicopters or drones and are designed to limit the damage to their targets. The Israeli-designed and manufactured SPIKE anti-armor missile system<sup>7</sup> and the still experimental DIME (dense inert metal explosive) missile<sup>8</sup> are examples of smaller missiles designed to cause smaller explosions and limit collateral damage. Such missiles cause less powerful explosions than the previous generation of US-manufactured TOW and Hellfire missiles (often used by the IDF in assassination attempts against Palestinian militants in Gaza and the West Bank), which would have destroyed the ambulances completely. While the smaller missiles can be fired from either drones or helicopters, none of the witnesses

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of SPIKE missiles, see <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/israel/spike.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of DIME missiles, see <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/munitions/dime.htm>

reported hearing helicopters in the air before or during the attack, so it is most likely the missiles were fired from an Israeli drone.

Human Rights Watch cannot conclusively state which missiles were used in the attack on the ambulances, because our researchers did not find diagnostic shrapnel or missile parts at the scene, and because of the experimental nature of some missiles used by the IDF. The DIME is a weapon with a casing designed to disintegrate in an effort to minimize collateral damage from its fragmentation. Regardless of the weapon used, the IDF certainly has the capability to attack vehicles with limited impact missiles designed to cause low collateral damage.

The accuracy, limited lethality, and limited structural damage caused by drone-fired missiles are consistent with other similar incidents documented by Human Rights Watch involving Israeli drone-fired missiles. For example, an Israeli drone also attacked a white van carrying 17 members of the Shaita family traveling near Kafra on July 23, hitting the van in the middle of its roof and causing a limited explosion that killed three persons and wounded 14, but did not destroy the vehicle. Human Rights Watch also observed similar limited damage caused by the July 18 missile strikes on a convoy of the United Arab Emirates' Red Crescent Society transporting medicines, vegetable oil, and food supplies, as well as a subsequent attack on a convoy of fuel smugglers hit in the Bekaa Valley on July 19.

It is clear that the limited damage to the ambulances was not caused by a malfunction of the missile but rather by a weapon designed to cause limited damage. The conclusion that the ambulances were hit by a smaller missile fired from an Israeli drone also addresses some of the “hoax” claims, such as the statement by Australia’s foreign minister that his skepticism came from the fact that “the ambulance would have been pulverized if it had been hit by a missile.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, many of the Lebanese vehicles hit by drone-fired missiles during the 2006 conflict were not “pulverized,” sustaining only limited damage.

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<sup>9</sup> Misha Schubert, “Downer Attacks Lebanon Coverage,” *The Age* (Australia), September 1, 2006.



The interior of the van carrying the Shaita family, which was struck by an Israeli missile on July 23, killing three persons. Like the Qana ambulance, the van was struck in the middle of the roof (by two missiles), but the missiles caused only limited destruction inside the van. © 2006 Peter Bouckaert/Human Rights Watch

The missile traveled from the roof of ambulance 777 through the gurney on which Ahmed Fawaz was strapped, severing his leg, and then through the floor of the ambulance deep into the pavement of the road. This first explosion also blew out the windscreen of Tibnine ambulance 782, and sprayed the three Tibnine ambulance crew and the Tyre ambulance crew with shrapnel. Because all of the ambulance crews were wearing flak jackets and helmets, they were spared serious injuries, but one of the Tyre ambulance crew, Muhammad Hasan, was hit with so much shrapnel to his helmet that he momentarily lost consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Muhammad Hasan, Tyre, September 15, 2006; Human Rights Watch interview with Husain Farhat, Tibnine, September 13, 2006.



