



ASFARI INSTITUTE FOR
CIVIL SOCIETY & CITIZENSHIP
معهد الأصفري للمجتمع المدني والمواطنة
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

CIVIL SOCIETY OBSERVATORY ON WAR, DISPLACEMENT, & EVOLVING NARRATIVES IN LEBANON



Brief #1
Displacement
and Discrimination

**Safety, Exclusion,
and Displacement
in Wartime Lebanon**

August 2026

ABOUT THE BRIEF SERIES

The Civil Society Observatory on War, Displacement, and Evolving Narratives in Lebanon produces a series of short briefs examining key themes emerging during the 2026 war.

The briefs draw on media coverage, social media, interviews, and field observations to document how experiences of displacement, solidarity, exclusion, and civil society response are unfolding and being discussed over time.

The series aims to capture shifts in public discourse and civil society responses as they occur, while highlighting the tensions, challenges, and forms of collective action that emerge during the conflict.

Author

Clara Ghorayeb

Clara Ghorayeb earned her bachelor's degree in psychology, with a minor in Gender Studies, and is currently pursuing her master's in educational psychology at the American University of Beirut (AUB). Her interests include structural inequalities, collective care, and social issues in Lebanon and the broader region. She has also been involved in volunteer and activist initiatives focused on social and humanitarian issues.

Suggested citation

Ghorayeb, Clara. Displacement and Discrimination: Safety, Exclusion, and Displacement in Wartime Lebanon. Civil Society Observatory on War, Displacement, and Evolving Narratives in Lebanon, Brief No. 1. Beirut: Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship, American University of Beirut, 2026.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission from the publisher, except for brief quotations used for scholarly or non-commercial purposes with appropriate citation.

© 2026 Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship, American University of Beirut.



**ASFARI INSTITUTE FOR
CIVIL SOCIETY & CITIZENSHIP**
معهد الأسفاري للمجتمع المدني والمواطنة
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

CONTEXT

With the escalation of the war in March 2026, Lebanon has witnessed one of the largest waves of internal displacement since the 2006 war¹.

As Israeli airstrikes violated Lebanon's south and Beirut's southern suburbs and expanded into the Bekaa, Mount Lebanon, and other regions, thousands of families sought refuge in areas deemed less exposed to danger². Schools, hotels, private homes, public buildings, streets, and open spaces served as sites of accommodation and shelter for displaced individuals, while municipalities, civil society organizations, and volunteers mobilized to respond to urgent humanitarian needs³.

Throughout this humanitarian response, questions of safety became central to both private and public discourse. Municipalities started debating how they should manage the incoming population; communities attempted to process the rapidly fluctuating security conditions, and displaced individuals assessed where and how to relocate. Labeling places as "safe" and "unsafe" became increasingly common across news stations, social media, and interpersonal interactions; assigning the label based on how affected by the war the area was. Official sources such as the United Kingdom government even issued travel advice about the areas deemed unsafe ("Advise against all travel") versus areas considered safer ("Advise against all but essential travel")⁴.

Security concerns in times of war are normal, expected, and justified. Risk perceptions are often shaped by the uncertainty of the situation, the incessant airstrikes, and the possibility of further escalation. However, the language of security and the discourse around it began shaping the way individuals perceive one another: over time, security concerns originally linked to geographic locations and demographic features increasingly became associated with certain groups of people, based on their identities, communities, and political parties they associate with⁵.

This brief examines how the security discourse has been used to justify discriminatory practices toward displaced individuals, while looking at how pre-existing sectarian divisions intersected with resurgent fears, resulting in new forms of profiling and exclusion. It is important to discern legitimate security concerns and credible risks arising from active conflict, versus discriminatory practices justified by generalized assumptions or stereotypes that displaced individuals inherently pose a security threat. While fear of airstrikes or further escalation was real, these concerns were, in many cases, extended to entire communities due to perceived political affiliations assumed from religion and place of origin.

¹United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). UNRWA Situation Report #13: Lebanon Emergency Response 2026. June 22, 2026.

