

Police step up presence in Dahiyeh

Matt Nash



Members of the Internal Security Forces recently began increasing their presence in Dahiyeh. (AFP / Joseph Barrak)

The Internal Security Forces are coordinating with Hezbollah, Amal and heads of the Municipalities in Beirut's southern suburbs (or Dahiyeh) to impose order. Launched last week, the "Order [comes] from Faith" campaign has so far focused on regulating traffic and unregistered vehicles, and de-cluttering sidewalks throughout Dahiyeh, residents told NOW.

Banners announcing the "Order [comes] from Faith" campaign hung from streetlights throughout the southern suburbs before its launch, and, according to *Al-Akhbar*, Hezbollah's *Endebat* (Disciplinary Corps), which had been controlling traffic at the request of the municipalities, awaited their replacements from the ISF.

The *Endebat* are not a police force, and Hezbollah cadres receive more military-style training, leaving them ill-equipped to act as cops when needed. Following the events of May 2008, when gunmen led by Hezbollah took over half of Beirut, the party requested the ISF come into Dahiyeh to help maintain order as unemployment in the southern suburbs rose.

That situation has no doubt been exacerbated following both the international financial crisis, in which many Lebanese living in the Gulf lost their jobs, and Lebanon's local financial crisis - the bankruptcy of Salah Ezzedine.

According to *Al-Akhbar*, in early November Hezbollah, Amal and municipality leaders requested the ISF increase their presence in the Dahiyeh so that there would be one Internal Security Forces member for every 2,000 people to help catch wanted criminals and reduce chaos in the area. *Al-Hayat* reported on Monday that 250 additional ISF officers are now on patrol there.

Neither the ISF nor Hezbollah responded to interview requests.

Dahiyeh, much like Beirut, witnessed repeated waves of immigration since Lebanon gained independence in the 1940s and people moved from villages because of economic opportunities near the capital or fled their homes because of war.

Also like Beirut, Dahiyeh bustled and grew with no eye toward urban planning. Many streets are narrow and winding, parking is scarce and the resulting traffic patterns often resemble anarchy. *Al-Akhbar* reported that in addition to traffic control, ISF members will crack down on people who clog the streets and sidewalks with unregistered carts, selling vegetables and various other goods, and such other common to

and sidewalks with unregistered carts, selling vegetables and various other goods, and push shop owners to remove their goods from the sidewalks.

"They're trying to make it look nicer," said the owner of a store that sells *kaak*, a kind of Lebanese bread.

"People wanted it," said Abbas, a clothing store owner. "They're fed up with the lack of order." He said that the new campaign was a good idea but will take time to implement.

"Some people are following the regulations and some aren't. Shop owners will move things off the sidewalks but put them back as soon as the police officer turns his back," he said. "Chaos is in our blood."

The ISF has long had a very light presence in Dahiyeh. Hezbollah maintains that the state neglects the suburbs and refuses to send security forces there to maintain order, while government officials claim Hezbollah refuses to let them enter. The relationship between Dahiyeh residents and ISF members, meanwhile, has been rocky.

Since the end of the civil war, protests in the southern suburbs have repeatedly ended with ISF members shooting demonstrators.

Several clashes between Dahiyeh residents and the ISF have also erupted in recent years when security forces members attempted to stop the construction of illegal buildings.

However, residents told NOW they are glad the ISF is present.

"The *Endebat* are all guys from the neighborhood," said one coffee vendor on a street corner. "When they stop someone riding an unregistered motorbike, they often know him and let him go. It will be better to have the police here to enforce the law."

And while residents said that crime is not a problem in Dahiyeh - "We have no crime; we have Hezbollah," said Fatima, a restaurant employee - the party's Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, recently suggested drugs - particularly pills - is a growing concern.

Speaking last week on Hezbollah's Martyr's Day, Nasrallah said, "Very regrettably, today the [drug] that is found in the country is pills. And that regrettably has infiltrated the preparatory schools and the secondary schools and - I am not exaggerating - into the universities."

Following meetings among representatives from Amal, Hezbollah, the Interior Ministry and Dahiyeh municipalities, sources told *Al-Hayat* that in implementing "Order [comes] from Faith," the ISF will not halt investigations for political reasons. Anyone suspected of a crime, regardless of their political affiliation, will be pursued and punished if necessary.

Ali al-Amin, however, wrote in Monday's edition of *Al-Balad* that "Order [comes] from Faith" is only being implemented in the parts of Dahiyeh controlled by Hezbollah, avoiding the areas where Amal is more popular.

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