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Lebanon: Sectarian Attacks in Tripoli

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Sectarian tensions between the Alawite Jabal Mohsen neighborhood and surrounding Sunni neighborhoods have led to increasing targeted attacks against Alawites in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli. The Lebanese authorities' response has remained weak even as the conflict in Syria has seriously aggravated tensions there.

Lebanese authorities should take all feasible steps to protect Tripoli residents by confiscating weapons that have been used to kill residents such as mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, and automatic weapons, arresting and prosecuting gunmen, and maintaining an active security presence in all communities.

"With battles going on in Tripoli and with people being targeted, beaten, knifed, and killed, the Lebanese government can't afford to sit on its hands," said Joe Stork, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "It needs to start arresting and prosecuting the people behind the violence in Tripoli and confiscate their weapons."

The government's new security plan for Tripoli should specifically include measures to protect Alawite residents and their property. It should include a plan to stop attacks that are underway, investigate incidents, and arrest and prosecute those responsible, while respecting the rights of all, including anyone detained.

The conflict in neighboring Syria has severely aggravated existing sectarian tensions in Tripoli, where intermittent violence has persisted between the hilltop Alawite neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen and the Sunni neighborhoods that completely surround it, including Bab al-Tabbaneh, since May 2008. Hundreds of both Sunni and Alawite residents have been the main victims, but Jabal Mohsen residents are especially vulnerable.

Sunni gunmen and arsonists have attacked and burned numerous shops belonging to Jabal Mohsen residents in other Tripoli districts. Sunni militants have also beaten Alawites on the streets of Tripoli outside of Jabal Mohsen. Some gunmen from the Sunni neighborhood of Bab al-Tabbaneh have forced Alawite shop owners to pay protection money.

The government's security response has been weak, and official security operations have failed to stop the fighting or demilitarize affected neighborhoods, Human Rights Watch said. Law enforcement and security forces have made no sustained effort to disarm, arrest, and prosecute the gunmen, despite some arrests and weapons confiscated in 2013. Tripoli residents from both Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh told Human Rights Watch that a program administered through the High Relief Committee (HRC) to compensate for damaged or destroyed property has been plagued by delays, exclusions, and inadequate payments.

Security forces in Tripoli have in particular failed to provide Alawites with adequate protection and to arrest, disarm, and punish those responsible for attacks even though the identities of many of the attackers are known. For example, in April a stabbing victim told Human Rights Watch that Lebanese army troops stationed nearby did not attempt to stop his attackers.

Based on publicly available information, in four of the five reported attacks on Alawites in November and December, no arrests were made. In six of seven cases Human Rights Watch documented in which Alawite shops were attacked, shop owners, their neighbors, or employees said that security forces did not attempt to stop the attacks. Witnesses said that security forces investigated only two of the attacks afterward.

In November, the Lebanese government said it was putting a security plan into operation for the city, which has an estimated population of 500,000. On December 2, the caretaker prime minister, Najib Mikati, placed Tripoli under the control of the army for six months.

The government's actions are a major change in its response to the numerous rounds of violence in Tripoli, which have had a devastating impact on local residents. Human Rights Watch previously documented clashes pitting gunmen from Jabal Mohsen against gunmen from Bab al-Tabbaneh and other surrounding Sunni neighborhoods.

The clashes have killed at least 141 people since June 2008 and injured hundreds of others and in some cases have hampered access to medical assistance. They have also badly damaged property and severely affected residents' livelihoods, freedom of movement, and access to education.

While the clashes have affected both Sunnis and Alawites in these neighborhoods, Tripoli's small Alawite community of tens of thousands people face additional dangers as a result of the increasing violence directed against them.

Lebanese authorities, with the support of international donors, should confiscate weapons such as mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, and automatic weapons, arrest and prosecute gunmen, and maintain an active security presence in all threatened communities in a way that takes into account local concerns and fears. These measures should include investigations into those responsible for criminal attacks and holding them to account in civilian courts.

One way to address the underlying grievances would be to establish a committee with representatives from both sides as well as national leaders, Human Rights Watch said. The committee should investigate the grievances and the needs of impoverished and long neglected communities, both Alawite and Sunni.

The Lebanese government should also improve the HRC compensation program to eliminate delays, exclusions, and inadequate payments.

"There is no quick fix to the rampant violence in Tripoli or to resolving decades-long grievances, but addressing the problem of impunity of gunmen is absolutely key," Stork said. "Lebanese authorities should expand security in the short-term while developing reconciliation processes to achieve lasting solutions to the violence in Tripoli."

