

How Did a “Syrian” Child Become Lebanese?

A “Rape” with Taste of “Civil War..”

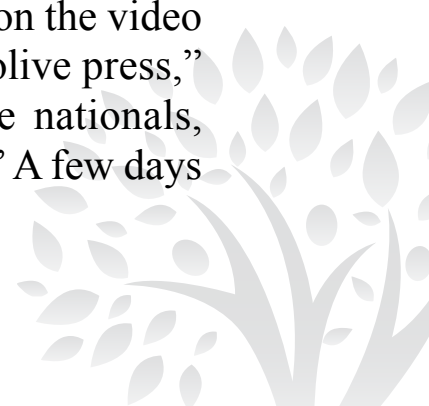
At the end of June 2020, a video of sexual violence against a “Syrian” child in a “Shia” West Beqaa village surfaced. The typical Lebanese mechanisms for containing scandal were put in motion and within days, the issue went off the radar of public opinion.

Although the Lebanese Initiative Against Discrimination and Racism would like to believe that the Lebanese judiciary will do its job properly in prosecuting the perpetrators of this crime, it nevertheless believes that a more detailed review of this issue is mandatory—especially since whispers of “civil war” have accompanied the unfolding of this case of sexual violence.

At the end of June 2020, a video was circulated on social media showing “a number of young men sexually harassing an unidentified minor, which caused great discontent among the public,” according to a statement issued by the Internal Security Forces (ISF) on July 2, 2020. The statement adds that investigations identified the victim as “a Syrian national born in the year 2007.” During the legal hearing, the victim, who should be now thirteen, stated that the attack captured on the video occurred “about two years ago, during his work at an olive press,” where “eight individuals, all of whom are Lebanese nationals, submitted him to sexual harassment and indecent acts.” A few days



Still from the video that prompted attention to the situation



later, on July 6, a second statement was issued by the ISF, stating that “a number of the suspects involved in the sexual harassment case surrendered themselves to the relevant authorities.”⁽¹⁾

On July 8, media outlets reported that the head of the municipality of Sohmor, the village where the attack occurred, held a press conference. The leader reviewed the facts of the case, and when asked about the victim, he asserted “He is one of the sons of the village... he was born and raised in it and his mother is one of the locals, so he is not a refugee as some media outlets reported... He is one of the people of this village and has many relatives and family connections.” In the same press conference, lawyer Ali Qamar also spoke on behalf of the village. He stated:

“What is surprising is that there is exploitation of the video [which shows the sexual harassment incident] in an abusive manner at an international level... the way the issue was depicted aimed to highlight that the child is a Syrian and that the offense against him happened in a specific milieu.⁽²⁾ The bottom line of all this is to prejudice [the image] of a specific political organization...”⁽³⁾

Once the judiciary became involved with the case, it faded out of the media as if no further action was to be taken except to wait for the court’s ruling. The defendants on the side of the victim considers the situation to be a victory, largely due to the fact that a number of these perpetrators surrendered themselves, while the perpetrators themselves deem the case to be closed with minimal losses since the public must now wait for the issuance of the judgment.

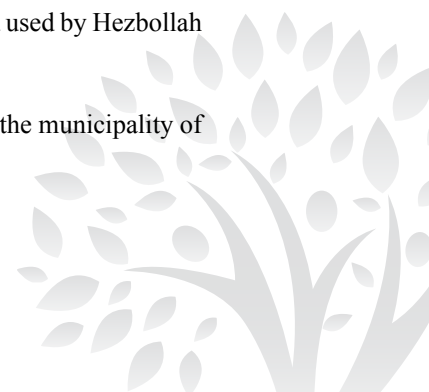
Despite the fact that the antagonism between the “victim’s party” and the “perpetrators’ party” is suspended until further notice, it

⁽¹⁾ The statements of the Internal Security Forces are available in Arabic on their website: www.isf.gov.lb

⁽²⁾ The Arabic word *bia*’ – translated here as “milieu” – used by lawyer Qamar is the word used by Hezbollah to refer to its constituency.

