



Inter Press Service News Agency

THE STORY UNDERNEATH

Sunday, August 13, 2006 10:44 GMT

[Latest News](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[Readers' Opinions](#)
[Search](#)
MIDEAST:**Christians Caught in Political Crossfire**

Roxana Saberi

BEIRUT, Aug 8 (IPS) - Many Lebanese Christians say they feel caught in the middle of a war in which they have a lot to lose and little to gain.

Most of the areas Israel has been targeting -- southern and eastern Lebanon and southern Beirut -- are majority Shia Muslim. Israel says it is trying to cut off supply lines to the Shia militant group Hezbollah and to stop its ability to launch rockets into northern Israel.

But the fighting has also displaced many Christians, damaged their livelihoods, and challenged their hopes for stability in a country that saw the end of civil war only 16 years ago.

"Really their situation is very treacherous," Elie Fawaz, a Christian and a political analyst in Beirut told IPS. "They want to live in peace, (but) if you're against war and you don't support the Hezbollah, all of a sudden you're seen as a traitor, and you don't belong to this region, which is totally wrong."

No official census has been taken in Lebanon since 1932, but it is estimated that 60 to 70 percent of Lebanon's almost four million people are Muslim, and most of the rest Christians.

Religious groups have been the main basis of political organisation in Lebanon. The National Pact of 1943 provided for a Maronite Christian president, a Sunni Muslim prime minister, and a Shia Muslim speaker of parliament. It also determined that the ratio of seats in parliament would be six Christians for every five Muslims.

Muslims sought greater power when they later surpassed Christians as the majority population in Lebanon. Tensions erupted in a civil war, which ended with a peace accord that reduced the authority of the Maronite president in favour of the Sunni Muslim prime minister, and gave Muslims and Christians an equal number of seats in parliament.

Some Lebanese Christians, like 32-year-old Michel, say that since then many Lebanese have been trying to put aside their country's past differences to work for a better future together.

"Many of the young people see themselves more as Lebanese than as belonging to a specific religion," he said. "For example, in business, you don't care what religion someone is because you want to do business with everyone, but the current war is challenging these efforts."

Hezbollah's seizure of two Israeli soldiers last month, which prompted the Israeli assault on Lebanon, widened the gap. While criticism of Hezbollah does not break cleanly along religious lines -- some Muslims, both Shia and Sunni, have been critical of the group -- it is felt strongly by Christians like 48-year-old Gilbert.

Gilbert, who did not want to give his last name, fled to Jbail with his wife and three children after Israeli strikes farther south pushed them out of their homes. He was looking for safety in this mostly Christian city north of Beirut. But on Friday Israel bombed a main highway bridge in Jbail and sent debris flying onto his car parked nearby.

"This is a Christian area, and we are supposed to be safe here," Gilbert said. "This should be a secure zone for the people. Why did they do this? You have to tell me why because there are no Hezbollah people here."

But other Christians, like 38-year-old Yusef Yaqub, said Israel's continuing strikes on his country are only strengthening unity in support for Hezbollah's resistance against Israel.

"Naturally we must help one another here and stand up to Israel," he said. "Christians and Muslims must be united."

Sheikh Ahmed Sadeq, a Shia Muslim cleric from Nabatiye, also thinks the current conflict can bring Lebanese Christians and Muslims closer together.

"The proof is that the Christian people -- not all, but many -- have been helping Muslim refugees from other villages, and they provide everything for them," he said. "They are not concerned about religious differences."

The Maronite Church, for its part, is supporting the stance of the Lebanese government, according to analyst Fawaz. It has voiced support for a seven-point plan put forward by Beirut for ending the conflict.

That plan includes an immediate ceasefire based on Israel's withdrawal, efforts to release Lebanese and Israeli prisoners, the extension of the Lebanese government's authority throughout the territory, and the strengthening of the U.N. international force in southern Lebanon.

However, General Michel Aoun, a former commander of the Lebanese army and now a leading Christian member of parliament, has come out against the deployment of a multinational force in Lebanon. He has argued it would revive sectarian tensions.

And unlike other Lebanese Christian leaders, Aoun supports an alliance with Hezbollah in an effort to reduce the confessional basis of Lebanon's conflicts. (FIN/2006)

**[Contact Us](#) | [About Us](#) | [Subscription](#) | [Help us Improve](#) | [News in RSS](#)
Copyright © 2006 IPS-Inter Press Service. All rights reserved.**