²Anera. "Lebanon War Escalation 2026: What Happened and Why Thousands Are Fleeing." March 6, 2026.

³Ghali, Maria. "All Eyes on Lebanon: How to Help as a New Displacement Crisis Unfolds." AD Middle East, April 9, 2026.

⁴Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. Lebanon Travel Advice. May 21, 2026.

⁵Salhani, Justin. "They Want to Create a Rift: Israeli Attacks Deepen Lebanon Fissures." Al Jazeera, April 7, 2026.

THE UNFOLDING OF OLD SECTARIAN TENSIONS

It is important to note that the discriminatory practices explored throughout this brief cannot be limited solely to a result of the current conflict but rather should be understood with the context of decades of already existing sectarian and political segregation and disagreement. This conflict did not create these tensions but rather awoke collective memories of violence, past conflicts, and dormant anxieties. Many discussions about the war and the stances people were taking regarding the

displacement issue reflected memories from past wars, including older conflicts with Israel and the Lebanese civil war, fueling longstanding political disagreements and intensifying already present sectarian divisions.

These dynamics were not universal: these same historical memories that arose pushed some people to act differently, explicitly rejecting sectarian divisions, wanting to make a change in the narrative, and emphasizing collective responsibility.

"SAFE AREAS" VERSUS "SAFE PEOPLE"

One of the earliest observable narratives that emerged following the escalation of the war included the identification of "safe" areas. During the first few weeks of the conflict, people viewed certain areas as safer than others, based on the locations that were considered less likely to be targeted. Mountain villages, coastal towns, and several Christian-majority towns were often perceived as safer than Beirut's southern suburbs, parts of the Bekaa, and South Lebanon. Initially, these statements were based on military realities⁶: airstrikes were concentrated in those specific regions described as "unsafe"; therefore, many people avoided these areas. However, as displacement increased, the safety of an area was no longer purely reflective of military action and the likelihood of airstrikes, but also included the people inhabiting certain areas, whether as permanent residents or in temporary shelters.

The language used surrounding displacement started changing increasingly, reflecting this paradigm shift. Public conversations went from questions such as "Which areas are being bombed?" toward questions such as "Who is arriving? Will our area change? Will it be at risk?" Geography began to increasingly intertwine with assumptions about identity, a transition particularly visible on social media platforms. Warnings were frequently shared over WhatsApp communities, Facebook groups, and news channels encouraging residents to be more vigilant about their surroundings and unfamiliar individuals in their neighborhoods, especially regarding Syrian and Palestinian refugees, as well as migrant workers^{7,8,9}. In many cases, these warnings did not target specific security issues but rather emphasized and demonized the presence of displaced populations.

⁶Public Works Studio. Israeli Attacks on Lebanon: Bombing and Target Types—Investigation Map. Accessed August 7, 2026.

⁷Centre Libanais des Droits Humains (CLDH). Left Behind: Systemic Discrimination against Migrant Workers during the Israeli War on Lebanon. May 2026.

⁸Minority Rights Group International. "Lebanon: Exclusion Exacerbated by War." February 5, 2025.

⁹PBS NewsHour. "Migrants in Lebanon Displaced Again as Mideast Conflict Escalates." YouTube video, March 2026.

MUNICIPAL RESPONSES

The weaponization of displacement was not limited to interpersonal interactions and discourse. In many towns, municipalities adopted measures that framed displaced populations through a security lens. Some municipalities issued decrees requiring displaced individuals to register with local authorities and increased monitoring of newcomers and even removed displaced people's tents and told them to leave¹⁰.

While these measures reflect genuine administrative challenges associated with rapidly increasing populations, they also had unequal social consequences. Registration requirements and selectively imposed curfews disproportionately affected families arriving from heavily bombarded areas, most of whom were already experiencing displacement, financial insecurity, and intense psychological distress.

