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MAHA HOUTEIT & ADAM RASMI

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## Cafés in Dahiyeh may have a security function

Ordinary citizens provide information in exchange for certain benefits



Small ambulant coffee shops, known as “express” cafés, are noticeably multiplying on the streets of Beirut’s southern suburbs. Young men gather around in these cafés from early morning until well into the night, sipping coffee, smoking *shishas*, and watching television.

Many of these cafés are adorned with posters of Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, Speaker Nabih Berri - and, as of late, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. One Party source in Dahiyeh says: “These cafés primarily have a political function. The café’s young male patrons use them to pass on information quickly to party security headquarters - which, in turn, disseminate the incoming information especially if it is about a suspicious person or car.”

There are currently about 400 express cafés along the main roads and streets of Dahiyeh, especially at the entrances of various neighborhoods. “Shiyah has a special status as it encompasses a high number of these cafés due to its location as a junction between Ain al-Remmaneh, Tariq al-Jedideh, and Qasqas,” the Party source said.

The young men in these cafés are not professional security personnel affiliated to some party’s apparatus. Instead, they are ordinary folks to whom Hezbollah or the Amal Movement provides financial assistance in order to establish their cafés and buy the necessary equipment. Hezbollah and Amal turn a blind eye to the illegal location of these cafés in return for their providing security information. “If any café does not undertake its security mission, a ‘raid’ by the municipal police or security forces would be its punishment, thereby removing the café and forcing its owner to resume his security functions,” said the Party source.

A journalist and resident of Dahiyeh, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said to NOW: “There are many tools adopted by Hezbollah to control Dahiyeh’s ‘security.’” Teenage card players found on the street, for instance, often serve as informants. The source added that these cafés collect information valuable to Hezbollah officials, ranging anywhere from patrons’ behavior to personal details. “Many of these informants are even unaware that they are working closely with Hezbollah operatives,” the NOW source said.

In part, dire economic circumstances explain the growth in these types of cafés. People desperate for work take up the role of an informant, sometimes even disguising themselves to conceal their identities.

Still, not all the express cafés in Dahiyeh are used for security purposes. According to the same NOW source, the image of Dahiyeh as a surveillance site can be “exaggerated.” The source’s brother, for instance, owns a café in Dahiyeh and he is neither

a Hezbollah supporter nor an informant, as Party officials are well-aware he is a staunch leftist.

Since the 2006 war, these express cafés have become more prominent even as local residents have been asking where the funds for them are coming from. Meanwhile, Hezbollah has been using the cafés to encourage people to stay in the Dahiyeh instead of relocating to Hamra or Downtown Beirut, as many residents have done.

But as Syrians continue to pour into Dahiyeh as a result of the two-year old conflict, these express cafés are increasingly targeting the Syrian community. A curfew has even just been implemented for Syrians, prohibiting them from wandering the streets after 9 PM. The recent rocket attacks on Shiyah have only made the suspicion of Syrians grow, according to NOW's source in Dahiyeh.

Ali al-Amin, a political analyst for *al-Balad*, says that Syrians are already closely monitored regardless of these express cafés. "Hezbollah is aware of each Syrian present in Dahiyeh, as their identity cards are confiscated before settling in the area," al-Amin told NOW.

However, al-Amin does not agree that these express cafés primarily serve a security function. He says that they were first opened after the 2006 war as a means to employ small-business owners. "These cafés deal mostly with small, local quarrels, and not the larger and more important political issues relevant to Hezbollah."

*Yara Chehayed contributed to reporting.*