

BETWEEN “SOVEREIGNTY” AND “SURRENDER”: MAPPING LEBANON’S POLARIZED PUBLIC DISCOURSE

TRENDS WATCH ALERT

BIWEEKLY SUMMARY

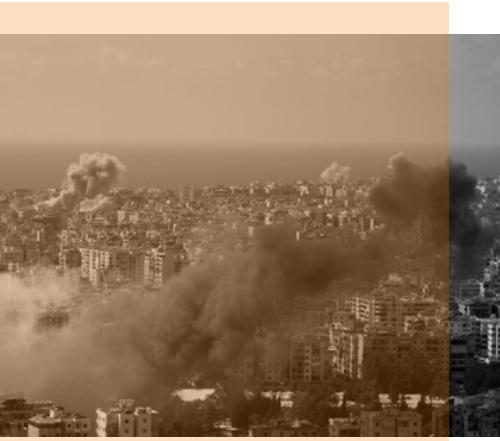
13 - 22 APRIL 2026

The ongoing war in Lebanon and the broader Middle East has caused a deep divide within Lebanese society regarding this war, its causes, and the responsibility of the parties involved. This internal division is not limited to this issue; it has extended to many domestic topics and positions, so that numerous Lebanese affairs and various political, social, and other stances have become axes of alignment, disputes, and conflicting narratives. Added to this are numerous violent and inflammatory speeches, as well as distorted or false news, which exacerbate internal divisions.

Therefore, this project monitors social and political discourse in the public sphere by following issues that media outlets, political actors, social media platforms, and influencers prioritize, with the aim of shedding light on them, tracking their narratives, understanding who stands behind them, and assessing the risks they carry. These topics often reflect societal trends and reveal the positions of key actors regarding them.

This series of reports is prepared with the support of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF).

1. WHAT IS THE CONTEXT?



Between 13 and 22 April 2026, a series of major political developments triggered intense public and online discourse in Lebanon.



On the security level, the period came in the aftermath of “Black Wednesday,” on April 8th, when Israeli strikes targeted Beirut and multiple regions across the country, resulting in more than 300 deaths and approximately 1,000 injuries. The scale and intensity of the attacks captured widespread public attention and became a central reference point in subsequent political and media debates.



Politically, two key developments acted as immediate triggers for public discourse. First, the Cabinet’s decision on April 9th, to designate Beirut as a “disarmed zone” and to instruct security forces to enforce this measure. Second, the government’s position on negotiations—specifically its refusal to allow Iran to represent Lebanon in talks with the United States on a ceasefire with Israel, and its assertion that Lebanon alone holds the sovereign authority to engage in direct negotiations with Israel through American mediation in Washington.





The Lebanese-Israeli negotiations in Washington on April 14th, that followed this decision, widely described as a historic development for Lebanon and the Middle East, further deepened divisions among Lebanese actors. Political discourse surrounding these negotiations became increasingly charged, marked by accusations, allegations of treason, and explicit threats.

On 16 April, Al-Akhbar newspaper published positions reflecting the level of tension prevailing within the country and among its various components. These positions directly challenged Lebanese state authority, warning that the President of the Republic and the Prime Minister were endangering civil peace and lacked legitimacy, having come to power under external influence. Within this framing, government decisions—particularly those related to “the Resistance”—were portrayed as illegitimate, implying that they should be disregarded.

Subsequently, President Joseph Aoun’s speech on April 17th, following the announcement of a ceasefire introduced a new and highly sensitive political framing of direct negotiations with Israel under American sponsorship. The speech generated significant reactions and divided responses into two main camps: those who supported it as a sovereign initiative aimed at achieving peace for Lebanon, and those who rejected it as surrender to the enemy and a betrayal of the blood of Resistance martyrs.

2. WHAT NARRATIVES AND PUBLIC DISCOURSES EMERGED?

Two polarizing narratives around these events were identified:

Sovereignty

“Sovereignty” narrative supporting the government’s decision to engage in direct negotiations with Israel and to instruct the army and security forces to strengthen state control over Beirut and restrict weapons exclusively to legitimate forces.