For details of attacks on Alawites in Tripoli, Lebanon, please see below.

Rise of Sectarian Tensions in Tripoli

Human Rights Watch researchers conducted field investigations in Tripoli, Lebanon, in May and June 2013 and reviewed reports and statements by the Lebanese government in response to the violence there. On November 6, Human Rights Watch wrote to the Lebanese Ministries of Defense, Interior and Justice, and the High Relief Commission requesting information about the government's response to attacks in Tripoli, but received no response.

The sectarian tensions have resulted in an increase in attacks against Alawites since the start of the war in Syria in summer 2012, including attacks against Alawite workers while they commute between their homes in Jabal Mohsen and other parts of Lebanon, the burning and destruction of Alawite shops, and attacks against buses - including school buses - transporting Alawite residents. Many Alawite residents of Jabal Mohsen told Human Rights Watch they no longer feel safe to leave their Alawite enclave.

Attacks on Alawites on the Streets and at Work

Starting in August 2012, Human Rights Watch documented attacks against Alawites solely on the basis of their identity, both on the streets and at their workplaces.

In August 2012, Jafar (his and all other names have been changed for security purposes), an 18-year-old Alawite student from Jabal Mohsen, took a summer job as a waiter at a restaurant in Tripoli outside of his neighborhood so he could save some money. One evening, on his way back to Jabal Mohsen with two of his cousins, just meters from the neighborhood boundary, a group of about 15 Sunni youth stopped them. "They knew we were from Jabal Mohsen," Jafar told Human Rights Watch. "The only question they asked was 'Where are you going?' - because they knew the answer." They tried to take one cousin away, but his two companions refused to be separated from him. The Sunni youths then severely beat and stabbed the youngest of the three:

My youngest cousin was beaten very badly, and stabbed three times in the shoulder. They even tried to break his neck ... My oldest cousin tried to help, and he was also stabbed in his shoulder ... People were shouting, 'It is Ramadan, this isn't right, leave them alone!' Those attacking us replied to them, 'Because it is Ramadan, we want to finish them [the Alawites] off.' They kept shouting, 'Allahu Akbar!'

Men from Jabal Mohsen rescued the three cousins. The two sides began throwing rocks at each other, and then the clash escalated into an exchange of gunfire. After the beating and stabbing, the three cousins stopped going to work, fearing for their safety. In April, a large group of Sunni protesters, many of them religious Salafis, blocked the road at the Abu Ali roundabout entering Jabal Mohsen, holding a rally just 10 meters from the nearest Lebanese Army checkpoint. The protesters began stopping vehicles and allegedly asking the occupants if they were Alawites. Among the vehicles was a small bus carrying 16 passengers, all workers at a Beirut electricity company. Hassan, a resident of Jabal Mohsen, described what happened next:

They stopped our bus and asked the driver, 'How many Alawites and how many Sunnis do you have?' The driver told him there were no Alawites, but he knew we were eight Alawites and eight Sunnis. They told the driver to step down and then hit him twice on the head with a wooden stick. Then they took the keys to the van.

Then they told everyone to get out of the bus, and most did. I refused to go outside because I knew they would kill me. So, about 20 or 30 of the men came into the bus and cornered me. They just started stabbing me with knives, little knives and big knives - I was stabbed 19 times, and they were beating me with sticks as well. They were shouting, 'Allahu Akbar, we caught an Alawite!' When they finished with me, they gave the driver the keys back and said to him, 'Take him to Rifaat Eid, [the leader of the Arab Democratic Party which represents Alawites], this is our

message for him.' Two other Alawites were also beaten with sticks, and the three of us were taken to the hospital. I spent one week in the hospital. Luckily none of my organs were damaged.

Hassan said the Lebanese army troops stationed nearby did not attempt to stop the attack. He showed Human Rights Watch his scars from the stab wounds.

According to media reports, on April 22, Sunni militants in the Qobbeh neighborhood adjoining Jabal Mohsen stoned a school bus transporting children back to their homes in Jabal Mohsen. Lebanese army soldiers intervened, and the bus proceeded without any injuries to the children. After the incident, the Lebanese army reportedly escorted school buses for Alawite children to prevent attacks.

On May 31, following fierce armed clashes between Jabal Mohsen and its surrounding Sunni neighborhoods that left at least 28 people dead, Sunni militants threatened Alawite workers for the city government, texting them not to come to work or they would be killed. Hussein, one of the Alawite municipal workers, told Human Rights Watch that 50 to 60 Alawites from Jabal Mohsen work for the city, both in administrative functions inside the municipal building and more exposed positions as drivers or street cleaners in the neighborhoods.