The roof of ambulance 777, showing the entry and exit points of the missile. The location of the exit point of the missile corresponds with the missile impact location on the gurney mattress on which Ahmed Fawaz was located (see picture below). © 2006 Peter Bouckaert/Human Rights Watch



All of the ambulance workers managed to run away from their vehicles and sought shelter in a nearby building. Minutes later, Ayyad, the driver of ambulance 782, returned to his ambulance to try to use its radio to contact his office when a second Israeli drone missile hit the ambulance right through the middle of the Red Cross emblem on the roof. As Ayyad again ran away from the ambulance, he saw the young patient, Muhammad, make his way out of ambulance 777 and lose consciousness. He carried Muhammad back to the building. Muhammad had received additional shrapnel wounds to his chest and head from the first attack on the ambulance. The crew members were unable to retrieve Ahmed Fawaz and his mother Jamila from the first ambulance hit, and believed them to have been killed.

The ambulance crews stayed in the basement of the building for one hour and 40 minutes. They used cell-phones to contact their offices, but had to leave their basement shelter to obtain a signal. In the basement, they administered first aid to each other, using the first aid supplies that they carried in their pockets, dressing shrapnel wounds and trying to stem their bleeding ears and noses. Representatives of the ICRC confirmed to Human Rights Watch that the Lebanese Red Cross had contacted them that night, and they in turn contacted Israeli officials to inform them of the incident and seek safe passage for a second ambulance convoy to retrieve the wounded patients and the ambulance crews. At 1:15 a.m., an ambulance crew from Tyre finally managed to reach Qana and evacuate the wounded patients and ambulance crews.



The Qana basement in which the wounded ambulance crews and Muhammad Fawaz took shelter. The floor of the basement was still littered with discarded first aid equipment when visited by Human Rights Watch on September 14. © 2006 Peter Bouckaert/Human Rights Watch

As the ambulance workers would soon discover, both Ahmad Fawaz and his mother Jamila had actually survived the attack. Ahmad Fawaz recalled to Human Rights Watch that he was knocked unconscious by the first attack, but soon awoke to realize he had lost his leg:

“When I woke up, there were still explosions, but farther away from us.... I extended my hand to my leg, and realized I had lost my leg. It was my right leg. I did not feel anything. I also received shrapnel to my left leg, and it was broken. My left knee cap was also affected.... I stayed in the ambulance for one and a half hours.... During that time, I would wake up and black out. I got cold, so I covered myself and blacked out until I saw the light of the ambulance coming. Then, they did not come to me, as they must have thought I was dead. I raised my arms three times before they saw me. They then came and got me.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Ahmad Fawaz, Beirut, September 16, 2006.

After the second attack, Jamila managed to crawl out of ambulance 777 to the entrance gate of a nearby building, where she sought shelter. She sustained serious shrapnel wounds, and was losing a lot of blood. When the second ambulance crew arrived, Ahmad told them that his mother was alive and had crawled out of the ambulance.<sup>12</sup>

The new ambulances from Tyre took all of the wounded to Jabal Amal hospital in Tyre, before sending them to other hospitals. Muhammad, the most seriously injured, remained in intensive care for five days. Although the ambulance crews' flak jackets and helmets protected them from major injuries, all suffered significant damage to their ear drums, including bleeding from their ears, due to the impact of the explosion, and from minor shrapnel wounds.

Human Rights Watch found significant physical evidence to support the version of events provided by the ambulance drivers, their patients, and their supervisors, and found no inconsistencies in their accounts. The intake logs of the Tibnine hospital and the dispatch logs of the Tyre and Tibnine Red Cross offices accurately reflect the injuries sustained by the victims and the timeline of events.

In Qana, Human Rights Watch researchers visited the scene of the incident. There, they located two small impact craters from drone-fired missiles on the pavement, located exactly where the eyewitnesses reported the ambulances to have been parked and hit. Nearby, in a basement shelter, Human Rights Watch researchers found discarded latex gloves, bandages, and other first aid equipment, consistent with the account provided by the witnesses.

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<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Watch interview with Jamila Fawaz, Beirut, September 16, 2006; Human Rights Watch interview with Ahmad Fawaz, Beirut, September 16, 2006.