Surrender

“Surrender” narrative opposing these decisions.

Each was supported by political and media actors as well as large groups of social media users, contributing to the perception of Lebanon as divided into opposing camps.

These narratives were reflected most prominently in the discourse of two outlets representing opposing editorial poles during the period under review: Al-Akhbar and Nida Al Watan. They were selected for analysis because they most clearly articulate contrasting editorial stances and entrenched framings of the events, while other actors further reinforce and circulate these broader dynamics.

Partisans of the “sovereignty” narrative considered these decisions as sovereign, necessary, and long-overdue steps toward restoring state authority, stabilizing the country, and achieving peace, presented as being in Lebanon’s national interest. This narrative emphasized Lebanon’s right to hold exclusive decision-making power, portraying the country as no longer a platform for external actors’ conflicts but as a state capable of defending its own interests and free from Iranian interference, which was depicted as having dragged Lebanon into “futile wars.” It also stressed the importance of restricting weapons to legitimate state forces as a constitutional principle, framing this as essential to re-establishing state authority and sovereignty.

In contrast, the "surrender" narrative framed these developments as a dangerous alignment with US and Israeli interests rather than an assertion of sovereignty. The government's decision to designate Beirut as a "disarmed zone" was portrayed as a "gift to the occupation," weakening Lebanon internally while Israeli attacks continued. Officials were accused of "conspiracy" and of adopting the enemy's narrative by justifying strikes as targeting Hezbollah positions, thereby legitimizing civilian casualties.

Direct negotiations with Israel were framed as submission, betrayal, and surrender, with claims that Lebanese authorities were coordinating with US-Israeli agendas through Washington. In this framing, rejecting Iranian mediation was not seen as an assertion of sovereignty, but as a shift toward Western alignment at the expense of internal balance.

The same polarization was reflected in public discourse on social media.

Both narratives involved forms of delegitimization of the opposing side. In this latter narrative, delegitimization extended to state leadership, portraying the President and Prime Minister as externally imposed, lacking political and popular legitimacy, and warning that their decisions—particularly regarding the Resistance—could provoke civil unrest. Media outlets critical of Hezbollah were labeled "Vichy media," in reference to the Vichy government in France, and accused of promoting "enemy narratives" and contributing to a broader process of "Israelization."

While the opposing view reinforced the government's legitimacy as the sole representative of the state and the only constitutional authority empowered to make sovereign decisions, it simultaneously portrayed Hezbollah as having imposed its will on the Lebanese state, functioning as a parallel authority that constrains state sovereignty and constitutes an existential threat to Lebanon, with warnings that this dynamic could trigger civil conflict. Given the perceived risks Hezbollah poses to national stability, calls for decisive action by the state and army. Federalism as an alternative framework to manage Lebanon's internal divisions was also advanced.

3. HOW WERE THESE NARRATIVES CONSTRUCTED AND FRAMED ?

partition as a response to disarmament

Conspirators threat to civil peace

Subordination Traitors

Political suicide Collaboration Assassination

Mercenaries **Dependency**

Existential threat Barbarians

government overthrow

Both sides rely on highly charged language, accompanied by mutual accusations of “collaboration,” “subordination,” and “dependency,” as well as terms such as “mercenaries,” “traitors,” “barbarians,” and “conspirators.” The rhetoric increasingly aligns with war discourse, including threats of street mobilization and confrontation.

Responses to the President’s proposal for direct negotiations were similarly marked by hostile framing, including terms such as “political suicide,” “assassination,” “existential threat,” “threat to civil peace,” “government overthrow,” and “partition as a response to disarmament.” Notably, accusations of treason directed at the President and Prime Minister, along with comparisons to the fate of Anwar Sadat, signatory of the Egypt-Israel Peace treaty, illustrate the escalation of rhetoric and the use of implicit threats. In some cases, this rhetoric is accompanied by explicit warnings of street mobilization and the potential overthrow of the government, reflecting a shift from discursive confrontation to pressure through public unrest. This underscores both the intensity of polarization and the growing normalization of intimidation-based framing.



