

REPORTAGE

Beirut: Displaced Shiites now seen as cause of attacks

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(From Beirut) – Nadine is the last Christian living in her apartment block in a Shia neighbourhood of West Beirut. She has not left her home for two days, fearing that one or more Shia families might break down the door and occupy her home if she were to

leave. The deaths of over 300 people – the toll is still provisional – killed in 'ten minutes' of simultaneous Israeli raids across Lebanon on 8 April have plunged the country into terror and chaos.

While there is debate on the international stage as to whether the truce between Iran and the United States will extend to Israel and Lebanon, in Lebanon the presence of over a million internally displaced people, most of whom are Shia from the south and the Bekaa Valley, has suddenly become a threat to everyone. Since 2 March, the IDF's targets have gradually expanded from the south – currently under Israeli control – to the whole country, culminating in the 8 April massacre. As a result, panic broke out across all communities and faiths, particularly in Beirut, where 192 people died in a matter of minutes.

On this day of national mourning, Beirut is half empty – fear keeps the inhabitants indoors and schools and offices are closed – and we meet Ali (not his real name), a Shia from Nabatiyeh, who tells us his story. After his home was destroyed by the IDF in early March, he found refuge in a flat in the Christian neighbourhood of Achrafieh, which he had legally rented from Mr Pierre, the owner. After the 8 April massacre, when he returned home from work, he found his belongings on the landing and the door locked with a large padlock. Pierre blamed a delay in the rent payment, but everyone, including Ali, knows that this is not the reason. Like the biblical Jonah, who was identified by the ship's crew as the cause of the storm and thrown overboard, **Ali was cast out for saving a life**. Displaced Shiites are now regarded by Beirut residents as the cause of the Israeli attacks. They are wandering through the city in a frantic exodus, fleeing Israeli bombs and following the IDF's evacuation orders.

After being driven out of Achrafieh, Ali tried to join the approximately one hundred Shiites being sheltered by a Catholic school outside Beirut, but they turned him away for fear of Hezbollah infiltration. He is currently sleeping in a friend's car.

Fadi (not his real name) is a sacristan at a Maronite parish in Sin El Fil, in the eastern part of Beirut. He accompanied his parish priest to offer condolences to the families of three people killed in an Israeli attack on the Maronite Complex in Ain Saadeh, on the hills just outside the capital. A leader of the Christian Lebanese Forces party, along with his wife and a neighbour, was killed in the building, which is owned by the Maronite Diocese of Beirut. "It was certainly a mistake," he tells us. 'It is impossible that he was the target. The Lebanese Forces party is a sworn enemy of Hezbollah and is indeed accused of sympathising with Israel.' So who was the IDF's target? 'It seems a Hezbollah member used to regularly visit a woman in the building and had just left

when the attack happened. But the whole affair remains a mystery.' The only thing we know for sure is that we can no longer trust anyone. We are afraid because Hezbollah members are everywhere. In my opinion, we Christians should only take in women and children because taking in men is too risky,' he concludes.

Indeed, walking around the city, it is not difficult to come across unfamiliar and unsettling figures: men in black patrolling neighbourhoods where Shiite communities are believed to have taken refuge, and flashy, high-powered cars without number plates. It is hard to tell whether these are members of the Shia militia, law enforcement officers, or both. But an immediate ceasefire in Lebanon is necessary not only to prevent further loss of life, but also to stop the country from descending into another civil war, which Israel would like to see happen.