The location of the two missile impact craters outside the Qana memorial (visible in the background). The location of the missile impact craters corresponds with testimony from witnesses on the location of the two ambulances, with ambulance 777 parked in front and to the left of ambulance 782. © 2006 Peter Bouckaert/Human Rights Watch



A close-up picture of the missile impact crater below where ambulance 777 was reportedly parked. The missile round penetrated deeply into the pavement. © 2006 Peter Bouckaert/Human Rights Watch

Human Rights Watch examined the struck ambulances, which were stored at the Red Cross parking lot in Tyre, and found that the damage to the vehicles also supports the accounts of the eyewitnesses. Both ambulances clearly show missile entry points on the roof, with ambulance 782 struck directly through the Red Cross emblem and ambulance 777 towards the rear of its roof, and smaller missile exit points on the floor of the ambulances. Human Rights Watch found the rooftop air vent of ambulance 782, which showed that it had itself been penetrated by a missile; the circular vent was about 30 cm in diameter, and was located at the center of a much larger red cross that covered the entire roof of the ambulance. Human Rights Watch located the gurney on which Ahmad was lying when the missile struck and severed his leg, which clearly shows the impact of a missile.



A Lebanese Red Cross worker holds the destroyed air vent, penetrated by an Israeli drone missile, next to the hole in the roof of ambulance 782. © 2006 Peter Bouckaert/Human Rights Watch



A close-up of the destroyed air vent of ambulance 782. © 2006 Peter Bouckaert/Human Rights Watch

### **Refuting ‘Evidence’ of the ‘Hoax’**

The physical evidence at the site of the attack, the eyewitness testimonies, and Red Cross and hospital records reviewed by Human Rights Watch refute each of the claims offered to support the hoax theory.

The claim that Israel did not hit ambulance 782 through the center of its roof’s Red Cross emblem, but that someone had instead removed the ambulance’s air vent to make it look that way, is false. Human Rights Watch recovered the air vent, which showed it to have been penetrated by a missile, most likely a smaller missile fired from an Israeli drone. Human Rights Watch also located the exit point of a missile on the floor of the ambulance, and the penetration point of a missile on the pavement where the ambulance was parked. The concurrence of these three markings indicates that a single missile caused the damage to the ambulance and pavement. Removing an air vent could not have created a hole in the floor of the ambulance or a crater beneath the ambulance.

The claim that the damage to the ambulances must have occurred long before July 23 because of the appearance of rust on the ambulance in photographs taken a week after the attack is baseless. Coastal Lebanon is not a “dry climate...in the summer,” as alleged, but is extremely humid – as anyone present in Lebanon during the war can recount. The saline humidity of Lebanon’s coast causes rapid rusting, especially on damaged metals such as shrapnel-torn roofs.

The claims that there was no “huge explosion” or “intense fire” are partly correct, but irrelevant. Israel has continuously advanced its drone-fired missiles, such as the STRIKE missile and the still-experimental DIME missile, so that they are capable of limited damage to their targets. Many of the drone attacks on civilian vehicles documented by Human Rights Watch, such as the attack on the Shaita family van on July 23, caused limited damage to the targeted vehicle; the drones are even capable of limiting fatalities to the immediate area of the strike. Such drone-fired missiles do not cause the massive damage that more powerful Israeli missiles, such as US-supplied TOW missiles fired from Apache helicopters, have caused, particularly when used in assassination attempts in Gaza. These more powerful missiles do destroy the entire vehicle and cause much more powerful explosions. However, even the smaller drones still cause an explosive blast and a flash of light. In Qana, the drone explosions did throw some of the ambulance workers to the ground, and damaged the ear drums of nearly all of the victims. While the newspaper accounts of the explosions may have overstated the size of the explosion, they accurately reflected the explosions as experienced by the witnesses.