When he and about 10 of his Alawite colleagues decided to go to work on June 13 despite the threats, he said, some of his Sunni colleagues refused to greet him and the other Alawites and were hostile. An hour or two after they arrived, he said, a small group of Sunni militants with sticks arrived at the front of the building and blocked the road. The militants began searching for Alawites inside the building.

"Their objective was to hurt us ... and no one in the municipality stopped them," Hussein said. He described how the Alawites were able to escape, but asked Human Rights Watch not to reveal the details for security reasons. Days later, he said, Sunni gunmen beat two or three Alawites who tried to return to work in the streets in front of the building. Commenting on the municipality's response to the violence, Hussein said:

The mayor knows the people who [blocked the road in front of the municipality on June 13] ... Afterward we spoke to the municipality [management] and they told us to just work in our neighborhood [Jabal Mohsen]. That wasn't a problem, but now they are saying there will not be full payment of our wages. There was no thought to investigate what happened. The army went to the municipality afterward but I don't know what happened after that.

In November, amid ongoing clashes between Jabal Mohsen and Bab al-Tabbaneh, there were a series of reported targeted attacks against Jabal Mohsen residents in other parts of Tripoli. The attacks came after Ali Eid, the founder of the Alawite Arab Democratic Party, did not respond to a summons on October 30 regarding his involvement in smuggling out of Lebanon a suspect who was responsible for two car bombings on August 23 in Tripoli. The car bombings left more than 40 people dead and 400 wounded in front of the al-Taqla and al-Salam mosques, where prominent Sunni imams who support the Syrian opposition were giving sermons. On November 5, a military court judge charged Eid with smuggling the wanted man.

On November 2, armed gunmen reportedly stopped a bus carrying Alawite workers from Jabal Mohsen and opened fire. The armed men pulled several men out of the bus, beating and shooting and wounding them. On November 3, the Lebanese army stated that it had detained Yehya Samir Mohamed, a Syrian who was allegedly involved in the attack, and that three Lebanese men, Khaled Jamal al-Rai, Omar Mohamed Abd al-Aziz al-Ahmad, and Mustafa Abd al-Hamid Jawhar were being sought for their involvement in the crime.

Also on November 2, men with knives attacked three Alawites in Tripoli's Tel neighborhood.

On November 7, unidentified assailants reportedly attacked three other Jabal Mohsen residents, one near the al-Nini hospital and two others in the Tel neighborhood. On November 28, unidentified gunmen also reportedly shot at four Alawite municipality workers near the Abu Ali roundabout on their way home to Jabal Mohsen. On December 11, unknown gunmen reportedly shot and injured two Jabal Mohsen residents in Baddawi neighborhood in Tripoli. Based on publicly available information, in four of these attacks, no arrests were made.

Human Rights Watch on November 6 requested information from the Ministries of Defense and Interior about what steps the Armed Forces and Interior Ministry are taking to respond to and preemptively stop targeted attacks against Alawite residents in Tripoli, but they have not responded. Human Rights Watch has also asked the Interior and Justice Ministries for information about any investigations under way of people responsible for sectarian attacks against Alawites in Tripoli but has received no response.

Burning and Destruction of Alawite Businesses

On numerous occasions dating back to at least 2008, Sunni militants targeted the shops of Alawite business owners from Jabal Mohsen in other parts of Tripoli, breaking in and stealing goods, and shooting at, blowing up or burning down the shops. Residents told Human Rights Watch that since the outbreak of the conflict in Syria these attacks have increased. Three Alawite shopkeepers told Human Rights Watch that Sunni militants have demanded "protection money," at times characterizing it as *jizya*, the tax that under Islamic law Muslim states can impose on non-Muslims to signify their acceptance of subjection to the Muslim ruler.

Wissam, 38, an Alawite resident of Jabal Mohsen who owned a barbershop in the popular Tel neighborhood in downtown Tripoli, told Human Rights Watch that Sunni militants burned down his shop on April 9.

On June 1 and June 3, following fierce clashes that left at least 13 people dead, including a soldier, Sunni militants destroyed at least four shops in Tel, according to the shop owners and their employees. Residents of the neighborhood told Human Rights Watch that Sunni militants also burned a fifth shop, a large sporting goods shop owned by an Alawite businessman, on June 6.