⁽³⁾ <http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/489373/nna-leb.gov.lb/ar>

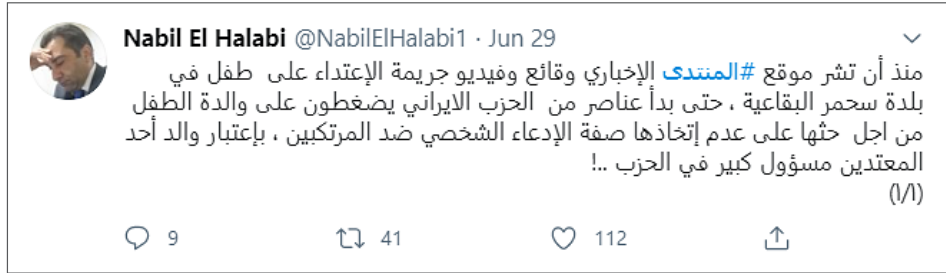
Of note, a video reproducing the press conference is available on the Facebook page of the municipality of Sohmor.



is deplorable that the issue did not go any further. This case was quickly set aside without looking at the lessons to be learned from it and the warnings it sent about the state of mind and of the neighborhood in that particular region of Lebanon, which houses a large segment of Syrian refugees.

So perhaps the first lesson learned is that any incident, even seemingly random in its nature, is subject to *politicization* related to the background of the deep divisions afflicting Lebanon. This politicization does not spare any aspect of life in Lebanon at the national level, and has the ability to compound divisions and fuel Lebanon with additional causes of sectarian, regional, and civil unrest.

In the case of this incident, the sectarian and local community aspect tensions are clearly visible. First, the Lebanese security forces showed lethargy in arresting the perpetrators, whose names had been publicly circulating on social media. It was only when a “bargain” (the details of which are unclear) was reached between the involved parties – the families and security forces – that *some of the perpetrators* were handed over to the Lebanese judiciary. This delay prompted all kinds of rumors to flourish, hinting that the perpetrators were enjoying the political protection of an influential organization, namely Hezbollah. While these rumors are unconfirmed, these claims were circulated by social media



A tweet published on June 29 by lawyer Nabil el-Halabi, coordinator of The Youth Forums, reads: “Since the al-Mountada website [the website of the Youth Forums] published the details of the offense against a Syrian child in Sohmor, members of the Party of Iran [i.e. Hezbollah] started to put pressure on his mother to stop her from filing a personal complaint against the wrongdoers because the father of one of them is a senior functionary of the party in question.”



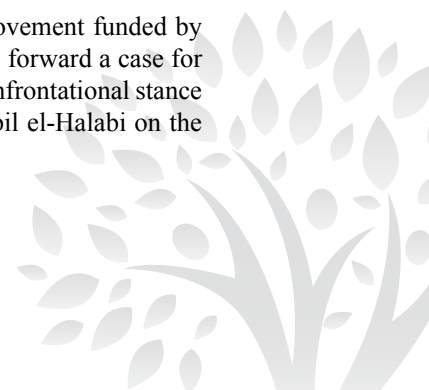
Irrespective of the veracity of the information el-Halabi published, the message made its way into public opinion. The municipality of Sohmor found itself compelled to counterattack on social media. The municipality produced a video, which they published on its Facebook page on July 7, that condemns the offense against the child, while also trying to refute the narrative of el-Halabi by featuring the mother of the victim denying her submission to any pressure. In addition, the video shows several Syrian refugees praising the welcoming attitude they receive in Sohmor, seemingly in attempt to provide counter-narratives.

accounts affiliated with an emergent political group⁽⁴⁾ that says it expresses the political frustration of the Sunni community and spearheads the defense of “Sunni rights,” and that does not hide its sympathy towards the hardship Syrian refugees are suffering in Lebanon. While the rumors are unconfirmed, their circulation among this group and its affiliates is not insignificant. In fact, the implication behind the rumors is that violation of the Syrian child’s body by allegedly Hezbollah-affiliated perpetrators is a reproduction of the violation of the right to life for all Syrians by militias allied with the Assad regime.

It needs to be noted that the geography of the attack adds light to the context. Sohmor is known as a “Shia” village that joins a number of surrounding “Shia” villages in forming a “Shia enclave” in the Sunni-majority West Beqaa area. Therefore, the location of the attack is not a politically devoid area. Interesting, the two statements issued by the ISF do not specify the village by name; only the second announcement referred to the location of the incident as “a West Beqaa village.” Additionally, the head of Sohmor’s municipality, by classifying the victim to be a “son of the village” and not a refugee, as well as the lawyer’s comments, both intended to confine the issue solely in the realm of morality, and thus to depoliticize the attack in contradiction to the above claims.

