

Dahiyeh's Transformation From "Capital of Resistance" to Gang-ridden Slum

Hassan Wehbe died earlier this month in his neighborhood of Chiyah after being shot by Youssef Dimashq. According to the Lebanese daily *as-Safir*, Wehbe had come out of his shop to confront Dimashq, who was using a water bottle placed on the head of a mentally disabled person as target practice.¹ Although Dimashq claimed Wehbe's death was accidental, eyewitnesses recounted that more than five bullets had been fired in his general direction. The article also stated that the Wehbe family was being pressured "not to talk to the public" about the situation. That "gag order" likely stemmed from a relationship that existed between the Dimashq clan, once involved in illicit activities in the neighborhood, and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri. "This incident displays the blatant crime² and corruption that now permeates *Dahiyeh*," said one Chiyah resident. "How are we supposed to trust our leaders if they protect criminals at our expense?"

Beirut's southern suburbs, known collectively as *Dahiyeh*, hosts Hezbollah's physical and ideological centers of gravity. As the organization focuses on strategizing "resistance" against the "Zionist enemy," *Dahiyeh* is considered the physical manifestation of the "divine victory" and of Hezbollah's *defeat* of Israel in 2006. Thus, the organization exerts tight control over the area, caring much more about its own security than that of its residents. Its patently iron-fisted rule and lack of transparency explains why Lebanese and foreigners alike approach the suburbs with a mix of curiosity and trepidation. Given these security concerns, it is not hard to understand why so many people avoid visiting the area. While Hezbollah

portrays itself as the moral arbiter of the Lebanese Shia that possesses the religious authority to lead the state (owing to the theory of *Wilayat al-Faqih*), it has created a society hobbled by petty crime and lawlessness.

Crimes ranging from theft, murder, random violence, familial violence, and drugs are common in all neighborhoods. An infamous case of theft occurred on October 31, 2011 when armed men made off with LL80 million (roughly \$53,000USD) from the Mazen Pharmacy in Chiyah. An investigation into the incident revealed that three employees had masterminded the crime. In May 2012, a man in Jnah murdered his aunt and buried her under concrete in the village of Aley after selling her apartment for \$20,000.³ Three men were wounded in April 2012 after a dispute between a motorist and two policemen ended with shots being fired.⁴ Masked gunmen wounded two after they shot up a Mraijeh café in 2012.⁵ Seven people were injured during a brawl at a car inspection center in Hadath. Although that fight sprang from a simple disagreement between an employee and a client, it escalated after members of the Moqdad clan

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arrived with pistols.⁶ In a more tragic incident, a young woman from Rouwess was killed just two weeks after her wedding when a bullet from her husband's gun struck her in the head. Although the incident was inarguably accidental, it reflects both the prevalence of guns in local homes and the carelessness with which they are handled. In this case, the husband had been cleaning the gun when the accident happened. Amidst this local culture of violence, familial tensions and rivalries—typical throughout Lebanon—are intensified. In April 2012,



On November 9, 2009, a then-unknown association known as *Kyam (Values)* called a press conference at which it announced the launch of a campaign titled “an-Nizam min al-Iman” (Respecting the law is part of the Faith). The keynote speaker at the gathering was none other than MP Mohammad Raad, who headed Hezbollah’s parliamentary bloc. Interestingly, the logo used in that comprehensive campaign, which included posters, hometown meetings, mass messaging and other approaches, was a crescent centered on a traffic light. Obviously, the art selected was not chosen randomly as responding appropriately to those lights demonstrates one’s respect for the law and for its agents. The traffic light was also quite symbolic since driving in Lebanon is generally considered “challenging.” In Dahiyeh, however, it’s more like “survival of the fittest!”

for example, two individuals were stabbed during a brawl between members of the Fadel and al-Masri families.⁷ Later that month, a machinegun battle broke out between the al-Sabaa and Harb families in Bourj al-Barajneh.⁸ Finally, drug crimes are rampant, as many drug-dealers themselves live in the area. *The Daily Star* reported on May 16 that two young men were arrested in Bourj al-Barajneh for drug trafficking and drug abuse. One was wanted on 50 counts of drug trafficking alone.⁹ These are merely a handful of reported crimes in an area where most incidents pass with little media coverage.

The conspicuous lack of coverage given specifically to Mr. Wehbe’s murder and the media’s general silence about local crime seems to follow a growing trend to suppress reports about Dahiyeh crime from reaching the national news. In mid-May 2012, for example, a clash broke out in Haret Hreik that involved some 15 people and left at least one man wounded by gunfire. According to one witness, the Lebanese Army appeared on the scene only after the dispute had been resolved by local residents. Nothing about the event was reported to the local media. Along similar lines, some 15 Syrians were abducted and beaten deep in the Dahiyeh neighborhood of Hey as-Selloum following the kidnapping of 11 Lebanese pilgrims in Syria.¹⁰ None of the major news outlets reported the crime and according to a local resident, Hezbollah members quickly negotiated the Syrians’ release following a speech in which Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah admonished residents to avoid acts of violence and retribution.

