

# FROM TRIGGER EVENTS TO SECTARIAN POLARIZATION: COMPETING NARRATIVES, HOSTILE RHETORIC AND DIGITAL AMPLIFICATION

## TRENDS **WATCH ALERT**

**BIWEEKLY SUMMARY**

**23 APRIL - 7 MAY 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?



Against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Lebanon—intensifying political polarization and sectarian sensitivities—two incidents in late April to early May 2026 inflamed public discourse.

- **First incident (April 25, 2026 - Saqiyat al-Janzir, Beirut):**



On Saturday afternoon, April 25, State Security forces attempted to arrest a generator owner, Hassan Itani (“Abu Ali”), a generator owner, in the Saqiyat al-Janzir area after he failed to comply with a judicial summons related to generator violations. The operation quickly escalated when residents intervened, leading to clashes, gunfire in the air, and the blocking of major roads across Beirut by protesters. The incident triggered political reactions, particularly among Sunni leaders, who framed it as an affront to the dignity of Beirut’s residents. Within hours, what began as a routine enforcement action turned into a national issue tied to sectarian tensions and distrust in security institutions. According to An-Nahar (27 April 2026), “voices rose in the capital, reaching as far as the Grand Serail, demanding accountability for the officer in charge of the patrol—a Shiite officer (Colonel Mohammad Shreim)—and calling for the prosecution of State Security members who fired warning shots into the air.”



- **Second incident (May 1, 2026 - LBCI video):**

On May 1, 2026, LBCI aired a short AI-generated satirical video inspired by the video game Angry Birds, portraying Hezbollah fighters and its Secretary-General in a cartoonish battle scenario. The video sparked immediate backlash from Hezbollah supporters, who launched a large-scale online campaign targeting religious figures, particularly Maronite Patriarch Bechara al-Rai, through manipulated and derogatory images. The escalation unfolded primarily on social media but was reinforced by political statements. The timing—over a weekend and during the Labor Day holiday, when print media was absent—contributed to intensified online engagement and rapid spread. The judiciary also intervened, and LBCI announced on May 3 that it had removed the cartoon following an order from the new public prosecutor at the Court of Cassation, Ahmad Rami Hajj.



In both cases, relatively limited triggers; an arrest operation and a satirical, AI-generated video; rapidly escalated into nationwide controversies, revealing how quickly public discourse in Lebanon can shift from specific events to broader identity-based and political confrontations within a highly volatile environment where political, sectarian, and media tensions intersect.

## 2. COMPETING NARRATIVES, REACTIONS, AND AMPLIFICATION DYNAMICS

### A. Saqiyat al-Janzir incident:

The Saqiyat al-Janzir incident generated multiple, competing narratives depending on the source, reflecting sharp disagreements over what happened on the ground, as well as questions of legality, proportionality, and underlying political meaning. Accounts of the incident varied widely, while the official narrative remained limited in scope and detail.

While State Security presented a procedural and legal framing, traditional media such as LBCI combined the official account with reporting on violations related to generators and procedural concerns raised by the detainee's lawyer. MTV amplified a more critical narrative, focusing on alleged excessive force, civilian endangerment, and broader patterns of controversial security conduct. Television coverage played a particularly central role in accelerating the spread and politicization of the incident.

An-Nahar news website, while relaying the official account, also introduced an alternative explanation linking the escalation to disputes over generator pricing and alleged pressure to reduce tariffs for displaced persons, with the refusal contributing to clashes involving gunfire and minor injuries. In contrast, Al-Akhbar website focused on the confrontation dynamics and popular intervention, reporting that supporters of Itani attacked the patrol, freed the detainee, and enabled his escape, while noting armed fire during the withdrawal.

As for print coverage, the story received limited attention, with some outlets omitting it due to timing as, by Monday, it had lost immediacy. Others, notably Al-Liwaa, framed it as evidence of deeper structural fragility, selective law enforcement, and a persistent risk of sectarian escalation.

Political figures then reinforced these framings through public statements, helping transform the incident from a localized security operation into a wider national debate about state authority, sectarian tensions, and institutional legitimacy.

Political figures then reinforced these framings through public statements, helping transform the incident from a localized security operation into a wider national debate about state authority, sectarian tensions, and institutional legitimacy.

**Secretary-General of the Future Movement Ahmad Hariri:**

“Beirut will not calm down until the state preserves the dignity of its people by holding all those responsible in the State Security apparatus accountable for the thuggery committed against our people in Saqiyat al-Janzir and against Abu Ali Itani...”

