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How Al-Aqsa Flood is reshaping Lebanon's Muslim sectarian divide

With the Israeli aggression intensifying across Lebanon, the rise of a communal humanitarian response reveals a rare moment of unity between Sunnis and Shias, while the shared struggle against a common enemy raises hopes for a new era of cooperation.



(Photo

Credit: The Cradle)

[23 September](#) marked a dark day for Lebanon as Israel expanded its aggression, prompting a mass exodus from southern Lebanon and the Bekaa region to the capital, Beirut, and the northern districts.

As the number of martyrs approached one thousand, civilians fled from the violence in search of refuge. The road connecting southern Lebanon to the capital became a scene of unimaginable distress, as [displaced people](#) were trapped in a suffocating gridlock that

stretched for an entire day. Under extreme heat and exhaustion, families faced not only fatigue and thirst but also the haunting fear that Israeli bombs would target their vehicles.

Amid this chaos, an incredible [grassroots effort](#) emerged from those living on either side of the international road. Residents offered water, fuel, and temporary shelter, filling the void left by the state.

Across the country, public schools were made into shelters, with civil initiatives springing up in cities from Saida and Beirut to Tripoli. This collective humanitarian response raises the question: Has the deep-seated tension between Sunni-majority Tripoli and Hezbollah, born from years of sectarian strife and the Syrian war, begun to soften?

Sunni–Shia rapprochement

Tripoli, [officially](#) “the poorest city in the Mediterranean” and long a stronghold of Sunni opposition to Hezbollah, has historically been a flashpoint for sectarian division. Over the last decade, political agendas leveraged these divides, driving animosity between the city’s population and Hezbollah’s Shia support base.

Yet, the humanitarian acts of Tripoli’s residents – extending their hands to embrace displaced families from the south – stood out as a symbol of hope and unity amidst the bloodshed. Could this solidarity signal a shift in the longstanding Sunni–Shia rivalry in Lebanon?

In Tripoli’s Al-Nour Square, a large banner of the martyred Hamas politburo chief [Ismail Haniyeh](#) adorns the city alongside symbols of the Palestinian resistance movement and local faction, the Islamic Group.

It was a visual reminder of Tripoli’s alignment with the Palestinian cause, with images of Haniyeh’s successor, Yahya Sinwar, and Qassam Brigades spokesman Abu Obeida becoming a common feature of the city’s streets and narrow neighborhoods. These same streets are the weekly setting for popular movements denouncing the crimes of the Israeli occupation state in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

Young men gather in the morning at an old cafe in Al-Tal Square to discuss the region’s conditions. When asked by *The Cradle* about the images of Hamas leaders and the ongoing protests since 7 October, one of them responds:

Palestine is a trust on our necks. The successive crises in Lebanon will not distract us from it. Our basic cause, and whoever has no cause, has no value.

A young passer-by on Tripoli’s Azmi Bey Street also informs *The Cradle*:

Our first and last enemy is the Israeli occupation, and we must unite Sunnis and Shias to confront it. Israel’s crimes unite the blood of Palestinians and Lebanese, so we must join hands and keep internal differences aside.

Al-Aqsa Flood: Uniting a divided people

It seems remarkable that Operation Al-Aqsa Flood has created an air of rapprochement between Lebanon's Sunnis and Shias after years of rivalry, especially with the entry of the [Islamic Group to the front lines](#), standing shoulder to shoulder with Hezbollah.

This cooperation has positioned the Islamic Group as a unique Sunni advocate for the Palestinian cause, much to the discontent of Lebanon's traditional Sunni leadership, who have [strong ties to Saudi Arabia](#).

From the inception of Greater Lebanon in 1920, Sunnis and Shias shared many of the same religious and social institutions. Sectarian tensions [ebbed and flowed](#) through the decades, culminating with the 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Yet, despite the occupation of Palestine and the rise of colonial efforts to divide the region into smaller states, Sunni-Shia relations remained largely cooperative, particularly during the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser, when the spirit of Arab nationalism and unity was at its peak.

This period fostered a shared sense of purpose among both communities, driven by the collective struggle against foreign influence and the broader vision of Arab solidarity.

Hariri's assassination, blamed on Hezbollah and the movement's subsequent alignment with the Syrian government, deepened Lebanon's political divide within the Muslim community. The rift was [solidified](#) by external powers – the Persian Gulf states backing the Sunni March 14 alliance, while Syria and Iran supported the Shia-led March 8 bloc.

The shared struggle

The Syrian civil war further [eroded](#) any semblance of unity, with Sunnis generally supporting the opposition while Hezbollah stood alongside the Syrian army. Tensions peaked, leaving Lebanese society bitterly divided along sectarian lines.

The occupation state, however, targets both Palestinians and Lebanese, regardless of religion or sect, and this shared threat has fostered an environment of rare cooperation between Sunnis and Shias in Lebanon.

As the core member of the [Axis of Resistance](#), Iran's vocal support for Palestinian resistance has played a pivotal role in reshaping Sunni-Shia relations in Lebanon. Many speculate that Tehran's motivations are twofold: to strengthen its influence in the Arab world and to position itself as the ultimate champion of Palestine, capitalizing on the perceived complacency of Arab states that have normalized ties with Israel.

Hezbollah's early entry into the Gaza war on 8 October – alongside the Sunni Islamic Group – marks a significant departure from Lebanon's traditionally fractured political lines. In past conflicts, the Islamic Group's relationship with Hezbollah was strained at best.

But as Hamas prepared for an inevitable confrontation with Israel, Iran's backing helped broker a rare alliance between the two, culminating in joint efforts during Al-Aqsa Flood.

Calm after the Flood: a glimpse of unity?

Speaking to *The Cradle*, former MP Khaled al-Daher reflects on this evolving unity, stating:

We agree in Lebanon to confront the enemy, while not denying the existence of previous differences. We must engage in dialogue to remove them, and whoever stabs Hezbollah while it is fighting to support Gaza will come one day and stab all of Lebanon. Therefore, we must leave all differences and return to unity among Sunnis, Shias, Christians, and Druze to confront the Zionist project that intends to destroy Lebanon. Today, our duty is to confront our common enemy, and after the confrontation is over and the Gaza war is over, we return to the Lebanese file and sit down and engage in dialogue.

Daher's comments resonate with the shifting mood in Lebanon, where even the most skeptical voices now call for unity in the face of Israel's aggression. They also came after a series of statements by the former secretary-general of the Islamic Group, Azzam al-Ayoubi, in which he stressed the necessity of Islamic cohesion in confronting the Israeli enemy, along with the necessity of overcoming previous differences after the war and reaching a dialogue that leads to an agreement that ends all divisions.

In a significant turn of events, social media is flooded with tributes to resistance leaders, including Hezbollah's [Hassan Nasrallah](#), lionized for his decades of defiance against Israel. This stands in stark contrast to the Syrian War era, where Hezbollah's involvement in the conflict alienated many Sunnis.

Yet today, with the Israeli war machine looming, Lebanon's Muslims – both Sunni and Shia – seem more united than ever, their differences eclipsed by an existential threat.

As Israel makes yet [another ill-fated attempt](#) to re-occupy southern Lebanon, the Al-Aqsa Flood has created an opportunity for reconciliation, even if only temporarily. Whether this fragile unity can withstand the aftermath of the Gaza conflict remains uncertain.

However, what is clear is that Israel's aggression has, for the time being, achieved what years of political maneuvering could not: uniting Lebanon's deeply divided communities in the face of a shared threat.

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