

**Refugee Review Tribunal  
AUSTRALIA**

**RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE**

**Research Response Number:** LBN35057  
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**Questions**

- 1. Please provide an update on 2008 material regarding any further reports of harm to Jehovah’s Witnesses, particularly in Halba El Zwarib and Akkar.**
- 2. Is there any independent evidence which supports the assertion of rising Sunni extremist activity in Halba El Zwarib and Akkar?**

**RESPONSE**

- 1. Please provide an update on 2008 material regarding any further reports of harm to Jehovah’s Witnesses, particularly in Halba El Zwarib and Akkar.**

Very little recent information on the treatment of members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Lebanon could be located. One report was located, which largely concurs with information previously provided in a 2008 research response on this subject.

A November 2008 report from *NOW Lebanon* quotes “Issa Diab, a translation consultant with the United Bible Society and expert on Christianity in Lebanon”, who claims that “many [Jehovah’s Witnesses] are concentrated in the town of Qalamoun, south of Tripoli, and in the caza of Akkar”. The article quotes a sect member who claims that he is “beaten sometimes”, and that he has “been assaulted” while proselytising, but also quotes another member who characterises the “reception [of the sect] in Lebanon and the Arab world in general as being more tolerant than elsewhere”. The report also draws attention to Maronite hostility toward the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the strong links between religious identity and family and social identity in Lebanon:

In Lebanon, there are 3,613 Jehovah’s Witnesses who make up 70 congregations. According to Issa Diab, a translation consultant with the United Bible Society and expert on Christianity

in Lebanon, many are concentrated in the town of Qalamoun, south of Tripoli, and in the caza of Akkar.

There are 15 Kingdom Halls in the country, where the faithful gather to study the Bible and doctrinal literature published by the Council of Elders, and from where they embark to go door-to-door in search of converts. But reception to their proselytising in Lebanon, Witnesses say, is mixed.

“I get beaten sometimes,” Njeim said. “I’ve had doors slammed in my face, and I’ve been assaulted.”

Abuse, however, is not the standard reaction Witnesses encounter. Another Witness, Ghassan – who only wanted his first name published so as not to glorify himself – spoke of reception in Lebanon and the Arab world in general as being more tolerant than elsewhere. “In Germany, Hitler killed thousands of Witnesses,” he noted.

But many non-Jehovah’s Christians in Lebanon, especially Maronites, put signs on their doors warning Witnesses not to come knocking. Father George Rahme is a particularly vocal critic of the sect, frequently denouncing it during his weekly television program on *Télé Lumière*, a Christian station founded in 1991 that is broadcast from Lebanon throughout the Middle East.

Rahme drew the ire of Lebanon’s Foundation for Human and Humanitarian rights in a 2006 report on religious freedom, which said that he denounces “heretical” Christian sects every week on his program, “his favorite boxing bag” being the Jehovah’s Witnesses and other minor religious sects. Rahme reportedly encourages viewers to keep a stick near their door to beat any Witnesses who visit.

...Diab, the scholar with the United Bible Society, stressed that Witnesses face particular trouble in Lebanon because one’s religious identity is so closely tied to one’s place in both society and politics.

“In Lebanon, belonging to a confession is more than having certain theological beliefs,” he said. “It’s having a certain social identity or [akin to] belonging to a tribe. In Europe or the [US], every 10 minutes you can change your religious affiliation. In Lebanon belonging to a religious confession is very historical. A big part of social life is based on belonging.”

Converting is disloyalty, and those who do are generally banished from their families, Diab added (Nash, M. 2008, ‘Faith comes knocking’, *NOW Lebanon*, 16 November <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=67298#> – Accessed 19 June 2009 – Attachment 1).

## **2. Is there any independent evidence which supports the assertion of rising Sunni extremist activity in Halba El Zwarib and Akkar?**

The city of Halba is the capital of the district (*qada*) of Akkar, in the North Governorate of Lebanon. No recent reports on Sunni extremist activity in the Halba area could be located; nonetheless, reports were located which claim that Akkar is a strongly Sunni area, and a likely source of Islamist movements. Previous research responses also provide information on the activities of militant Sunni groups in the north of Lebanon, including violence in Halba between government and opposition supporters in May 2008, armed conflict between Sunnis

and Allawites in Tripoli during 2008, and the confrontation between the Lebanese Armed Forces and the militant Islamist group Fatah al-Islam between May and September 2007.

### **Recent reports of Sunni extremist activity, violence in Akkar**

Very few recent reports were located on violence in Akkar. Two 8 June 2009 reports from *The Daily Star* claimed that voting in Lebanon's parliamentary election was generally peaceful in the Akkar district, reporting a minor clash in Wadi al-Jamous village which resulted in three arrests, and low-level violence between Future Movement and opposition supporters in Talbibeh ('Hundreds of thousands head for polling stations in north' 2009, *The Daily Star*, 8 June

[http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition\\_ID=1&article\\_ID=102771&categ\\_id=2#](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_ID=1&article_ID=102771&categ_id=2#) – Accessed 22 June 2009 – Attachment 2; Sfeir, T. 2009, 'Lebanon's election day relatively calm despite some minor security incidents', *The Daily Star*, 8 June [http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition\\_ID=1&article\\_ID=102789&categ\\_id=2#](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_ID=1&article_ID=102789&categ_id=2#) – Accessed 22 June 2009 – Attachment 3).