The issue of the inward blown windshield on ambulance 782 is explained by the fact that ambulance 777 was struck first, and was parked adjacent to ambulance 782. The windshield of ambulance 782 was blown inwards from that first explosion.

The “evidence” of an undamaged gurney and lack of blood inside the ambulance “proving” that Ahmad Fawaz could not have lost his leg during a missile attack while he was inside the ambulance was based on photographs of the wrong ambulance. The hoax theorists looked at photographs of ambulance 782 to make this argument, but Fawaz lost his leg in ambulance 777, where he had been transferred before the first missile hit it. The missile impact is clearly visible on the gurney of that ambulance, as is the exit point of the missile below the gurney.



The gurney mattress on which Ahmad Fawaz was lying when the Israeli missile struck, severing his leg. The gurney mattress clearly shows the impact of the missile. © 2006 Peter Bouckaert/Human Rights Watch

The claim that the ambulance crew faked their injuries because they were seen a week later without bandages misconstrues the nature of the injuries of the ambulance crew. While the gravest injuries the crew suffered were to their ear drums, they also sustained minor shrapnel injuries to the face, as verified by hospital records. Qasim Cha`lan, the ambulance driver pictured, suffered the most severe bleeding from his ears because he was standing right next to ambulance 777 when it was struck. The bandages were used to stem this internal bleeding (and a minor cut on his chin). The ear drum injuries were internal, and the minor cut of Cha`lan's chin could have healed within a week. There are no indications that Cha`lan or any of the other wounded attempted to exaggerate their injuries to the media.

The claim that Lebanese ambulance drivers are politically biased, and hence prone to engage in an anti-Israeli hoax, is spurious and irrelevant, particularly in the face of the overwhelming physical evidence. The Lebanese Red Cross is a professional organization, working in close cooperation with the ICRC. There have been no credible allegations that the Lebanese Red Cross violated professional ethics by taking any kind of active role in the conflict or fabricating information about Israeli attacks. Most of the Red Cross workers



involved in the Qana ambulance attack had been working for the organization for close to a decade, and there is no evidence to support claims that they misrepresented or faked the events of that day. The notion that the reference by a Lebanese Red Cross worker who was not present during the Qana ambulance attack to Hezbollah as “resistance fighters” is evidence of their bias, as alleged by the hoax theorists, reflects ignorance of the local parlance. Hezbollah’s military wing is known in Arabic as the “Islamic Resistance;” people in Lebanon commonly refer to them as “the resistance,” whether or not they support Hezbollah. The professional ethics of the Red Cross movement require their personnel to treat any wounded person, regardless of political affiliation or combatant status.

In conclusion, there was no “hoax.” All of the available evidence shows that the Israeli attack which hit the Qana ambulances took place as reported. Many of the earlier reports on the incident have minor inconsistencies that should be corrected. For example, Human Rights Watch’s report originally said that Israeli warplanes had carried out the attack, while further investigation established that the missiles most likely were fired by Israeli drones. Sloppy and sometimes exaggerated reporting in the news media contributed to some of the confusion. For example, while most reports correctly stated that Ahmad Fawaz lost his right leg, at least one claimed he lost his left leg and Yahoo’s Kevin Site’s “In the Hot Zone” reported that he lost both his legs. None of these minor errors, however, justifies Zombietime’s armchair conjectures of an elaborate Hezbollah hoax. The basic truth remains, however desperately some commentators have tried to deny it: an Israeli attack hit two clearly marked ambulances on the night of July 23. The Zombietime website itself acknowledged that, “if true,” the attack constitutes “an egregious and indefensible violation of the Geneva Convention[s].”

Human Rights Watch trusts that, now that the truth has been demonstrated, these armchair deniers will devote their energy to pressing Israel to determine why this attack occurred, who was responsible, whether disciplinary or punitive measures are in order, and what steps can be taken to ensure that similar attacks are not repeated in the future. It would also be appropriate to press for compensation to the victims as well.