

Friday, 25 January 2013

Skiing day out sparks Lebanon's latest sectarian showdown



It's ski season in Lebanon and everyone's hitting the slopes. But when the country's most controversial Sunni Muslim cleric took a convoy of supporters out for the day and was blocked by angry Christian protesters, many feared the trip could be the spark that would reignite Lebanon's sectarian flames. The long-bearded and bespectacled cleric Ahmed al-Assir, known for his inflammatory speeches and clashes with Shiite militants, took 10 buses on Thursday from his Sunni stronghold in the Mediterranean city of Sidon to Faraya, one of Lebanon's ski resorts. Residents of Kafar Zebian, a majority Christian area on the way to the resort, piled rocks and snow on the road in protest at what they saw as a provocation by Assir and his hardline supporters. A punch-up ensued and the Lebanese army intervened to break it up. With memories of the 1975-90 civil war still vivid, Lebanon's sectarian-based political factions have tried to minimize points of friction to avoid upsetting the careful balance that has kept the peace. Militant groups have traded gunfire over the past year as a civil war in neighboring Syria has deepened divisions among supporters and opponents of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Until a year ago, Assir was relatively unknown. But his speeches against powerful Shiite leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah and protests against Assad have won him the allegiance of many devoted Lebanese Sunnis, especially hardliners. In November, Assir and his gunmen tore down religious and political banners put up by Shiites to mark their ceremony of Ashura, triggering a shootout in which five people were killed. For a few hours on the road on Thursday there was a fear the protests could also escalate to something deadlier. Interior Minister Marwan Charbel and Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun called for calm and urged protesters to open the road. "We don't want another Ain al-Remmaneh bus," Lebanon's OTV quoted Aoun as saying, referring to an attack by Christian militants on a bus carrying Palestinians in 1975 that marked the start of Lebanon's civil war. Assir and the families accompanying him eventually got up the mountain, prayed and had a snowball fight as the sun set, the women clad in full-body black veils.