Within this polarized framing, opposing interpretations were systematically constructed around competing moral absolutes. The “surrender” narrative is articulated in open confrontation with the Lebanese government and presidency, accusing them of functioning as an “occupation authority” and as agents of external agendas, particularly those of the United States and Israel, and at times alleging complicity in aggression. This narrative goes as far as stripping state authority of legitimacy, arguing that it emerged under foreign tutelage and that the concept of legitimacy in Lebanon is therefore meaningless.

Conversely, Nida Al Watan accuses Hezbollah of seeking “illusory victories” internally after losses against Israel and calls for decisive action by the state and army. However, neither side articulates meaningful middle-ground initiatives or structured dialogue.



The framing of the negotiations between Lebanon and Israel further reflects this polarization. Supporters describe them as a “historic moment” that breaks taboos, ends Hezbollah’s “futile wars,” and restores sovereign state decision-making. Opponents, by contrast, characterize the authorities in highly charged terms such as “bowing,” “betrayal,” “shame,” “concession,” and “serving the enemy,” arguing that they bear responsibility for deterioration across all levels.

Furthermore, both narratives offer conflicting interpretations of the “Black Wednesday” Israeli strikes in Beirut. In Al-Akhbar, Ibrahim Al-Amine described the event as a massacre that shocked Washington, while Nidaa Al Watan reported that some targeted sites were indeed Hezbollah positions, offering two contradictory versions of the same event.

These framing patterns reflect a broader fragmentation of public discourse into competing narrative systems, in which actors construct divergent moral judgments, assign legitimacy in opposing ways, and even dispute factual accounts of the same events.

4. HOW WERE THESE NARRATIVES AMPLIFIED AND BY WHOM?

These narratives were amplified through a combination of traditional media outlets, political actors, public figures, and social media channels, which together contributed to the rapid circulation and polarization of discourse.



Lebanese media outlets played a central role in amplifying competing frames. Outlets aligned with or critical of Hezbollah, such as Al-Akhbar and Nida Al Watan, did not merely report events but actively reinforced opposing political interpretations through editorials, opinion pieces, and selective framing of news stories. While Al-Akhbar amplified narratives emphasizing resistance legitimacy and the government's alignment with external agendas, Nida Al Watan emphasized state authority, institutional sovereignty, and the need to disarm non-state actors.

Political actors further reinforced these narratives through public statements and televised interventions. Hezbollah representatives and allied figures framed government decisions as surrender and external alignment and threatened the government of street mobilization, while supporters of the government emphasized sovereignty, constitutional authority, and the exclusivity of state decision-making.

Mohamad Qamati (Hezbollah's vice president):

“After the victory, the state will face two options: either apologize to the people and reverse its decisions against Hezbollah, or face peaceful popular anger that may lead to its downfall”.



Ibrahim Al-Moussawi:

“Lebanon’s authority produces nothing but a path of free concessions to the enemy. We reject Lebanon entering into direct negotiations with the enemy and consider it a grave mistake. There is no broad national consensus that allows the authority to negotiate directly... There is no objection to negotiations, but they should not be direct and should not take place under fire.”



Hassan Fadlallah:

“Whoever wants to be an ‘Antoine Lahad’—we will fight them as we fought the Israelis... The May 17 agreement will not pass in Lebanon, even if we stand alone.”

Minister of Information Paul Morcos:

“The President’s speech laid out a roadmap for the country based on exercising national sovereignty and transforming Lebanon from being a card in anyone’s pocket into a state that negotiates on its own behalf.”



Ashraf Rifi:

“...Your Excellency, proceed with your faith and sincerity. The Lebanese are weary of the merchants of the temple and those of crime, killing, terrorism, and Captagon. The Lebanese are placing their trust in you and your presidency; their lives and dignity are entrusted to you, and the future of their children does not belong to a culture of death... We stand with you, along with all sincere and patriotic Lebanese.”



Michel Moawad:

“We tell President Salam that we support you in limiting arms to the hands of the state, in considering Hezbollah’s military and security activities as outside the law, and in engaging in direct negotiations with Israel so that we do not remain victims of others’ wars.”