In addition, many municipalities required property owners to notify local authorities before renting apartments to displaced individuals. In some municipalities, local authorities assessed prospective tenants, including their political affiliations, before approving the rent. The way municipal announcements would frame the situation at hand is noteworthy: rather than describing displaced individuals as civilians requiring assistance, they frequently emphasized the need for heightened security measures, surveillance, monitoring, verification of identity, and mandatory notification to local authorities, resulting in the alienation and othering of displaced individuals. In doing so, a humanitarian crisis was perceived and treated as a security concern for many, giving rise to debates around questions such as: Should we allow displaced individuals in our "safe" towns? Would doing so put us at risk?



June 25, 2026

¹⁰L'Orient Today. "Forced Displacement: Beirut Municipality Removes Uninhabited Tents near Summerland and in Biel." June 22, 2026.

¹¹France 24. "Hotels, Flats Turn Away Lebanese Displaced over Fears They Could Be Israeli Targets." March 16, 2026.

¹²Al Jazeera Staff. "Israel Destroys Southern Lebanon Towns, Hits 'Safe' Areas around Beirut." Al Jazeera, April 6, 2026.

HOUSING DISCRIMINATION

As the number of displaced people and the demand for rental housing dramatically increased, many individuals opened their houses for the displaced population, but the experience was unfortunately not the same everywhere. Across Lebanon, many reports documented displaced families being refused housing. The refusals were not explicitly justified through religious or political language, but rather framed as security concerns, fear of hosting military targets, or desires to "protect the neighborhood." Through this language, exclusion was presented as a reasonable response to wartime insecurity rather than blatant sectarian discrimination¹¹. On April 6, 2026 there was an Israeli airstrike on a predominantly Christian town, Ain Saade, which killed three civilians and left many scared and injured¹². Due to this and other similar incidents, many public debates shifted from humanitarian questions concerning housing availability towards discussions over whether landlords should rent to individuals perceived as coming from "targeted" communities. The effects of these attacks on the rental market became increasingly apparent through countless interviews

with displaced individuals looking for shelter: many displaced families were denied rent after admitting they came from Dahye, South Lebanon, or other highly targeted areas. Place of origin frequently became a proxy through which landlords and residents inferred religious affiliation, perceived political alignment, and the likelihood that a property might become a military target. Individuals and families who identified as Shiite repeatedly endured rejections, suspicions, and discriminatory behaviors, even after proving their political neutrality¹³. The discrimination displaced communities faced is not limited to outright refusal of rent: many landlords reportedly requested significantly higher rental prices from displaced individuals than from residents, justifying it by highlighting the increased demand and the perceived risk of becoming military targets, while others would request very large security deposits¹⁴. All these practices of othering and discrimination targeting displaced people added to the financial and emotional strain these communities were already under, making the already devastating conflict even more difficult to endure.

¹³Hayek, Cynthia. "« Je ne loue pas aux musulmans »... à l'ombre de la guerre, le retour des vieux démons." L'Orient-Le Jour, June 8, 2026. 11

¹⁴Barakat, Jana. "Lebanon: Displaced between the Fires of War and the Greed of Rent." Daraj, March 11, 2026. 12

¹⁵France 24. "Hotels, Flats Turn Away Lebanese Displaced over Fears They Could Be Israeli Targets." March 16, 2026.

¹⁶Hayek, Cynthia. "« Je ne loue pas aux musulmans »... à l'ombre de la guerre, le retour des vieux démons." L'Orient-Le Jour, June 8, 2026.

/ PROFILING

The security discourse was not limited to formal policies but also became visible in everyday interactions. Regardless of municipal decisions, families were asked where they came from before being offered accommodation. Assumptions about religion and political affiliations often became an important factor in the renting process, with some landlords refusing to rent to people from the Shia sect, or people whose houses were in Beirut's southern suburbs, southern Lebanon, or the Bekaa. In some cases, rent advertisements specifically mentioned that they were not accepting Muslims, and in other cases, displaced individuals were privately rejected after disclosing where they had come from¹⁵.