In the opinion of one resident, part of the reason behind the media’s deafening silence is that incidents involving individuals associated with Hezbollah are managed rigorously by that organization. In other words, information is rarely leaked to the press as happened in the Hey as-Seloum incident. The resident observed, “You won’t know anything until someone in the army becomes involved; then the leak starts.” A *Now Lebanon* article explained, “It is too risky to prosecute some people who are part of important Hezbollah families, and [the organization] doesn’t want to risk alienating, or drawing the ire of such families.”¹¹ To protect its members and their families, Hezbollah does not hesitate to place at risk the serenity of the region. As a result, many criminals today wander freely throughout Dahiyeh without fear of retribution for their crimes. Clearly, however, such complacency about depraved and corrupt actions can only produce an even greater crime wave.

Since the miscreants and criminals believe they will go unpunished, criminals feel free to brush-off state or Hezbollah reprisals. By extension, the increasingly overwhelming presence¹² of crime in the area has desensitized local residents to the violence. Of course, the more banal crime becomes, the cloudier Dahiyeh’s future gets. Above all, the



A policeman stands near one of the al-Nizam min al-Iman campaign’s posters. The text is a quote from Iran’s Supreme Leader Sayyed Ali Khamenai and states (obviously), “You should always respect the law!”

audible reports of gunfire in the suburbs only compound the pervasive opinion that Dahiyeh willingly hosts Hezbollah's large cache of weapons and that generally, the Shia are little more than an armed, militant sect.

Despite Hezbollah's attempts to highlight its morality, the prevalence of crime in Dahiyeh is inescapable. Of late, the organization has inadvertently admitted its inability to control the population despite its homegrown *an-Nizam min al-Iman* ("Respecting the law is part of the Faith") campaign and organizational acceptance of a limited LAF presence. Near the end of 2011, Lebanese security forces launched a massive campaign throughout Dahiyeh to apprehend wanted criminals. The campaign was noticeably ramped up after an unexplained explosion in early August that undermined Hezbollah's image in the area.¹³ Hezbollah and its Shia ally Amal lent their full support to the movement and agreed not to extend "political immunity" to any suspect, regardless of their familial, religious or political ties.¹⁴ While that promise was obviously ignored in a number of cases, the situation underscores the



After the 2006 war the expression "Ya Ashraf an-Nass," or "You, the most honorable people," became the standard interjection by which Sayyed Nasrallah addressed the masses. A part of the expression appears to the right of Nasrallah's portrait in this poster. In this context, the message is reversed to say: "Nasrallah is the most honorable person."

extent to which Hezbollah has lost control over the *Ashraf an-Nass* ("the most honorable people"), as Nasrallah referred to Hezbollah's constituency during a 2006 speech. Rather than acting as the heart and soul of the "Resistance," the Dahiyeh is shaping up to be no more than its namesake—a typical slum.

¹ <http://www.assafir.com/Article.aspx?EditionId=2149&ChannelId=51380&ArticleId=1348&Author=%D8%AC%D8%B9%D981%D8%B120%D8%A7%D984%D8%B9%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%B1&Page=1>

² "Pharmacy Robbery was Inside Job." *The Daily Star*. 23 December 2011. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2011/Dec-23157715-pharmacy-robbery-was-inside-job.ashx#axzz1w4QyIrlLE>

³ "Man Kills and Buries Aunt Under Dry Concrete." *The Daily Star*. 13 February 2012. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2012/Feb-13163036-man-kills-and-buries-aunt-under-dry-concrete.ashx>

⁴ "3 Men Wounded in Separate Shootings in South Beirut." *The Daily Star*. 17 April 2012. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2012/Apr-173-170472/men-wounded-in-separate-shootings-in-south-beirut.ashx>

⁵ "3 Men Wounded in Separate Shootings in South Beirut." *The Daily Star*. 17 April 2012. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2012/Apr-173-170472/men-wounded-in-separate-shootings-in-south-beirut.ashx>

⁶ "7 Injured in Scuffle at Vehicle Inspection Center." *The Daily Star*. 7 October 2011. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2011/Oct-077-150697/injured-in-scuffle-at-vehicle-inspection-center.ashx>

⁷ "Armed Clash Between 2 Families in Shiyah, 2 Hurt." *Naharnet*. 12 April 2012. <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/36611>

⁸ "Family Feud in Bourj al-Barajneh Turns into Gun Battle." *Now Lebanon*. 29 April 2012. <http://nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=391034>

⁹ "2 Lebanese Men Arrested on Multiple Drugs Charges." *The Daily Star*. 16 May 2012. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2012/May-162-173552/lebanese-men-arrested-on-multiple-drug-charges.ashx>

¹⁰ "Kidnap of Lebanese Pilgrims in Syria Heightens Tensions." *Now Lebanon*. 23 May 2012. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=400086>

¹¹ "Crime But No Punishment in Dahiyeh." *Now Lebanon*. 20 November 2011. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=334114>

¹² "Police Step Up Presence in Dahiyeh." *Now Lebanon*. 17 November 2009. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/Arabic/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=126938>

¹³ "Cracks in the Armor of the Resistance?" *Now Lebanon*. 5 August 2011. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=297937>

¹⁴ "Police Step Up Presence in Dahiyeh." *Now Lebanon*. 17 November 2009. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/Arabic/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=126938>