A sixth shop, a cellphone shop owned by a Sunni businessman, appears to have been bombed accidentally instead of the barbershop next door. On June 3 at 3 a.m., Sunni militants exploded a shrapnel-filled bomb in front of the cellphone shop, causing more than US\$5,000 in damage. The Sunni owner, Omar, told Human Rights Watch:

Most probably, they meant to target my neighbor's shop, as he is Alawite ... What I understood is that they were told to target the shop with a steel door, and I have pull-down steel grating in front of my shop, so it was by mistake ... Alawites cannot complain or make a big issue out of what is happening - the targeting of their shops - because they are here in an area that is not theirs. The majority here are Sunni and they are surrounded. They are afraid to open their shops now ... Two Alawite shop owners I know have closed their places and won't reopen.

Sunni militants in late May burned down another shop in the Tel neighborhood owned by an Alawite businessman, said Mustafa, an employee at a neighboring shop who witnessed the attack. A week later, on June 3, the attackers came back and looted the salvageable merchandise and machines in the shop. A nearby Sunni shop owner, Kareem, who witnessed and described the attacks to Human Rights Watch, added: "There is another Alawite shop owner just down the street but nothing happened there because he pays bribes" to the militants.

Malek, an Alawite clothing shop owner from Jabal Mohsen, told Human Rights Watch that he had decided to close his shop in Tripoli permanently following the May clashes and subsequent attacks on Alawite shops. In 2012, Sunni radicals attacked and destroyed his shop during Ramadan, and since then he twice had to empty his entire store to prevent it from being looted and burned again.

"Our [Alawite] shops are always hit when the fighting starts," he said. "Even if the fighting is far away from the shops, they will come and locate them and burn them when the fighting intensifies. Now, I have closed the shop because I am afraid they will just attack it again and then I would lose all the clothes and my investment."

Shopkeepers in Tel told Human Rights Watch that on the night of June 6, four armed men on motorcycles attacked one of the largest Alawite-owned shops in Tripoli, Just Sport, which had \$200,000 worth of clothes and sports merchandise inside. The shop is near a police station. The men opened fire on the closed shop with automatic guns. Abbas, an Alawite working in a nearby shop, told Human Rights Watch that a passing army patrol confronted the gunmen, leading to an exchange of gunfire that led to the death of one of the gunmen, while a second was arrested.

In all of the other cases Human Rights Watch documented, shop owners, their neighbors, or employees said that security forces did not try to stop attacks that were under way. A shop owner told Human Rights Watch of one other incident, in which the army escorted the shop owner to his shop to remove his merchandise during clashes so that his inventory would not be destroyed if his shop was attacked.

In two of the seven documented cases in which shops were targeted, witnesses said that security forces investigated the attack after the fact. In one of the cases where there was no investigation, Abbas explained to Human Rights Watch what happened after the shop he worked in was attacked: "I told Military Intelligence that [the attackers] tried to burn the place down and they said there isn't anything that they can do." In no case did victims say that the government provided compensation for their losses or that anyone was held accountable for the attacks.

Speaking about the lack of compensation and accountability, the Sunni cell phone shop owner, Omar, who believed that his shop was mistakenly identified as belonging to an Alawite, said:

They hit the place when no one was around. Of course they [the perpetrators] are not from Jabal Mohsen. I know who they are but I am not going to tell you ... I had to pay over \$4,500 to repair the place and there is still more to do. I lost a lot of merchandise. You can see it [is destroyed]. The High Relief Committee has not helped with anything. The guys that hit the place don't have money to eat let alone to compensate me. The ones responsible for the attack do not take orders from anyone.

On November 6, Human Rights Watch wrote to the HRC to request information about its compensation program and efforts to compensate Tripoli residents after violent clashes but has received no response.

In the absence of an adequate government response to the violence, three of the Alawite shopkeepers told Human Rights Watch that they felt compelled to pay protection money to Sunni militants from Bab al-Tabbaneh. While these extortion demands are not new, the shopkeepers told Human Rights Watch that they became more prevalent in the summer of 2013. Malek, the Alawite clothing shop owner from Jabal Mohsen, said:

People from Bab al-Tabbaneh come to my shop and ask for money for them to protect this shop. I pay them maybe 100,000 Lebanese pounds [approximately \$67] per person, they come once a month or so ... There are two different groups from Bab al-Tabbaneh I am paying now for protection. I have seen guns with them ... If I don't pay them, how will I be able to walk down the street? I need their protection.

Abbas, the Alawite who works in an Alawite-owned shop in the Tel neighborhood, also said that he paid regular bribes to Sunni gunmen:

People came asking for money, and I gave them money to protect the place. The authorities know about this, as I informed them. [Those asking for money] are thugs from the street. The authorities

allow them to do this, so that they don't do worse. I informed Military Intelligence that these guys [are asking for protection money]. I pay them every month about \$150-200. The head of the groups are the ones that come for the payment ... They can keep me from working here if I don't pay them.

