



Crime but no punishment in Dahiyeh

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A portrait of Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah tied to a yellow balloon floats behind a Hezbollah flag in Beirut's southern suburb of Dahiyeh, where there have been reports of increased crime levels. (AFP photo/Marwan Naamani)

Above the clatter of *dama* drafts and between puffs of arguileh, Ahmad told us that he was tired of living in Dahiyeh. "It is like the law of the jungle here," he said. "Some people do whatever they like—and they get away with it. The current situation is great for those in power, but not for the rest of us."

Worrying levels of crime are not a new phenomenon in Dahiyeh, though it would appear that the situation has worsened in the past few years.

Ahmad said he wants the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and state institutions to operate in the Hezbollah-controlled area south of Beirut in order to clamp down on criminals, a view he says is shared by many residents.

Ahmad's experience echoes those of Asaad Charara, the *As-Safir* reporter who recently wrote an article criticizing what he perceived as increasing disregard for the community by boisterous residents and highlighting his frustration upon discovering that individuals with close connections to the Party of God were immune from prosecution or reproach.

But Dahiyeh's problems extend beyond increased noise levels and the pull of *wasta*, or connections.

The serious concern is the heightened levels of street crime witnessed in recent months, of which the robbery at the Mazen pharmacy on November 1 was the most striking example. Armed gunmen made off with 80 million Lebanese Lira (\$53,333) in that instance. Drug trafficking, fighting and intimidation also appear to be on the rise according to interviewees.

So what is leading to increased crime in Hezbollah's heartland? And why isn't the Party of God clamping down and boosting security in Dahiyeh?

Lockman Slim, a Dahiyeh resident and the founder of NGO Hayya Bina, believes that the answer mainly lies in the untenable political position Hezbollah has placed itself in. Not wanting to give credence to the view that it controls Dahiyeh, the party is not exercising absolute control. However, its leadership is in a conundrum, as it doesn't want the Internal Security Forces to intervene either.

"They are the victims of their own lies," Slim told NOW Lebanon. "They don't want the state to operate there, but they want to pretend that it is open."

Also, Slim says, the party is constrained by the fact that it is too risky to prosecute some people who are part of important Hezbollah families, and it doesn't want to risk alienating, or drawing the ire, of such families.

Wadah Sharara, a sociology professor at the Lebanese University and a columnist at *al-Hayat* and author of *Dawlat Hezbollah* (Hezbollah's state), claims the source of heightened levels of crime is due to the heterogeneous make-up of Dahiyeh, which includes Amal supporters, residents with links to drug trafficking from Hermel, Palestinians in Bourj al-Barajneh, and others with diverging political and economic ties. This, Sharara believes, combined with illegal construction and overcrowding, results in somewhat of a powder keg.

When attempting to resolve disputes, Sharara told NOW Lebanon, Hezbollah inadvertently sows the seeds of further conflict as it is naturally drawn to taking the side of those with closer ties to Hezbollah at the expense of others.

“When these opposing parties feel that they are no longer powerful, they will resort to tools to empower, such as smuggling, weapons, drugs, illegal building [and] theft,” Sharara said. “This all gives way to more disorder.”

Meanwhile, *Al-Hayat* editor Hazem al-Amin, who regularly writes on Dahiyeh, believes that another reason Hezbollah is hesitant to exert its control over security matters in Dahiyeh is its unwillingness to appear too heavy handed. He believes that, especially in light of regional protests against figures in authority, Hezbollah is reluctant to act in a manner that might result in a backlash against the party’s popularity.

However, exerting too little control is also likely to alienate residents who, like Ahmad, find the situation unlivable. This is the delicate political tightrope that Hezbollah is walking.

Hezbollah could give the ISF a greater role over security issues in Dahiyeh, but this does not seem palatable to the party. Previous attempts to do so, such the 2008 “security plan” or the “Order [Comes] from Faith” campaign in 2009, were criticized for the tight restrictions Hezbollah placed on ISF members.

“It’s a joke,” Slim said of the ISF’s current presence in Dahiyeh. “They come to perform like actors... If they need to arrest people, they are accompanied by the Hezbollah patrol who determines whether they can be arrested or [not].”

The party also limits areas the ISF can enter. A recent example occurred in July, when a blast went off in a building in Dahiyeh and Hezbollah members blocked off the area, preventing ISF members from investigating.

Neither Ahmad nor Slim expect the situation to improve in Dahiyeh any time soon. “From time to time [Hezbollah] might try to impose order by violence, but this can’t last,” Slim said, highlighting the party’s reluctance to create personal vendettas.

“Hezbollah today can’t change itself into a political party or morally police this area. So I think that [Dahiyeh] will get worse,” he added.

Nadine Elali contributed reporting.

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