Furthermore, the contention over these claims escalated and permeated into the local community. A female activist from the village Labbaya, which is adjacent to Sohmor, was one of the individuals who was outspoken in criticizing the way the local authorities of Sohmor handled the case and in expressing belief that the perpetrators were enjoying political protection. In response, the municipality of Sohmor decided to prosecute the activists on charges of “defaming” and “insulting” the people of Sohmor. An added layer of complexity to this situation is that the mentioned activist is

⁽⁴⁾ This political group, “The Youth Forums,” is a sort of splinter within the Future Movement funded by Bahaa Hariri, the brother of Saad Hariri. Contrary to the Future Movement, which puts forward a case for “moderation,” the Youth Forums presents itself as a Sunni movement and promotes a confrontational stance vis-à-vis Hezbollah. About the Youth Forums, see for example the interview with Nabil el-Halabi on the MTV’s website in date of April 14, 2020.

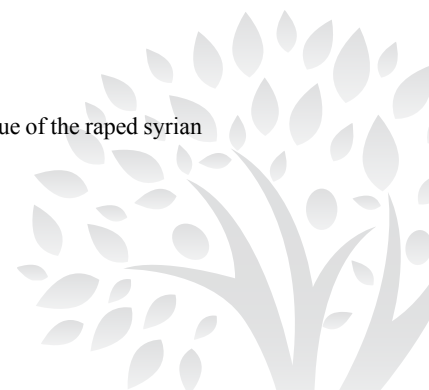


“Shia,” but she opposes the policies of the “Shia duo” of Hezbollah and AMAL. Tensions between her and the local representatives of this “duo” had been escalating since the outbreak of the “October 17 Revolution” in 2019. According to some sources, the emergence of the sexual harassment case and her criticism of its handling gave the partisan duo an opportunity to attack her, which they did by both compelling the municipality to sue her and prompting the police to summon her for further investigation!⁽⁵⁾

The second lesson deals with the silence that has overwhelmed past cases of sexual violence against refugee children—incidents that were largely neither publicized nor turned into public issues. The widespread attention, interaction of public opinion, and international organization engagement with the above case has spurred an interest in these types of incidents. On July 2, 2020, an international news channel followed up on this issue and interviewed a Syrian activist who talked about the occurrence of another sexual violence incident against two refugee children months ago in the same West Bekaa district; however, interventions led to the closure of this case. Although we only have this single testimony about the incident, a review of newspapers and recorded events of experiences of Syrian refugees in Lebanon pushes us not to question the probability of this incident, but rather to assume that it is one episode in a larger series of incidents.

The third lesson learned is based on the issue of citizenship in Lebanon: Lebanese women married to non-Lebanese are unable to give their nationality to their own children according to Lebanon’s citizenship laws. Indeed, while the official version of the Sohmor child sexual harassment case referred to the victim as a *Syrian child*, the revised version presented by the Sohmor municipality after the scandal was contained by placing in within

⁽⁵⁾ See the article published, in Arabic, by www.almodon.com: “Sohmor turns a blind eye to the issue of the raped syrian child and sues an activist,” July 7, 2020.



the judicial realm, focuses on the “Lebanese-ness” of the child, at least “culturally” if not legally. *Since the child was born to a Lebanese mother, it was presented as if the act of rape was one against a member of the Lebanese “family,” which is thus less susceptible to (political) reprehension than the act of rape against a Syrian refugee child.*

In light of these three identified areas of concern, the *Lebanese Initiative Against Discrimination and Racism* calls on the Lebanese judiciary to deal with this issue in the most appropriate way possible, taking into consideration not only severity of sexual assault against a minor but also the way this case ignited the sparks of sectarian and civil conflicts. There are currently doubts surrounding the Lebanese judiciary’s ability to operate independently, despite domestic desire and international calls to reform the judiciary system to ensure its impartiality. The case needs to be seen in light of the dynamics surrounding it: politicization and attempted de-politicization of the event as a continuation of attacks on Syrians within Lebanon, as spurred by the war in Syria; overall silence and perhaps active repression of reporting on sexual abuses cases against minors; and the issue of Lebanon’s patriarchal citizenship laws that confound identity and protection under the law and within society.