Wissam, the owner of the barbershop in the Tel neighborhood, said his shop had been attacked by Sunni gunmen on three occasions it was burned it down on April 9, leaving him deeply in debt and without income.

He said the first attack was in the summer of 2012, when Sunni gunmen fired about thirty rounds from an AK-47 automatic weapon into the shop during a funeral procession for a Sunni fighter killed in clashes with Jabal Mohsen fighters. The repairs, mainly replacing the shattered shop window, cost nearly \$1,000.

One month later, shortly after the end of another round of clashes, he said, a group of five or six armed men came to the barbershop, beat up two Sunni barbers working there, and began destroying the equipment. The damage from that attack forced Wissam to take out a \$7,000 loan to repair his shop, he said. He told Human Rights Watch that he filed a complaint against the men who had attacked the shop, whom he and others in the neighborhood knew by name, but authorities did not arrest or prosecute the attackers.

In March, gunmen from Bab al-Tabbaneh again came to Wissam's shop and offered him a deal: if he paid them 500,000 Lebanese Pounds (\$330) a month in "protection money," which they characterized as jizya, his shop would be safe. Wissam refused their demands, which he characterized as extortion, and explained to the gunmen that with his small shop, he could not afford such a large sum.

Wissam told Human Rights Watch that on April 9, the same gunmen returned, told the employees to go outside, and poured gasoline all over the shop, then set it on fire. As the shop was burning, the gunmen remained in the street, preventing neighboring shop owners from attempting to put out the fire. It took Lebanese security forces nearly an hour to arrive, by which time the shop had been completely gutted and the gunmen were gone.

Despite the claim filed by Wissam, and his assertion that the identity of the men who destroyed his shop is well-known, the authorities have not detained or charged the men with any crime in relation to these events. With damages estimated at \$25,000, he has given up on attempting to reopen. Wissam is still repaying the previous \$7,000 loan he took out to repair his shop. He said:

Before these incidents, I used to go around freely and even stay late in the Tel neighborhood. But now, I am always afraid when I go out [of Jabal Mohsen]. Nobody verbally attacks me, and my neighbor[ing shop keepers] are compassionate people. But there are a lot of armed people everywhere. Just yesterday, I was helping out in my father's barbershop [in Tel neighborhood] and a man in a motorcycle just pulled out a gun and started firing in the air for no reason ... I have lost my work, I don't have any money to pay my children's tuition, and I am now supported by my 80-year-old father who is ill but insists on going to work every day to support us.

Background

Divisions and clashes between the Alawites of Jabal Mohsen and the Sunnis of the surrounding neighborhoods including Bab al-Tabbaneh have roots in Lebanon's civil war (1975-1990) as well as in the economic and social marginalization of both communities. Violent clashes between gunmen from the two communities have erupted periodically in armed clashes since May 2008 and have intensified since the uprising in Syria in March 2011 developed into an armed conflict. The war in Syria has sharpened divisions between Tripoli's small Alawite community, which has longstanding ties to the Syrian government, and its much larger Sunni community, many of whose members are sympathetic to the Syrian opposition.

On some occasions, the fighting in Tripoli appears to have been in direct response to defeats and victories of one side or the other in the Syrian civil war. For example, when fierce fighting broke out between the Syrian opposition and the Syrian Army backed by Hezbollah over control of the city of Qusayr in May, Sunni gunmen from Tripoli attempted to come to the assistance of the Syrian opposition but were reportedly repelled by Hezbollah forces. The Sunni gunmen attacked Jabal Mohsen instead. One of the Sunni commanders explained their actions to a reporter, saying: "As long as Qusayr is surrounded, Jabal Mohsen will be surrounded."

In Jabal Mohsen, armed groups are mostly under the direct control of the Arab Democratic Party (ADP), although various neighborhood commanders display some autonomy. Such centralized control does not exist in Bab al-Tabbaneh and the surrounding Sunni neighborhoods, where a profusion of armed groups operate under independent commanders, with varying ideologies and loyalties.

While media reports have accused Lebanese politicians of providing direct financial support to the Sunni gunmen in Tripoli, the clandestine nature of such relationships make them difficult to document. When Human Rights Watch asked a local gunman in Bab al-Tabbaneh about his sources of support, his answer was that his group relied on their own resources. He told Human Rights Watch: "We don't get any money from politicians. This is all talk."

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