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# Lebanese Christians shocked over Shia politics but this could be just the beginning

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is a Lebanese writer.



“The Shia camp is not only responsible for upsetting the delicate balance of power in Lebanon but is behind upsetting the religious balance.”

The old row in Lebanon between the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and the Amal Movement recently spilt into the streets. Both parties are allies of Hezbollah and members of the March 8 alliance it leads since 2005 following the exit of Syrian troops from Lebanon. Recent clashes between supporters of both parties reveal dissonance between yesterday's allies.

The so-called Mar Mikhael agreement of February 2006 between FPM founder Michel Aoun, now Lebanon's president, and Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah was, in essence, based on a political trade-off: Hezbollah would help Aoun get to the presidency and the FPM would go along with Hezbollah's local and regional strategic choices and let it keep its militia.

The Amal-FPM standoff was triggered by derogatory remarks made by FPM leader – and Aoun's son-in-law – Foreign Affairs Minister Gebran Bassil, about Amal and its chairman, Nabih Berri, speaker of the Lebanese parliament and Hezbollah's ally.

It has become clear that the relationship between both Shia parties is part and parcel of a well-established and solid system of mutual interests while the relationship be-

tween Hezbollah and the FPM is far from being part of that system and remains susceptible to collapse.

Hezbollah has clearly sided with Berri without necessarily abandoning its mediating role. It stated that its relationship with Berri has priority over the rest. The Shia party also failed to condemn the overly exaggerated and intimidating street protests by Berri's supporters, who did not hesitate to take the demonstrations to Christian-majority neighbourhoods.

The crisis has been defused at the level of the street but the shock felt by the Christian side is apparent. In an interview with the French-language publication Magazine, Bassil said internal choices by Hezbollah were detrimental to Lebanon's interests. He must have been trying to say that Hezbollah is not ready or is not willing to choose the side of the state when this choice conflicts with the interests of its allies who are deeply involved in corruption. Bassil was also alluding to Hezbollah's close relation with Berri, whom FPM leaders and supporters see as a hurdle blocking the pro-state choice.

The parliamentary elections in May might be the trigger for a full-blown confrontation. The shock is shared by those who had bet on an alliance with Hezbollah as being the

best way to uphold state authority with a greater role in state affairs for the Christian side. Quite obviously, the Christian shock is not caused by Hezbollah's foreign adventures and its total disregard for the state's authority. Aoun was among the first to approve of Hezbollah's Syrian adventure and Bassil has done his best to provide needed diplomatic cover for this adventure.

This time, the shock in the Christian camp was triggered by the boorish and militia-like behaviour of Berri's supporters, especially when they invaded Christian neighbourhoods. The Christian side has suddenly realised the surprising level of political arrogance of the Shia camp on the local level. The Christian camp likes to believe that the agreement between Hezbollah and the FPM is no longer relevant, especially with the arrival of Saad Hariri on the scene and in light of the predominance of the Iranian influence in Lebanon.

Another lesson from recent events is that Hezbollah has reaped vast political gains since 2006. The party's militia and its weapons are no longer questioned by the state. The party also took advantage of the political cover provided by its alliance with the Christian camp to make inroads inside the state structure and gain more power. With

time, the party has become a de facto powerhouse in Lebanon and can easily afford to lose whatever advantages it reaped from its alliance with the FPM.

The Christian camp is stunned by the sudden realisation that the so-called political Shia camp is not only responsible for upsetting the delicate balance of political power in Lebanon but is behind upsetting the religious balance in the country. For ten years the Christian camp has focused attention and efforts on competing with the Sunni camp. Now, many in the FPM camp are pointing out that the Shia pair – Hezbollah and Amal – are more and more imposing in Lebanese internal politics a policy of “either I or nothing,” in other words “state affairs proceed as we wish or we halt everything.”