A June 2009 article in *Al-Ahram Weekly* on the election campaign in north Lebanon states that:

This election is marked by a change of heart among Salafis who enjoy a powerbase in Tripoli and Akkar. A group of Salafi sheikhs issued a fatwa allowing their followers to contest and vote in the election. Salafis feel a sense of betrayal by Al-Hariri who marginalised them and ignored early promises to have them represented on his list of candidates (Abdel-Latif, O. 2009, 'Premiership in play', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 4-11 June <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2009/950/re6.htm> – Accessed 22 June 2009 – Attachment 4)

An August 2008 article on Sunni militants in Lebanon, also sourced from *Al-Ahram Weekly*, claims that "Tripoli and nearby rural areas, such as Akkar, are overwhelmingly Sunni and a breeding ground for Islamist movements – peaceful as well as the militant fringe" (Fielder, L. 2008, 'Tripoli rumbles on', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 21-27 August <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/911/re4.htm> – Accessed 22 June 2009 – Attachment 5).

### **Previous research responses**

Sunni extremist groups in north Lebanon have been the subject of previous research responses, the most pertinent of which are summarised below with relevant individual sources within the responses highlighted.

*Research Response LBN33419*, of 27 June 2008, quotes a May 2008 article from the *International Herald Tribune* which describes Akkar and Tripoli as "Sunni-dominated regions...where fundamentalists operate". The response also quotes a June 2008 report from *Al Arabiya* which claims that the Future Movement leadership, in a bid to retain the loyalty of Sunnis in north Lebanon, has "resorted to giving handouts to the poor, setting up fighting forces in the form of security firms, recruited from poor areas in Tripoli and Akkar" ('Lebanon Sunnis bitter in Lebanon power shift toward Shiite Hezbollah' 2008, *International Herald Tribune*, 16 May <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/05/16/africa/ME-GEN-Lebanon-Sunnis.php> – Accessed 20 June 2008 – Attachment 16; 'Alliance in question' 2008, *Al Arabiya*, 18 June <http://www.alarabiya.net/views/2008/06/18/51699.html> – Accessed 19 June 2008 – Attachment 17; RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response LBN33419*, 27 June – Attachment 18).

The north of Lebanon has seen ongoing conflict between Sunni and Allawite militia groups in the last twelve months, with the violence mainly focused on the suburbs of Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tebbaneh in Tripoli. *Research Response LBN33661* provides a comprehensive overview of violent incidents in North Lebanon up to September 2008, and an overview of relations between Hezbollah, the Future Movement and Sunni Salifist groups in north Lebanon; Question 2 of this response also provides an overview of the location, demography and other information available on Akkar (RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response LBN33661*, 9 September – Attachment 6).

*LBN33661* provides information on May 2008 violence in Akkar's capital of Halba between Sunni Future Movement supporters and members of the opposition-aligned Syrian Social Nationalist Party, in which members of both organisations were killed. Sources consulted in this response provide differing angles on the incident, and include:

- The *Ya Libnan* news service, which stated that “3 members of the Future Movement (Al Mustaqbal) and 9 members of Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) were killed” in the violence (‘Saturday’s live coverage of the war in Lebanon’ 2008, *Ya Libnan*, 10 May [http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2008/05/\\_1415\\_governmen.php](http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2008/05/_1415_governmen.php) – Accessed 5 September 2008 – Attachment 7);
- A *New York Times* report, which characterised the incident as a Future Movement revenge attack following Hezbollah’s occupation of Beirut; the report claimed that “an angry mob set fire to the offices of a militia allied with Hezbollah and killed 11 of its members” (Worth, R.F. & Bakri, N. 2008, ‘Hezbollah Ignites a Sectarian Fuse in Lebanon’, *New York Times*, 18 May [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/18/world/middleeast/18Lebanon.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/18/world/middleeast/18Lebanon.html?_r=1&oref=slogin&pagewanted=print) – Accessed 5 September 2008 – Attachment 8);
- A report in *The Age* which stated that an Australian was among “12 people killed when 100 pro-government loyalists attacked the office of an opposition political party” in Halba (Jackson, A. 2008, ‘Melbourne man killed in Lebanon “was on holiday”’, *The Age*, 12 May <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2008/05/12/1210444292099.html> – Accessed 5 September 2008 – Attachment 9);
- An article from the *NOW Lebanon* website which reported Hezbollah-published claims that the Future Movement had massacred SSNP members, claims which were denied by Future Movement leaders (‘Hariri warns Hezbollah against slandering Akkar mufti’ 2008, *NOW Lebanon*, 14 May <http://www.nowLebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=42869> – Accessed 8 September 2008 – Attachment 10);
- And a report from *BBC News* which expressed the view that: “Sunni reaction in the north of the country produced some of the worst atrocities of this violent episode, when supporters of Saad Hariri took revenge on followers of a Syrian-backed party, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party”. The report also notes the manner in which “Sunni fundamentalists” became involved in the conflict (Muir, J. 2008, ‘Hezbollah in dangerous territory’, *BBC News*, 16 May [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7403951.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7403951.stm) – Accessed 8 September 2008 – Attachment 11).