These decisions were commonly justified by needing to maintain neighborhood security rather than using

explicit sectarian language, contributing to the normalization of security discourse as a justification for exclusion and othering.

A very straightforward example is what happened to Ms. R., a Shiite woman proved of not to have any affiliation with any political party, trying to rent an apartment in Hazmieh, a predominantly Christian town. The owner of the apartment was ready to rent it out to her and her family, but the neighbors were not comfortable with it. They said: "Même si la municipalité a donné son accord, est-ce elle qui nous dédommagera si les Israéliens bombardent l'immeuble?" ("Even if the municipality approved, would she compensate us if the Israelis bomb the building?")¹⁶ This kind of exclusion was reported repeatedly, disguised as fear and weaponized to discriminate against unwanted displaced individuals.

created exclusion and fear also fostered new forms of cooperation between communities frequently represented as socially or politically divided. Acts of solidarity and discrimination were documented simultaneously, sometimes even in the same neighborhoods or communities. Therefore, reducing the Lebanese response to acts of solidarity or acts of exclusion alone would be a misrepresentation of the variety of the lived experiences of displaced communities during the crisis.

/ SOLIDARITY

Importantly, these discriminatory practices did not occur uniformly across Lebanon, nor did they define the Lebanese civil society's response. Alongside discrimination, profiling, and exclusion, countless individuals, municipalities, religious institutions, civil society organizations, and informal grassroots initiatives mobilized to support displaced communities regardless of religion, political affiliation, or regional identity¹⁷. While the conflict intensified existing sectarian divisions in some areas, it reinforced solidarity and transcended social divisions in others.

Several communities that were displaced themselves made significant contributions to the volunteer work

needed in shelters, for example in Raseef restaurant, where kitchen staff were not only staff or volunteers but displaced people themselves¹⁸, or in many other shelters where much of the organizing, cooking, and other essential tasks were taken care of by displaced people living in these shelters.

In many areas, residents publicly affirmed that humanitarian obligations should be prioritized over political and sectarian divisions, calling for national unity, and challenging the narratives in some cases suggesting that religious identity inevitably leads to patterns of exclusion or inclusion¹⁹. The coexistence of these divergent responses is a crucial aspect in need of closer observation: the same conflict that

/ LIMITATIONS

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this brief.

First, most of the evidence available and used in this brief comes from interviews, social media posts, volunteer testimonies, and media reporting, rather than from peer-reviewed datasets and research. This means that the findings reflect observable patterns but cannot capture every instance of exclusion or act of support that took place during the conflict.

Second, limited coverage likely shaped the scope of the findings. Because displacement was unfolding in real time and access to some affected areas was constrained, certain experiences may remain undocumented, particularly in parts of South Lebanon and the Bekaa where access by aid and civil society initiatives has been limited. As a result, the brief may not fully capture less visible forms of

discrimination or support.

Third, the material used as evidence in this brief may be skewed towards publicly visible, widely shared, and emotionally compelling cases, which might create a reporting bias where dramatic incidents result in more attention than routine experiences. Fourth, the political and sectarian sensitivity of the topic may have influenced and limited what people were willing to publicly state because of reputational, security, or social concerns, and others might have emphasized one aspect while downplaying another. Finally, this brief focuses solely on housing access to displaced people during the 2026 escalation of the war. It does not attempt to provide a full historical context and account of sectarian divisions and relations in Lebanon, nor does it assess long-term changes in attitudes in Lebanon.

¹⁵Ghali, Maria. "All Eyes on Lebanon: How to Help as a New Displacement Crisis Unfolds." *AD Middle East*, April 9, 2026. 11

¹⁸Ghorayeb, Clara. "More Than Aid: Raseef, a Community Space for Countless People." *The Asfari Institute for Civil Society & Citizenship*, June 3, 2026. 12

¹⁹L'Orient Today. "Lebanon's Religious Leaders Call for National Unity, Back State Efforts to Secure Cease-Fire." June 2, 2026.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Al Jazeera Staff. “Israel Destroys Southern Lebanon Towns, Hits ‘Safe’ Areas around Beirut.”