Lebanese Christians are beginning to realise that their role in giving victory to the Iranian project over the Saudi project in Lebanon did not bring them security. They have seen concrete manifestations of the aggressive mob mentality of the Shia protesters and the expression of the unbridled arrogance prevailing in the Shia camp. An FPM leader said this uncivilised behaviour is a slap in the face to the Shia themselves and cannot be associated with a parliament speaker.

# Totally unacceptable statistics in the Middle East

**Claude Salhani**  
is a regular columnist for The Arab Weekly.



“I never really understood wars, although I have covered several of them as a photojournalist.”

It is said that truth is the first casualty of war. If so, then children are a close second.

Children find themselves trapped in the crossfire, becoming victims in a conflict they did not choose and becoming even more vulnerable when their parents are killed. At least 83 children were killed in conflict zones in the Middle East and North Africa during January, the UN children's agency said.

They died in fighting in Iraq, Libya, the Palestinian territories, Syria and Yemen, UNICEF said in a statement. Some children were killed during suicide attacks.

Geert Cappelaere, UNICEF's regional director for the Middle East and North Africa, called the deaths “unacceptable” and said they represented a breach of international law.

“These children have paid the highest price for wars that they have absolutely no responsibility for. Their lives have been cut short; their families forever broken in grief,” he said.

All too often children are recruited to fight. During the Iraq-Iran war, in which close to 1 million people died on both sides, the Iranians would dispatch young boys to march ahead of the older fighters, thus clearing minefields. In exchange the boys were promised an eternal place in paradise.

Violent conflicts affect different children in different ways. Besides the obvious physical wounds caused by exchanges of fire and the unfortunate targeting of civilians in what the military calls “collateral damage,” there are the deep psychological scars that may take years to diagnose.



**Blowing the pain away.** A Syrian girl blows bubbles amid the rubble of destroyed buildings in Daraa in southern Syria. (AFP)

UNICEF said 59 children were killed in Syria last month. In Yemen, 16 children died in January with UNICEF receiving reports of casualties on a “daily basis,” Cappelaere said.

A suicide attack killed three children in Benghazi, Libya, where three others died while playing near an unexploded bomb that detonated. Other fatalities included a boy shot near Ramallah in the West Bank and a child killed by a bomb in Mosul, Iraq.

Along with those killed in the conflicts, four children were among 16 Syrian refugees who froze to death after fleeing the

battle in their country.

Conflicts across the Middle East and North Africa have taken a “devastating toll” on children in the region, Cappelaere said.

“Not hundreds, not thousands but millions more children in the Middle East and North Africa region have their childhood stolen, maimed for life, traumatised, arrested and detained, exploited, prevented from going to school and from getting the most essential health services; denied even the basic right to play,” he said.

Once, while on a radio programme in Washington talking

about war in the Middle East, I was asked if there would ever be peace in the Middle East. The host added: “You have 30 seconds to reply before we go to commercial break.” I had half a minute to round up my nearly 30 years of experience covering violent conflicts in the Middle East.

My best effort at a comprehensive reply was as follows: “Yes, I do believe there will be peace in the Middle East someday but for that to happen the antagonists must have greater love for their children than the hate they currently harbour of their enemy.”

I never really understood wars although I have covered several of them as a photojournalist before transitioning into a correspondent and an analyst. After the birth of my first child, I understood the willingness of engaging an enemy in battle even less. I would be willing to do just about anything to prevent my son going to fight in a war. However, what I found to be quite common in the conflicts I covered was the ease with which these children were sent off to do battle.

The Geneva Conventions, which set out the laws of conflict, call for the protection of children during war. All 193 members of the United Nations ratified the conventions. But how many countries respect the conventions?

Those are depressing statistics from the Middle East. Those are unacceptable statistics from the Middle East. The unacceptable truth, as told by statistics from the Middle East, is, as Cappelaere said: “We collectively continue failing to stop the war on children.”

## The Arab Weekly

Published by Al Arab Publishing House

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