**Prime Minister Nawaf Salam:**

“The violence committed by members of one of the security agencies against civilians in the Saqiyat al-Janzir area, including gunfire and the intimidation of citizens, is unacceptable regardless of the reasons or justifications...”

Other political actors affiliated with the Future Movement also warned that they would not accept a “new 7 May,” recalling earlier episodes of internal conflict, in reference to the events of 7 May 2008, when Hezbollah-affiliated fighters took control of parts of Beirut amid a broader political and security crisis.

On social media, the hashtag [#ساقية\\_الجنزير](#) ([#Saqiyat\\_al-Janzir](#)) first emerged on 25 April, the day of the incident, as the main entry point for circulating information about it. It was initially used as a news-based hashtag to describe the location and developments of the event before quickly turning into a space for public debate with diverging viewpoints.

Alongside it, the hashtag [#بيروت\\_خط\\_أحمر](#) ([#Beirut\\_Red\\_Line](#)) later emerged on the same day, as narratives around the incident fragmented into divergent interpretations. It focused on protecting the “dignity of Beirut” and rejecting what was viewed as an affront against its residents, while opposing reactions largely remained confined to critical comments within the original hashtag or through individual responses, without the emergence of a unified counter-hashtag.

This trajectory reflects the shift from describing the incident as a localized event to framing it within broader symbolic narratives tied to sectarian identity and dignity, contributing to polarization and transforming the incident into a public opinion issue that exceeded its immediate context.

## B. LBCI video:

The LBCI video initially triggered immediate backlash from Hezbollah supporters, which quickly escalated into a large-scale online campaign targeting religious figures, particularly Maronite Patriarch Bechara al-Rai, involving defamation through digitally altered and degrading images that became a key driver of its spread.

As interaction intensified, 2 May saw a shift toward supportive hashtags such as **البطريرك\_الراعي** and **#بكركي\_جبل** (**#Patriarch\_Rai** and **#Bkerke\_Mountain**), which peaked around midday, alongside hashtags such as **#الرموز\_الدينية** and **#المقامات** (**#Religious\_Symbols** and **#Sacred\_Institutions**) that reframed the debate within a “defense of religious authority” narrative. This trajectory reflects a shift from media criticism to visual defamation, before being recontextualized within a broader identity- and religious framework.

In parallel, no unified opposing hashtag emerged. The response also extended beyond static images, with AI-generated videos circulated on platform X modifying the original video by redirecting the message against the opposing camp within the same dynamics of escalation. These videos were characterized by their speed, simplicity, and ease of reproduction, enabling rapid and wide dissemination.

The incident also unfolded through competing narratives in public statements by religious and political figures, journalists, and activists, centering on issues of freedom of expression, political criticism of Hezbollah, and concerns over civil peace. Hezbollah responded by condemning the video as an offensive and deliberate attempt to inflame tensions and provoke civil strife, calling for restraint and legal action.

Some commentators focused on the backlash involving manipulated images of Patriarch al-Rai as part of broader identity and political struggles. Defenders of free expression emphasized satire and criticism as falling within the right to free expression, while critics of Hezbollah highlighted its intolerance toward criticism and its perceived negative impact on national cohesion. Political and religious leaders, including the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of Parliament, and the Maronite Patriarch, quickly condemned the prevailing discourse, denounced attacks on religious figures, and called for calm, warning that escalating rhetoric and attacks on symbolic figures risk undermining social cohesion and fueling civil strife.



**Nabih Berri**

“condemned the campaigns of insult and attacks against religious and national symbols ‘regardless of where they came from or through what medium, whether in the media or the virtual sphere,’ calling on the Lebanese people to ‘be aware of the dangers of sliding toward strife, something that the common enemy of the Lebanese – Christians and Muslims alike – has long dreamed of and sought to ignite...” (Source: Al Akhbar)



**Serge Dagher (Kataeb Party):**

“You respect neither the Patriarch, nor the President, nor the Prime Minister, nor Lebanon, nor the sects, nor the Lebanese people. We are not surprised – we know you well: no morals, no sense of belonging, nothing Lebanese about you. Mercenaries, 100%. But now your true nature is being exposed, in case anyone was still deceived. The war will end, but the real question is: can there still be coexistence with you afterward? The statement is directed at a party, not a sect. The sect itself is the first victim of your destruction.”



