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Lebanon's children are not its future

Sectarianism inhibits the rise of a national and unifying meta-narrative



The recent clashes in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli between the Sunni quarter of Bab al-Tabbaneh and the Alawite Jabal Mohsen are often perceived as a spillover from the Syrian crisis. Some even frame the clashes as a result of a deep-rooted, or perhaps, more ostensibly primordial conflict.

These two neighboring communities native to Tripoli have time-and-again violently clashed, which makes this standoff somewhat recurrent, if not unexpected. As early as the mid-1980s, the Sunnis and the Alawites of the city were divided in their support of the Syrian regime. While the Sunnis opted to support the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and its chairman Yasser Arafat, the Lebanese Alawites stuck to their natural ally, Hafez al-Assad. After an all-out assault by the Syrian army and its allies, the PLO and the local Islamist factions (which controlled the city at the time) were defeated and ousted, something which the 1982 Israeli invasion failed to achieve. The outcome was a city in shambles occupied by the Syrians until their expulsion in 2005.

At its core, the animosity between these groups did not extend beyond the political spectrum. Nor was the conflict purely sectarian in nature, as many might suggest. Yet, public rhetoric and a wide-array of social media exchanges leave the mistaken impression that both groups are primordial enemies.

More alarming, however, is the sight of **armed children** and adolescents being paraded by the two factions in a cheap-yet-sly attempt to mobilize their respective communities for war. These child soldiers should not only be perceived as a political maneuver - but rather, as a very important weapon which these communities use to create and solidify collective identities that perpetuate and permit sectarian clashes to linger.

Two such videos that recently appeared on YouTube illustrate how forging these collective identities at a young age can be crucial in creating ethnic and/or religious conflict between different communities.

The **first** video shows a bearded Sunni gunman standing next to a girl about 5 years in age. The man proceeds to give the girl an assault rifle, instructing her to tell the camera what she is going to shoot. The girl responds that she is targeting the mountain (Jabal Mohsen). Interestingly, the gunman did not name the people he asked her to shoot at - but rather, referred to the direction as an inanimate object. Unfortunately, this ritual and the fashion it was conducted in will likely remain engraved in the child's psyche as an acceptable - or perhaps even a common act. The video also sends a clear message to the others (in this case the Alawites), that even our children will take up arms in the ongoing conflict.

Similarly, the Alawite community used the same methods to engender group solidarity in order to shield off attacks from what they perceived to be a fanatical Sunni majority.

The **second** video features an Alawite gunman sitting next to his son, Jaffar, who carries rifles in both hands. Jaffar, just like the girl down the road from him, seemed also amused to be involved in such an activity. In this video, Abu Jaffar (Jaffar's father) tells his audience how he and his three sons are willing to die defending their community against the attacks of the "Salafi swine."

Abu Jaffar concludes his chauvinist speech by affirming that "[His] grandfathers and his ancestors before him fought the Sunnis and he and his offspring will continue in this legacy as well." While this incident can be viewed as an act of indoctrination passing from father to son, the reality runs deeper. Abu Jaffar may also have been the victim of collective identity brainwashing by older members of his clan.

These acts of indoctrination permit the leaderships of both communities to redirect their groups to serve a contemporary political goal, all while dressing it up with imaginary ancient feuds. Interestingly enough, these communities have a lot more in common with each other than their so-called co-religionists elsewhere. Both the Sunni and the Alawite gunmen in the two videos even spoke with an identical Tripoli accent.

Moreover, growing up in this poor and underdeveloped region of Lebanon should bring them more closely together than the sectarian rift which they both claim exists. It is even plausible that the grandfathers of both Jaffar and the little girl could have been friends rather than enemies.

Strangely enough, what applies to the Sunnis and Alawites in Tripoli is also true with the rest of the Lebanese population. Diverse sects and clans continue to actively construct their own exclusionary narrative that inhibits the rise of a national and unifying meta-narrative.

The majority of the Lebanese tend to blame their leaders for the fate of their country. The reality of the matter, however, is that as long as we allow ourselves to spread our sect's or group's collective identity, as well as refrain from immunizing our youth from the ills of sectarianism and violence, Lebanon's children are definitely not its future.