*Research Response LBN34104*, of 9 December 2008, provides updated information on violence in northern Lebanon, including reports that Allawites in Tripoli were fleeing to Akkar due to violence between Sunni and Allawi militias in the suburbs of Jabal Mohsen and Bab el-Tabbaneh. This response also quotes reports from *Bloomberg* and *Ya Libnan* alleging building tension in Akkar between Sunnis and Allawites (Williams, D. 2008, 'Tripoli Turmoil Increases Risk of a Sunni-Shiite War in Lebanon', *Bloomberg*, 30 September <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601085&sid=a.emfPHnt0.o&refer=europe#> – Accessed 4 December 2008 – Attachment 12; 'Syrian commandos deploy in north Lebanon – reports' 2008, *Ya Libnan*, 15 September [http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2008/09/syrian\\_commando.php](http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2008/09/syrian_commando.php) – Accessed 4 December 2008 – Attachment 13; RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response LBN34104*, 9 December – Attachment 14).

Questions 3 and 4 of *Research Response LBN33576*, of 29 August 2008, provide information on the conflict between the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Sunni militant group Fatah al-Islam at the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp in Akkar between May and September 2007 (RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response LBN33576*, 29 August – Attachment 15).

## List of Sources Consulted

### Internet Sources:

Google search engine <http://www.google.com.au>

### Databases:

FACTIVA (news database)

BACIS (DIAC Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

ISYS (RRT Research & Information database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)

RRT Library Catalogue

## List of Attachments

1. Nash, M. 2008, 'Faith comes knocking', *NOW Lebanon*, 16 November <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=67298#> – Accessed 19 June 2009.
2. 'Hundreds of thousands head for polling stations in north' 2009, *The Daily Star*, 8 June [http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition\\_ID=1&article\\_ID=102771&categ\\_id=2#](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_ID=1&article_ID=102771&categ_id=2#) – Accessed 22 June 2009.
3. Sfeir, T. 2009, 'Lebanon's election day relatively calm despite some minor security incidents', *The Daily Star*, 8 June [http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition\\_ID=1&article\\_ID=102789&categ\\_id=2#](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_ID=1&article_ID=102789&categ_id=2#) – Accessed 22 June 2009.

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6. RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response LBN33661*, 9 September.
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8. Worth, R.F. & Bakri, N. 2008, 'Hezbollah Ignites a Sectarian Fuse in Lebanon', *New York Times*, 18 May [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/18/world/middleeast/18Lebanon.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/18/world/middleeast/18Lebanon.html?_r=1&oref=slogin&pagewanted=print) – Accessed 5 September 2008.
9. Jackson, A. 2008, 'Melbourne man killed in Lebanon "was on holiday"', *The Age*, 12 May <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2008/05/12/1210444292099.html> – Accessed 5 September 2008.
10. 'Hariri warns Hezbollah against slandering Akkar mufti' 2008, *NOW Lebanon*, 14 May <http://www.nowLebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=42869> – Accessed 8 September 2008.
11. Muir, J. 2008, 'Hezbollah in dangerous territory', *BBC News*, 16 May [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7403951.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7403951.stm) – Accessed 8 September 2008.
12. Williams, D. 2008, 'Tripoli Turmoil Increases Risk of a Sunni-Shiite War in Lebanon', *Bloomberg*, 30 September <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601085&sid=a.emfPHnt0.o&refer=europen#> – Accessed 4 December 2008.
13. 'Syrian commandos deploy in north Lebanon – reports' 2008, *Ya Libnan*, 15 September [http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2008/09/syrian\\_commando.php](http://yalibnan.com/site/archives/2008/09/syrian_commando.php) – Accessed 4 December 2008.
14. RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response LBN34104*, 9 December.
15. RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response LBN33576*, 29 August.
16. 'Lebanon Sunnis bitter in Lebanon power shift toward Shiite Hezbollah' 2008, *International Herald Tribune*, 16 May <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/05/16/africa/ME-GEN-Lebanon-Sunnis.php> – Accessed 20 June 2008.
17. 'Alliance in question' 2008, *Al Arabiya*, 18 June <http://www.alarabiya.net/views/2008/06/18/51699.html> – Accessed 19 June 2008.
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