**Nizar Saghieh:**

“Any religious figure who engages in the political arena must courageously accept criticism directed at them. Those who influence people’s lives cannot deny people the right to criticize them under the pretext that they are a religious symbol. On the other hand, any campaign targeting a religious figure not because of what they do or say, but because of what they represent, or as retaliation for a figure from another religion, may constitute incitement and hate speech.”



**Annahar News:**

“The campaign of insults against Patriarch Al-Rai raises questions: Is Hezbollah experiencing a phase of deliberate indiscipline aimed at political intimidation? Or does what is emerging reflect internal fragility and a decline in organizational control after Hassan Nasrallah?”

---

Reactions reflected the depth of polarization in Lebanon around national issues and ongoing events. Some observers described the dynamics as a digital manifestation of escalating tensions, while also warning that such patterns reflect a decline in the level of public discourse, with potential implications for freedom of expression.

Overall, this development signals a shift from political disagreement to sharper identity-based polarization, contributing to the transformation of the incident into a public opinion issue that extends beyond its immediate media context, similarly to the case above.

### 3. COMMON FRAMING PATTERNS ACROSS THE TWO INCIDENTS

#### Escalation and ‘provocation’ framing:

Both incidents were framed by different actors as deliberate triggers—either media content or security action— aimed at targeting specific communities, designed to provoke unrest or destabilization.



- **MP Ibrahim Mousawi:** “We strongly condemn LBCI’s overt attempt at incitement and at dragging the country toward civil strife and internal division, in the context of an ongoing Israeli war of aggression against Lebanon.”
- **Secretary-General of the Future Movement Ahmad Hariri:** “Are there individuals within the security agencies who have turned into a militia and decided to play with the fire of sedition and to undermine the efforts of Arab brothers to preserve Lebanon’s stability, security, and peace?”

#### Sectarian and identity-based framing:

The incidents were interpreted through a sectarian lens, with emphasis on collective dignity, representation, and perceived targeting of specific communities (e.g., Beirut’s dignity in the Saqiyat al-Janzir case, and religious symbols such as the Maronite Patriarch in the LBCI video case). Each side presented itself as defending collective identity against insult or targeting.



- **An-Nahar summarized the situation with the headline:** “Sunni-Shiite tension exploded in Saqiyat al-Janzir” (April 27, 2026).
- **Salim Sayegh:** “The campaign against the Maronite Patriarch is not merely criticism, but part of a deeper struggle over Lebanon’s identity and future. It began when His Beatitude proposed the idea of Lebanon’s neutrality, which contradicts Hezbollah’s project...”

### Broader crisis framing:

In both cases, the incidents were rapidly interpreted by different actors through broader political and structural lenses, linking them to wider issues of institutional fragility, sectarian tension, and national instability.



- Al-Liwaa, April 27, 2026: “The Saqiyat al-Janzir incident in Beirut was not merely a local dispute over electricity generator pricing, but rather a revealing moment that laid bare the structure of the Lebanese state. Its surface was a service dispute between residents and a security agency, but its deeper layer is a much more profound crisis...”

“To understand the roots of the crisis, it is necessary to go back to the post-civil war period, specifically the era of Syrian tutelage. Institutions were not built on a constitutional basis but on the balance of militias that emerged from the war and entered the state”.

- **MP Melhem Khalaf** : “We are facing the danger of the disappearance of what remains of our national social fabric, and a reality that could spiral out of control at any moment if not addressed with wisdom and responsibility.”

Reactivation of conflict memory was also evident through recurring references to “sedition,” “civil strife,” and historical patterns of instability, which evoked Lebanon’s civil war legacy and reinforced perceptions of systemic fragility and political mistrust.

## 4. WHY DOES THIS MATTER? (RISKS & IMPLICATIONS)

---

Both cases illustrate how quickly public discourse can escalate into sectarian tension, as events are reframed through identity-based lenses. This dynamic risks deepening societal divisions and undermining civil peace by transforming discrete incidents into broader communal confrontations. The rapid circulation of emotionally charged narratives across media and social platforms, including the use of AI-generated content, further increases the likelihood that digital tensions may spill over into offline spaces, particularly in already polarized contexts.

A further concern is the normalization of hostile discourse. The frequent use of insults, dehumanizing language, and accusatory rhetoric contributes to polarization and increases the risk of physical confrontation.

At the same time, the boundary between legitimate criticism and incitement becomes increasingly blurred. This ambiguity creates a dual risk: it may encourage restriction of freedom of expression, while also enabling the spread and justification of hate speech under the guise of political commentary.

This underscores the importance of both media and individual responsibility in public expression, in order to avoid contributing to the amplification of divisions.