

REPORTAGE

## Lebanon, Christians terrorised by jihadists and Israeli attacks

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It is Sunday in Achrafieh, a Christian neighbourhood in Beirut, which has always been home to the city's middle-upper class. In front of one of the many churches in the area, waiting for the faithful to arrive for the 11:30 Mass, there is something new: two soldiers

guarding the entrance to the building. The church, which is quite large, is about a third full, mostly with people over fifty; lowering the average age of those present are four young altar boys assisting the priest. Halfway through the service, the celebrant is uneasy: from the altar, he has seen a man enter the church without making the sign of the cross. He does not let on to the faithful, but gestures to the sacristan to take a look. The man stands for a while at the back of the church, then finally makes the sign of the cross and leaves. Danger averted, for now.

**After the attack on Sunday 22 June on the Orthodox Church of St. Elias in**

Damascus, which claimed the lives of thirty people, the atmosphere among Lebanese Christians is tense. The jihadist group that claimed responsibility for the attack has explicitly threatened further attacks against Christians in Syria and Lebanon.



**'Last night, General Security informed us that they would be sending men** to guard the church during Mass. We had no choice but to accept,' the priest confided to La Nuova Bussola Quotidiana after the service. 'I cannot deny that we are worried. We all know each other here, and when I saw that man enter alone after Mass had begun, I cannot hide that I thought the worst. An attack in Achrafie would be a major blow for the extremists and, as the episode in Damascus teaches us, the guards at the entrance to the church do not necessarily offer any guarantee of safety.' It now seems clear that the soldier guarding the Damascus church of St. Elias, who, according to the testimony of survivors, did not prevent the attackers from entering the church but cooperated in the success of the attack, was a soldier regularly paid by the government of Ahmed Al Sharaa.

**Since Hayat Tahrir al Sham took power in Damascus,** the border between Lebanon and Syria has become permeable, not only to the traditional smuggling of people and goods, but also to Islamic extremists. In recent days, Lebanese security forces have arrested two suspected ISIS affiliates in Tripoli, including a man known by the nom de

guerre Qasoura, who is suspected of being one of the leaders of the Islamist group in Lebanon. At the same time, Syrian security forces announced that they had arrested three Lebanese citizens accused of providing logistical support to the perpetrators of the attack on St. Elias Church.

**While Christians in Beirut fear for their safety,** those remaining in southern Lebanon are now at their wits' end. Israeli occupation forces – it should be remembered that the IDF occupies at least five, but apparently now seven, positions on Lebanese territory, in violation of agreements guaranteed by the international community – have intensified their attacks on civilians in the south since the end of the “twelve-day war” with Iran. In the last 24 hours, a village councillor, a motorcyclist on his way to work, and two women, one of whom was a newlywed whose husband was wounded, have been killed. And the list is constantly being updated. The victims are all Shiite civilians accused by the IDF of belonging to or being close to Hezbollah in various capacities.

**It is interesting to note that this crackdown coincides** with the month of mourning of Ashura, when Shiites commemorate the death of Imam al-Husayn and his seventy-two followers, killed by the troops of the Umayyad caliph Yazid I in the year 40 AH. The rituals of Ashura are solemn for Shiites and often viewed with contempt by those who do not share their faith. Incidentally, on 27 June, the first day of Muharram, the month of Ashura, several men from Hayat Tahrir al Sham killed an elderly pilgrim visiting the Shiite shrine of Sayyida Zeinab, near Damascus, who had refused to remove the black mourning clothes typical of the celebration.

**In addition to Israeli military attacks, Lebanon is under intense international pressure** – through US envoy Tom Barrack – to “make peace with Israel” by forcibly requisitioning Hezbollah's remaining weapons as a precondition for any agreement. In return, the Jewish state would begin to “gradually” withdraw its troops from the south of the country. According to Barrack, the end of the war between Iran and Israel has paved the way for “a new peace in the Middle East” within the framework of the Abraham Accords, from which Syria and Lebanon cannot escape. Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar has officially announced that the Jewish state will ask Syria to annex the Golan

Heights before it can talk about peace.



**Similarly, Lebanon is also being asked to comply with Israeli demands** – the response from the Lebanese institutions is expected by 7 July, when Barrack is due to return to Beirut. Hezbollah has already opposed total disarmament without first receiving precise assurances from the US that Israel will not take advantage of the situation and end up exterminating the population of the south. According to the Lebanese media outlet LBC, Speaker of the House Nabih Berri, who is leading the negotiations with Barrack in coordination with Hezbollah, has asked the US for more time to consult with all the forces involved. The Lebanese government will probably ask its counterpart for a gradual, rather than a total, seizure of Hezbollah's weapons, which in any case would be extremely difficult to achieve. Meanwhile, Lebanese President Joseph Aoun, meeting with the new commander of the UNIFIL mission, Diodato Abagnara, stressed the importance of peacekeeping forces in southern Lebanon alongside the Lebanese army. Aoun called for a renewal of the mission - UNIFIL's mandate expires next August - but to date, UN leaders have not announced whether the mandate will be renewed, and, if so, under what terms.