

Tattoo Sectarianism

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Brief Analysis



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There is not a war in the world that does not bring misfortune. Even if Hezbollah wins the Syrian war, sharp divisions among the Lebanese Shia will remain. The war has exacerbated the phenomenon of sectarianism in a variety of ways. Day after day, the region's poor become poorer, while the middle class make profitable investments.

Frustration and resentment are widespread among poor members of the Shia community, and the failure of Shia political parties to improve the lives of their constituents has only contributed further to this mentality. This phenomenon has reverberated inside tattoo shops. Particularly among the lower classes, undereducated youth, the unemployed, and other marginalized members of society, tattoos are becoming a more common and powerful representation of inner turmoil.

Religious tattoos grew quickly in popularity after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. Many of these tattoos carry a sectarian connotation associated with the Shia sect. This highly sectarian connotation, in many ways, reflects the willingness of individuals in strictly delineated sectarian regions to wage any battle to defend their religious communities. These tattoos are most prevalent among poor communities, thus distinguishing members of the lower class even further from their counterparts in other social classes who have already endeavored to segregate themselves from the poor--by neighborhood or school, for instance.

Recently, a group of unemployed and socioeconomically-disadvantaged Shia youth held a series of meetings in Beirut's southern suburbs. Although they had not joined the ranks of Hezbollah, they belonged to a constituency that would typically support the party, commonly known as "popular incubators." As an expression of frustration at their living conditions and the Syrian war, and as an homage to the Imam Hussein's words about courage and nobility in warfare, each agreed to get a tattoo incorporating symbols of the Shia sect. One tattoo shop owner, Muhammed said that from 2013 to 2015, many youths took interest in tattooing their bodies with religious images. He and his friend tattooed nearly 1,700 young Shia during this time period. Turnout declined sharply in 2016, down to 200 from early 2016 through March 2017.

Among the most popular tattoos were: "Rise to avenge Hussein;" "We are all your Abbas, Zainab;" "Save us, oh Remnant of God;" and "Oh, Zainab." Many get new tattoos to cover old ones that do not carry religious significance. The Imam Hussein and his brother, Abu Fadl al Abbas, were both historical models of patience in the face of poverty

and social deprivation, two problems prevalent within Lebanon's Shia-dominated suburbs. Likewise, through their tattoos, the youths demonstrate their willingness to make sacrifices of flesh and blood in what they see as a frustrating, prolonged battle in Syria.

Youth interest in tattoos is connected with the outcome of the war; as the war recedes, so too does interest in tattoos. After the battle of Aarsal last July, the tattoo market was once again reenergized, according to Muhammed.

Tattoos have allowed poor Shia communities to engage in the discourse of war with their bodies, granting them a voice they lacked previously. Depending on how much of their body is covered in religious symbols and slogans, the sight of their bodies sometimes frightens others. "The form of the tattoo on my body incites fear," said Muhammed. "I live in an environment filled with problems, where people use a number of light weapons. Tattoos communicate a message to others that I am able to respond to aggression."

The ability to send this message is also relevant when it comes to class conflict. An incident in mid-2016 in which a group of young people residing in the poverty-stricken Al-Harsh area stormed the wealthy area of al-Janah reflects the degree of frustration and anger that many poor Shia hold toward their wealthier counterparts.

24-year-old Hussein has transformed his body into a symbolic canvas depicting Shia history, with the quote, "Oh, Abbas" written across his chest. According to Hussein, the images that cover his body represent the sanctity of the Shia and are tied to the wars in Syria and Iraq. The teardrop tattoo at the corner of his left eye reminds him of his sadness for the death of Imam Hussein, he explains; it also reflects his persistence in finding his daily sustenance. But the teardrop has another story: teenagers often use it to symbolize their involvement in gangs scattered throughout rough neighborhoods.

20-year-old Jaafar says that the events that have occurred where he lives in the Sabra neighborhood, an area known for crime, has caused him fear: "Violence rules the area, and drug addicts roam through it with impunity," he says.

The Lebanese government has not implemented development projects in Beirut's southern suburb of Dahieh for decades, nor have the Shia political parties been much help. This has created fertile conditions for violence. "We are prepared for acts of violence because our living situations force us to be this way," according to Jaafar.

Meanwhile, the Lebanese security apparatus conducts raids into poor Shia areas to arrest outlaws, including drug and arms dealers. While it sends them to prison by the hundreds, it lacks the resources necessary to rehabilitate them. A cursory glance at official security reports reveals that a large number of convicted youth were born in the 1990s, including Jaafar. By his account, the prison system failed him: "I entered prisons on account of my bad behavior, and I came out much worse."

To make matters worse, demonstrations by these "troublemakers" often turn violent. In March 2017, Lebanese civil society organizations and activists organized demonstrations against the government's move to raise taxes. During the protest, a group of masked individuals chucked water bottles at Prime Minister Saad Hariri's head after he arrived to invite the demonstrators to form a committee to discuss the tax issue. Their behavior caused a wave of resentment among the elite toward Lebanese civil society movements. The demonstrators subsequently withdrew from the streets, fearful of being drawn into danger.

For many years, both Hezbollah and Amal have claimed to represent the demands and aspirations of Lebanese Shia. They have attempted to consolidate their power by co-opting marginalized groups, but lately they have begun to ignore and cater less to their poorer constituents. In particular, Hezbollah does not have a plan to improve the lives of deprived communities, which helps explain their increased involvement in the Syrian War as a tool of distraction. The depth of the crisis afflicting the poor is unclear, but it is currently too serious to contain.

In recent years, Hezbollah has relied on a media campaign in order to portray its intervention in Syria as a war to

protect Lebanese Shia, and to mobilize public opinion in favor of this military campaign. However, these efforts to sway the Shia community, combined with increased militarization due to the war, have only exacerbated the issue.

Media loyal to Hezbollah has also attempted to obscure the plight of the Lebanese Shia community by publicizing superficial successes. In mid-June 2017, one pro-Hezbollah TV station launched an ad campaign that depicted Dahieh, the southern suburb of Beirut, in prime condition--with clean streets and policemen regulating traffic. The campaign at-tempted to portray the party's Syria intervention as a preemptive war on terror neces-sary to preserve the stability and beauty of Beirut's suburbs. However, the ads were quickly countered by a young, pro-Hezbollah woman, who wrote in a Facebook post that the situation in Dahieh was much worse than depicted in the ad.

The situation of poor Lebanese Shia will likely deteriorate over time, as the situation in Syria continues to wreak havoc on the Lebanese Shia community. One consequence could be the birth of a movement that sows even more chaos than is already present. The upper class is largely unaffected by the consequences of sectarian divisions at the moment. However, if these tensions consolidate into a new, organized political movement, all socioeconomic groups in Lebanon will feel its effects. ❖

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