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## Biting the bullet.

Sunni clerics and politicians share concern following reports that the Lebanese army is failing to maintain its neutrality in the country's sectarian rivalries.



The last few weeks have been a sobering reminder to Sunni clerics and leaders of how quickly sectarian divisions can grow and affect the country's institutions. Amid accusations against the Lebanese army of failing to maintain its neutrality in the country's sectarian rivalries and of fighting alongside Hezbollah's military wing during the clashes in Saida, voices are united in their request for a swift address to the crisis faced by the military and the civilians.

Hundreds of Lebanese rallied in Sidon on Friday in support of fugitive Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir, a day after an **audio** recording believed to be his voice urged followers to demonstrate. The message repeated the cleric's claims that the army had conspired with Hezbollah to attack him. The city of Tripoli also saw demonstrations, but they were subdued when security incidents prompted fears of more sectarian fighting aiming to pit Sunni protestors against the Lebanese Army for a second time.

During the protest near Bilal Bin Rabah Mosque, a number of Assir supporters assaulted journalists, and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) subsequently requested all media reporters to leave. News of the attack made its way to Tripoli's clerics, who had issued a statement earlier during the day requesting their supporters to protest peacefully and to refrain from blocking roads and carrying arms.

The LAF's move raised an alarm among the organizers, especially after eyewitnesses in Tripoli reported seeing snipers posted on rooftops near Nour Square. Following the Friday prayers, Tripoli's Sheikh Salem al-Rafei requested the youth to be wary of armed infiltrators, and he asked that they immediately withdraw from the scene fearing a repeat of the clashes in Saida. In his statement, which was disseminated over social media, al-Rafei said that "earlier this week, as youths protested in Nour Square, armed groups said to be working with the Lebanese army's intelligence were instigating clashes by firing at the army. So, if you see gunmen, ask them to leave, and if they do not respond, I urge you to withdraw."

Sunni Muslim clerics in particular are accusing the Lebanese army of failing to maintain its neutrality amid widespread reports that it had fought alongside Hezbollah's military wing in Saida. Video footage aired last week appeared to show Hezbollah members assisting the army in the fight, in addition to clips of Lebanese Army officials mistreating captured detainees. Human rights groups have joined Sunni religious leaders in their calling for an immediate official investigation into the incidents, especially as reports continue to emerge of Sunnis being tortured in detention, and (in at least one instance) killed while in interrogation.

The Association of Muslim Scholars issued its statement Tuesday – and in collaboration with the human rights foundation LIFE, submitted a letter to the authorities containing legal and human rights claims to be addressed. The director of the Lebanese Institute for Democracy and Human Rights (LIFE) told NOW that the letter requested the end of arbitrary arrests, the release of detainees, the release of the bodies, and the arrest of officials accused of torture. The director also stressed that investigations take place in justice courts and in the presence of judges, as opposed to being carried out by military intelligence.

“It is unacceptable that the party involved in the clashes [i.e. the LAF] be the party investigating, interrogating, and trying those accused,” says lawyer and human rights activist Nabil Halabi. “Investigations continue to take place at the ministry of defense in presence of military intelligence, thus raising questions about the investigation process. He continued, “This was not the process implemented during investigations following the Nahr al Bared clashes and thus should not be the procedure now.”

“To this day, they [the LAF] have not released neither the wounded, nor the bodies, nor have they allowed any contact between the detained and their families,” says Halabi. “They have not taken any legal measures against army officials who are accused of torture either.” Halabi expresses worry that the delay aims to expunge any evidence of torture; or worse, that there will be other security incidents incited to take the attention away from the human rights violations.

Al-Jamaa al-Islamiya's leader in the South of Lebanon, Bassam Hammoud, told NOW that there is mass anger in the Sunni street, and that state authorities and army commanders should be wise and responsible in addressing the community's concerns.

“Many of Saida's residents were harassed and attacked during the investigation process that followed the clashes. Civilians were detained for merely supporting the Syrian revolution, and others were attacked by Hezbollah-affiliated groups [Saraya Moqawama] for being affiliated with Assir and Fadel Shaker. Many of these people's belongings were confiscated and some homes were burnt down. Investigations need to take place as soon as possible so that these civilian reclaim their rights by law and to prevent a major outburst that could well remind us of the Lebanese civil war,” argued Hammoud.

Lebanese politician, Wehbe Katisha, a former general in the Lebanese Army, explains that it is vital that the Lebanese Army conduct its own investigations in order to evaluate the operation and its repercussions for the institution. “At the end of the day,” says Katisha, “the army incurred major losses too; innocent officers and soldiers were killed in the fighting.

“I do believe that the army was lured into the fight, but I also hope that the animosity against it decreases because it remains to be

the sole institution that guarantees the stability of our state.”

“During the civil war, regional factors and internal sectarian divides caused the army to split. Today, as the sectarian rhetoric increases, people do fear a similar scenario. However, political statements (whether international or local) point to a divide among the army that will serve no one’s interest, Hezbollah included. I don’t believe the events will ultimately lead to a divide in the army, but it will leave deep scars... Sunnis will need to bite the bullet.”

There is a without a doubt a need for reform among the Lebanese army and other military institutions, stresses Tripoli’s MP Mosbah Ahdab. “The Lebanese Army,” he says, “has been given orders to protect the Syrian regime over the last forty years and is still doing so by protecting the interests of Hezbollah.”

“There needs to be a political initiative from all political groups, Sunnis among them, to form a government as soon as possible and to bring an end to this current void that Hezbollah has created in order to reaffirm its control over the state and its institutions,” Ahdab added.

“Anyone who believes in the sovereignty of Lebanon should openly support the president because it is the only institution defending legitimacy today.”