

Beirut's Dahiyeh: The Rise of the Outlaws



Hezbollah has repeatedly declared at the highest levels that it wants, indeed needs, the security forces to come into the area to combat crime. (Photo: Haitham Moussawi)

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The breakdown of law and order amid the growing presence of gangs in Beirut's southern suburbs threatens to undermine Hezbollah's standing in its urban heartland.

Some years back, Rida felt sure that Hezbollah was all-powerful, particularly in Dahiyeh – the sprawling southern suburbs of Beirut.

This conviction was shattered when the young party member was assaulted, in Dahiyeh itself, by a gang of youths from a family of known troublemakers. When he went to a local party office to ask for action to be taken against them, he was surprised to find the official in charge urging him to calm down and let things be. He was told that if the gang members were confronted,

their entire clan would become involved, and that would seriously harm Hezbollah.

Years later, Rida still occasionally bumps into some of his assailants. They have become more experienced. He recently saw one of them beat up an elderly mini-bus driver in broad daylight at a major crossroads. It turned out he had failed to pay them “protection money” for the right to operate along that taxi route.

Hezbollah officials in Dahiyeh are aware that one of the most important sources of the resistance’s strength is the popular support it enjoys in its milieu. But that milieu has spawned elements that are harming both the public and the party, and neither the state nor the “state within the state” are stopping them. The result is almost daily gunfights, traders forced to pay protection money, and thugs on the loose. This has all started to undermine the resistance’s public standing.

Extortion is openly practiced against store-owners, drivers and people engaged in other trades. No-one could question Rida’s commitment to the resistance, or to Dahiyeh, which in his words “produced hundreds of martyrs and thousands of resistance fighters.” But he said that allowing the situation to persist was like leaving a time-bomb to tick away. “If it explodes, the resistance and its milieu will be the first to suffer.”

Today, in some parts of Dahiyeh local “mafias” can be found specializing in everything from electricity generators and satellite TV subscriptions, to water distribution and mini-bus routes. Extortion is openly practiced against store-owners, drivers and people engaged in other trades.

In the Lailaki neighborhood, young men charge water tanker drivers a fee for allowing them to deliver supplies, says Heba, who moved there years ago.

Tawfiq, who has lived in Dahiyeh for three decades, says youths from a big local family force the owners of electricity generators to provide them with free supplies or pay them a monthly “protection insurance” premium. Providers of internet connections and satellite TV lines get similar treatment.

Until a few years ago, such practices were restricted to specific small neighborhoods, but they have now spread widely.

Where, local residents regularly wonder, are the police... or the security forces, or Hezbollah, or the Amal Movement, or anyone? Extortion for protection money is not the only thing the lawbreakers inflict on them, but it has become the major grievance and threat to social peace in an area with a population of around one million people.

A senior security official asked to explain the lack of policing in the area placed the blame firmly on Hezbollah. “When there was an explosion in Dahiyeh some years ago, the security forces were prevented from examining the site,” he explained. “That made us suspend implementation of the security plan we had drawn up for the area. We resumed working there later. But then there was the Ruwais explosion, and we were prevented from entering again. After that we decided to abandon the security plan completely.”

However, Hezbollah has repeatedly declared at the highest levels that it wants, indeed needs, the security forces to come into the area to combat crime. This is not new. In late 2009, Hezbollah’s Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah publicly urged the state to do more to curb drug-trafficking in Dahiyeh.

Another security official directly contradicted the assertion made by his more senior colleague.

He said there was “full coordination with Hezbollah with regard to the arrest of security violators” in the southern suburbs. “We we have never been prevented from doing our duty,” he added.

Interior Minister Marwan Charbel also spoke highly of the cooperation between police and local political parties and community leaders when he visited Dahiyeh earlier this year.

Hezbollah’s position was clarified by MP Bilal Farhat. “It is not true that the security forces are not allowed into Dahiyeh. We are fed up with this refrain,” he said. “If anyone has any doubts, they can ask the Minister of the Interior.”

Farhat and fellow Hezbollah MP Ali Ammar recently led a delegation of mayors of Dahiyeh municipalities who met the minister to demand more security officers and police stations in the area. Farhat stressed that security and order in Dahiyeh are high priorities for the party, noting that it launched a public awareness campaign on the issue last year.

But it does not take much to see that the campaign was a failure, and that more effective measures are required. One local Hezbollah official said that party recently set up a “crisis group” tasked with putting an end to racketeering and other excesses. The phone numbers of party officials were distributed to shopkeepers and other potential victims of extortion so they could contact them if subjected to further threats or attacks.

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There is a dedicated detail of the Internal Security Forces for Dahiyeh based in five police stations. But one official in charge complained it was severely undermanned – the perennial explanation for every security lapse in Lebanon. He explained that as a universal rule of thumb, seven policemen are needed for every 1,000 people in normal conditions, more when called for. Dahiyeh would therefore require 7,000 policemen, whereas the ISF brigade is only 200-strong. These include 100 traffic police, much fewer than needed given the congestion in the area. The number of emergency response personnel, who are normally deployed to deal with difficult situations, currently stands at six. They can be over-stretched by a single routine incident.

Another problem facing the contingent is that most of its members are from families resident in Dahiyeh that belong to clans hailing from the Bekaa Valley. One security official related an incident just days ago, when a patrol was sent in to deal with a gunfight that had broken out. It turned out that one of the rival sides had a longstanding feud with the family of the patrol’s commander. He decided to abort his mission “so there wouldn’t be new blood between the two families” that would fuel the vendetta.

Security officials acknowledge this problem, but say it is unavoidable because policemen from other areas do not want to work in Dahiyeh. They have no answer. Their ever-present justification is that “this is the reality.”

But according to one officer who has worked in Dahiyeh for many years, the only way the gangs can be curbed is through the intervention of military intelligence. “It knows the names of the active gang members and leaders. With four or five raids, each time arresting 15 of them, the others would be reined in,” he said.

Local municipalities are also making efforts to end extortion and racketeering in cooperation with the security forces, political parties and community leaders, according to Muhammad al-Khansa, head of the union of Dahiyeh municipalities. He urged “the judicial police in particular, with its investigators, to identify the leaders of these gangs and arrest them without hesitation.” He said

local people had sacrificed much, and deserve better than “to be left prey to thugs and crooks.”

Six years after the devastation inflicted in the June 2006 war, Dahiyeh’s reconstruction has been impressive. But there is whispering in its streets and alleyways, where posters of martyrs are ubiquitous. People think the resistance, which made Dahiyeh and the country stand proud, should find a way of restoring security to the area and preserving its social peace – whatever that takes, and however much the state shirks its responsibility.

This article is an edited translation from the Arabic Edition.