



Fueling the fitna

Lebanon's Sunni-Shia divide growing

By Moe Ali Nayel on April 03, 2013

- On a quiet Sunday night last month the fraying coexistence that is Lebanese society suffered another tear. Two scholars from Dar Al Fatwa, Sheikh Mazen Hariri and Sheikh Ahmed Fakhran, were assaulted while walking in the Khandaq Al Ghamiq neighborhood of Beirut, while simultaneously, two other Sheikhs were beaten in the Chiyah area of the city's southern suburbs.

In Lebanon they say bad news arrives faster than good and that it did. Angry protesters blocked roads in the Beirut areas of Tariq Al Jedideh, Qasqas and Corniche Al Mazraa, as well as the entrance to the southern city of Saida and Al Masnaa in the eastern Bekaa. Anger built to such intensity that some Sunni protesters were calling out for jihad.

The two Sheikhs in Khandaq Al Ghamiq were assaulted on Shar'a Al-Harameyeh, or "Street of Thieves". This name has been earned, for close to a decade now a group of zouran, or thugs, have made this alley their haunt. Locals I spoke with after the incident say the gang runs a small-time criminal network there. Many are wanted felons and most have spent time in jail.

People in Khandaq Al Ghamiq generally seemed to disown and despise this street, saying the thugs are not from their society, and that Sunni and Shia coexist peacefully here. Locals I spoke with washed their hands of the "embarrassing incident", as some called it, and insisted that it was organized by outsiders to stir a fitna — meaning discord or chaos — between the Sunni and Shia in Lebanon.

Indeed, the gruesome videos of beheadings and sectarian killings posted to the Internet from the war in Syria and the vitriolic public diatribes of sectarian leaders here in Lebanon have incited much of the tension brimming across the country.

But on that night, just as belligerents on both sides began calling for blood, these same agitating politicians, perhaps shocked by the violent street reaction, scrambled to curb the rush toward sectarian vengeance. In an unprecedented display of professionalism and efficiency, the Lebanese Army had, within 45 minutes, arrested five alleged perpetrators of the attacks, with residents of Khandak Al Ghamiq praising the efforts of the major Shia parties — Haraket Amal and Hezbollah — for assisting the Lebanese army in the arrests. On the other side, in Tariq Al Jedideh, the chants for jihad amongst some Sunni demonstrators were met with calls for calm and self restraint by local politicians and the Mufti.

The sectarian battle also took to social media with two Facebook pages leading the virtual clash. Ashbah Al Daheyeh and Tariq Al Jedideh News Network swapped sectarian insults, threats and vows of revenge online. Luckily, a number of secular Lebanese youth worked through the night, reporting both pages to Facebook administrators until they were taken down, silencing the virtual showdown before it manifested in reality.

But while cooler heads managed to tame the outrage that night, the cumulative toll on Lebanese society is showing. Tariq Al Jedideh, better known these days as a 'Sunni stronghold', has historically also been home to many Shia families and business owners. Khodor Khalefeh, for one, has worked in clothing shops in the neighborhood since he was a boy, learning the craft of commerce here and eventually becoming a small-time trader himself. When I met Khodor, 35, he was packing to relocate his clothing business.

"My trader neighbors are telling me to stay under their protection but I'm tired, things have been unbearable lately," he said. "Zouran have been harassing us; they say they don't want Shia amongst them. They super-glued my business locks four times, they sprayed insulting graffiti on my door, and each time [Sheikh Ahmed] al-Assir incites hate, I lock my business and go home to avoid becoming a victim of his outraged supporters."

While Khodor says he knows these thugs in no way represent the majority of people in Tariq Al Jedideh, the growing hostility has prompted an exodus of Shia families over the past year.

A handful of hoodlums beating up a couple of religious figures should not, in itself, risk the eruption of armed sectarian street battles. That it did is a testament to how much tolerance has thinned to sectarian provocations, whether intended or perceived. As is fashionable these days, one could reasonably assume someone recorded the thugs shaving the beard of one of the two Sheikhs on their camera phone. If, or perhaps when, that video is uploaded to social media, expect another round of sectarian fury.