Influencers, journalists, and commentators on social media further intensified polarization by reproducing these frames, often accelerating the spread of accusations such as betrayal, treason, and legitimacy crises.

Zeinab Hawi:

“History will record that under Joseph Aoun’s presidency, the oath speech was violated and no effort was made to pursue a path toward discussing a defensive strategy that protects Lebanon and the South... History will record that during his term, weapons were confiscated and the resistance was restricted... that the door to direct normalization with the killer was opened... and today he is paving the way for direct negotiations with the war criminal Netanyahu, calling on us, the Lebanese, to stand behind him ‘to preserve’ our rights... You, your presidency, and your circle are the ones who squandered the land, gambled with people’s lives, and withdrew the army to allow the occupation to advance further and seize more territory... Down with all these faces!”



Abdel Ghani Tleis:

“...Your speech sent Netanyahu a message of surrender. That is what it is, and that is how he understood it. And this matter is not up to you. Your reference to Anwar Sadat should remind you of his end, because his decision did not come from the people but from Kissinger’s promises...”

Charles Jabbour:

“The equation that should govern the next phase in Lebanon is the following: insisting on maintaining Hezbollah’s weapons requires a counter-response calling for partition, as there can be no coexistence with weapons that impose wars and kill Lebanese people. Enough wars, enough being dragged into conflicts...”



Naufal Daou:

“Where did Hassan Fadlallah get the theory that the state violates the constitution when it negotiates with Israel? What constitutional text says that? And since when has the constitution become a reference for Hezbollah? Was it on May 7, 2008? Or during the ‘black shirts’? Or in the wars of ‘if I had known,’ Syria, and ‘support’...?”



Elie Sakr (Head of the Diaspora Authority in the Kataeb Party):

“The speech is a pivotal moment in Lebanon’s history in which the president laid the foundations for restoring national decision-making and affirmed the choice of protecting the people above all else... It outlined the path out of the ‘mini-state of war’ toward the state, sovereignty, and peace.”



5. WHY DOES THIS MATTER? (RISKS & IMPLICATIONS)

The fragmentation of public discourse into opposing narratives poses serious risks to Lebanon's social cohesion and stability. Each side claims to represent the truth and the national interest, leaving little room for dialogue and reinforcing an "us versus them" dynamic in which political opponents are treated as existential threats. This mutual framing as both victim of conspiracy and sole defender of the nation deepens fear, undermines trust, and obstructs political life.

Furthermore, this polarization extends across both social media and mainstream media, where outlets increasingly amplify accusatory and provocative narratives, further deepening divisions and weakening trust in institutions and information.

The normalization of hostile rhetoric, including accusations of treason, calls for mobilization, and warnings of civil conflict, raises the risk of escalation beyond discourse. Both narratives contribute to this dynamic, whether by legitimizing opposition to state authority or by calling for decisive military or coercive action, ultimately increasing the likelihood of confrontation.

More broadly, the absence of shared ground between actors and the perception that divisions are irreparable reflect a fragile national context. Combined with ongoing external threats, these dynamics sustain a volatile environment in which polarization, distrust, and competing narratives undermine stability and prospects for national consensus and unity.

BEYOND POLITICAL NARRATIVES

Despite the existence of opposing narratives, a common pattern across media coverage was observed: Lebanese media outlets, for the most part, focused heavily on political figures and political analysis, with limited engagement with the lives and daily realities of ordinary citizens, including their social conditions and lived experiences during times of conflict.

This imbalance raises questions about the media's role in reflecting societal realities. Beyond political coverage, media outlets play a key role in conveying people's voices, documenting their living conditions, and presenting a comprehensive picture of society. Limited attention to these dimensions risks deepening social divides and weakening a shared sense of national belonging.

An exception to this pattern is the French-language newspaper *L'Orient-Le Jour*, which, during the period under review (Monday, April 20 and Tuesday, April 21), dedicated sustained coverage to people's experiences, amplifying their voices and documenting the human impact of the war.