Al Jazeera. April 6, 2026.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/6/israel-destroys-southern-lebanon-towns-hits-safe-areas-around-beirut>

Anera. “Lebanon War Escalation 2026: What Happened and Why Thousands Are Fleeing.” March 6, 2026.

<https://www.anera.org/blog/lebanon-war-escalation-2026-what-happened-and-why-thousands-are-fleeing/>

Barakat, Jana. “Lebanon: Displaced between the Fires of War and the Greed of Rent.” Daraj. March 11, 2026.

<https://daraj.media/en/lebanon-displaced-between-the-fires-of-war-and-the-greed-of-rent/>

Centre Libanais des Droits Humains (CLDH). Left Behind: Systemic Discrimination against Migrant Workers during the Israeli War on Lebanon. May 2026. https://www.cldh-lebanon.org/HumanRightsBrie/3fd5b2d7-d2f2-46ad-b94d-64e4bb1257e6_Migrant%20Workers%20Violations%20Report%202026.pdf

Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. Lebanon Travel Advice. May 21, 2026.

<https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/lebanon>

France 24. “Hotels, Flats Turn Away Lebanese Displaced over Fears They Could Be Israeli Targets.” March 16, 2026.

<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20260316-hotels-flats-turn-away-lebanese-displaced-over-fears-they-could-be-israeli-targets>

Ghali, Maria. “All Eyes on Lebanon: How to Help as a New Displacement Crisis Unfolds.” AD Middle East. April 9, 2026.

<https://www.admiddleeast.com/story/how-to-help-lebanon-right-now-ngos-and-community-initiatives-supporting-displaced-families>

Ghorayeb, Clara. “More Than Aid: Raseef, a Community Space for Countless People.” The Asfari Institute for Civil Society & Citizenship. June 3, 2026.

<https://asfariinstitute.org/2026/06/03/more-than-aid-raseef-a-community-space-for-countless-people/>

Hayek, Cynthia. “« Je ne loue pas aux musulmans »... à l’ombre de la guerre, le retour des vieux démons.” L’Orient-Le Jour. June 8, 2026. <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1507239/-je-ne-loue-pas-aux-musulmans-a-lombre-de-la-guerre-le-retour-des-vieux-demons.html>

L’Orient Today. “Forced Displacement: Beirut Municipality Removes Uninhabited Tents near Summerland and in Biel.” June 22, 2026. <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1538969/forced-displacement-beirut-municipality-removes-uninhabited-tents-near-summerland-and-in-biel.html>

L’Orient Today. “Lebanon’s Religious Leaders Call for National Unity, Back State Efforts to Secure Cease-Fire.” June 2, 2026. <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1508722/lebanons-religious-leaders-call-for-national-unity-back-state-efforts-to-secure-cess-fire.html>

Minority Rights Group International. “Lebanon: Exclusion Exacerbated by War.” February 5, 2025.

<https://minorityrights.org/oummal/>

PBS NewsHour. “Migrants in Lebanon Displaced Again as Mideast Conflict Escalates.” YouTube video. March 2026.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILpJelg44bw>

Public Works Studio. Israeli Attacks on Lebanon: Bombing and Target Types—Investigation Map. Accessed August 7, 2026. <https://publicworksstudio.com/en/israeli-attacks-map/>

Salhani, Justin. “‘They Want to Create a Rift’: Israeli Attacks Deepen Lebanon Fissures.” Al Jazeera. April 7, 2026.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2026/4/7/creating-rift-part-of-game-plan-israeli-attacks-deepen-lebanon-fissures>

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). UNRWA Situation Report #13: Lebanon Emergency Response 2026. June 22, 2026.

<https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-13-lebanon-emergency-response-2026>

CONNECT WITH US



**ASFARI INSTITUTE FOR
CIVIL SOCIETY & CITIZENSHIP**
معهد الأصفري للمجتمع المدني والمواطنة

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT