



Plural security provision in Beirut



SPEED READ

MAIN MESSAGE

Efforts to support or reform security arrangements in Beirut, and Lebanon more broadly, will need to contend with how current systems underpin and are underpinned by the political balance among Beirut's main power brokers, namely, the key political parties. This paper explores *plural security provision* in Beirut, where multiple state and nonstate actors assert claims on the legitimate use of force.

AUDIENCE

Research and policy community members concerned with strengthening security and stabilization policies in a manner that more accurately reflects local realities.

KEY FINDINGS

Certain characteristics of Beirut's plural security provision emerge as particularly salient.

- Neighborhood-level conflict management and enforcement is tightly linked to national political tensions and even regional and geopolitical dynamics.
- Intricate networking engages and connects security providers and other actors in a functional division of labor, in which political parties play a linchpin role.
- Security provision tends to amount to the rapid and discrete quelling of local sectarian conflict.
- A high level of in-group social cohesion enables plural security provision, and mitigates risk factors that might otherwise contribute to everyday crime and disorder.

AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Further empirical research is needed to ensure that donor policy is informed by a nuanced, grounded understanding of how security could be delivered as a public good to local populations in contexts of fragility and conflict. Such future research would include investigations into the following areas:

- the centrality and primacy of political parties in the security field;
 - the division of labor in contexts of security provision, especially the role of local governance actors and brokers in relation to localized security arrangements in contributing to improved citizen security outcomes; and
 - the relationship of social cohesion to everyday crime and disorder and, by extension, its role in enabling plural security provision to function with social consent.
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About the Platform

The Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law brings together a network of relevant communities of practice comprising experts, policymakers, practitioners, researchers and the business sector on the topic of security and rule of law in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. It provides for a meeting space - offline as well as online - and intellectual stimulus grounded in practice, for its network to share experiences, exchange lessons learned and discuss novel insights. This way, it strives to contribute to the evidence base of current policies, the effectiveness of collaboration and programming while simultaneously facilitating the generation of new knowledge. The Secretariat of the Platform is run jointly by the Hague Institute for Global Justice and Conflict Research Unit of Clingendael Institute.

Introduction

In Lebanon, the state's ability to project its authority is highly limited, particularly in the realm of security provision, where myriad private actors, often motivated by political or sectarian competition, dominate this sphere. Lebanon's capital, Beirut, presents a compelling case study to analyze the dynamics of convergence and divergence between the interests of the state, political parties and other actors with regards to the provision of security. Beirut hosts virtually all of Lebanon's confessional communities, and all the associated political parties are represented in the metropolitan area. It is here that local security dynamics concerning the protection of confessional communities intersect with political pursuits, and the interest of ensuring the stability of the state.

For these reasons, Beirut is a useful setting in which to investigate *plural security provision*, defined as multiple state and nonstate actors asserting claims on the legitimate use of force, and particularly how this phenomenon is manifested under urban conditions and linked to local governance. This paper explores the specific contours of plural security provision in Beirut, based on a literature review and the findings of a March 2015 field visit. Insights gathered from primary interviews with municipal authorities, politicians, academics, civil servants, journalists, analysts, social workers and residents of Beirut provide empirical nuance to the reality of plural security provision in urban contexts. The findings are offered here to advance discussion on options available to local governance actors and international donors providing security assistance in urban settings.

Plural security provision in brief

Building on the work of Baker and Schneckener¹, the working definition of *nonstate security providers* is:

actors characterized by the ability and willingness to deploy coercive force, lack of integration into formal state institutions, and organizational structure that persists over a period of time, who seek to ensure the maintenance of communal order, security and peace through elements of prevention, deterrence, investigation of breaches, and punishment.

Globally, the spectrum of nonstate security providers runs from religious police to paramilitaries, from community watch groups to mafias and other criminal organizations.² With or without state consent, nonstate security providers may acquire popular legitimacy in

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a number of ways: they may be more effective and efficient, proximate and relevant to the needs of local populations, and cheaper than state alternatives. Yet they are often associated with human rights violations, a strong tendency toward net insecurity over time, and difficulty providing security impartially in contexts of diversity, most acutely when state control over the use of force is weak.

The city is an increasingly important site for tackling this dilemma. A global trend in urban migration is concentrating more of the world's population in metropolises. Chaotic or rapid influxes can quickly overwhelm the service capacity of cities, particularly in states already challenged by underdevelopment, conflict, or fragility. Because local governments seldom have direct control over state security providers, they are often compelled to use other policy levers (spatial planning, mobility, housing policy, and so on) to impact citizen safety and security.

Context and security provision panorama

Beirut context in brief

Metropolitan Beirut is a city of up to three million people living in distinctive Sunni and Shia Muslim, Maronite Catholic, Greek, Armenian, Druze, and Protestant communities. The 1975-1990 civil war among opposing Lebanese factions and foreign interveners (notably Israel and Syria) divided the city along the Green Line between mainly Christian East and predominantly Muslim West Beirut. In many neighborhoods, militias aligned with different political parties exerted localized coercive forms of authority, reinforcing the parties' historically continuous and territorially marked autonomy.³ Beirut went through a rapid postwar reconstruction, even as Lebanon's stability was threatened by the growing polarization between two broad blocs of confessional political forces, known as the March 8 and March 14 camps.⁴ Years after the end of the civil war, Beirut is still segregated but not partitioned.⁵



Research focused on six Beirut neighborhoods selected to cover a diverse range of communities:

- *Hamra* is a historically mixed area in Beirut's downtown commercial district.
- *Hayy el-Selloum* is a mainly Shia area in the municipality of Choueifat.
- *Dahiyeh*, a Hezbollah stronghold, is a predominantly Shia suburb in south Beirut.
- *Burj al-Barajneh* is a Palestinian refugee "camp" (in fact, a highly ghettoized urban district), bordering Dahiyeh.
- *Zuqaq al-Blat* is a mixed neighborhood in West Beirut, and the political turf of Amal, a Shia ally of Hezbollah.
- *Nab'a* is a largely informal, predominantly Christian, but ethnically diverse neighborhood.

The panorama of security providers in Beirut

Beirut is characterized by a startlingly diverse panorama of actors able to deploy coercive force in different circumstances and with varying degrees of state authorization or assent. Boundaries between the public and private identities of agents are blurred, and roles are divided in an unwritten and mercurial, but locally understood, way across security providers. Different nonstate security actors use their political and state security connections to claim to defend elements of the public, yet never submit to state authority. In this way, the broad array of security providers embody political and sectarian divisions, providing a coercive and territorialized materialization of those social divisions.

The security panorama includes the following key, interconnected actors:

- Many **political parties** have organized militants and stand-alone party security apparatuses, though most have formally disarmed their civil war-era armies.
- **Internal Security Forces (ISF)** are the national police, responsible for the maintenance of public order, traffic patrol, and counterterrorism, and reporting to the Interior Ministry. ISF generally commands little respect and its personnel are widely seen as ineffective.
- **Municipal police** are hired by and accountable to municipalities, are widely regarded as less professional than ISF, and are generally appointed in line with sectarian or political affiliation.
- **Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF)**, the national military, is responsible for managing internal unrest and one of the few multi-confessional institutions held in relatively high esteem.
- In many areas, local **neighborhood committees** have organized to protect the community, mostly male self-appointed local residents patrolling sectarian territories.
- In Palestinian "camps," **popular committees** (often operating in conjunction with armed Palestinian political factions) fulfill similar functions to neighborhood committees.
- **Commercial private security companies (PSCs)** are visible throughout Beirut and include the local arms of international security firms.

Interviews with both international and Lebanese experts, as well as with residents of various Beirut neighborhoods, described how political competition and negotiation at the national level is underwritten, and to a certain extent held in check, by the ability of political parties to manage conflict and violence at street level. Interparty negotiations and settlements are brokered within and between neighborhoods, dulling the sharp edge of overt competition between identity groups. As one Lebanese scholar argued, neighborhood tranquility is chiefly determined by these macro-scale dynamics: “Sectarianism is either shut down or fueled by political leaders.”¹⁰

In some neighborhoods, the interscalar nature of security means party members are directly involved in providing security. This is undoubtedly the case in Dahiyeh, where Hezbollah predominates. But more often, political parties form the spine through which local security, national politics, and regional dynamics interlace. The party structure appears vital not only in negotiating higher-level political settlements, but also in ensuring that those settlements are implemented through local-level security arrangements. To give a recent example, a government policy to remove political paraphernalia from public spaces was put into effect in Beirut, hinging entirely upon an agreement between Hezbollah and its main political rival, the Future Movement. The extensive implementation of the policy, meant to curb sectarian antagonism, demonstrated the deference given to party leaders and the sway their decisions hold at the neighborhood level.

Interviewees consistently described how national political alliances either limit or enhance the scope for party actors to cooperate at the neighborhood level and thereby guarantee local security. In such ways, local security arrangements are vertically integrated into political settlements and competition at the national or even international level. This interscalar connectivity is not solely conveyed, as it were, from the top down, however. Several interviewees also pointed to the fact that the social and political fibers linking the neighborhood to the national and geo-political playing field run both ways. Outbreaks of violence at the micro level can have disruptive consequences at macro levels, as one interviewee from Burj al-Barajneh remarked: “Small issues easily become big problems here.”

Networked local security arrangements and functional division of labor

The city’s security system is best understood as a network of local arrangements, overlapping and contested, where the boundaries between the public and private identities of public agents blur,¹¹ and “division of labor” among security providers is unwritten but widely understood. Although different actors, using their connections to and in some cases integration with state security, claim responsibility for specific sectors of the public, they do not answer to state authority. Nonstate security provision is thus effectively a coercive and territorialized materialization of political and sectarian divides.

Interviewees indicated that personal networks and local party leaders were the most likely recourse for any perceived injustice or threat. Political parties appear to act as the hubs of

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local conflict mediation and security assemblages, operating through their community representatives and informants. The local presence of political parties is generally informal and diffuse, appearing in systems resembling neighborhood watch networks that residents generally describe as “guys on the corner” observing the streets. Through these networks, local parties exercise a degree of surveillance and coercive interference in neighborhood affairs.

Although not all parties are involved in dispute resolution or policing directly, they are widely understood to have elaborate networks connecting them to, and enabling them to leverage influence within, state security institutions. One municipal official described how ISF personnel deployed at the neighborhood level are usually vetted by the locally preponderant political party or at least reflect the neighborhood’s sectarian make-up.¹² Several interviewees also shared examples of how party members rouse, allow, or oversee neighborhood-level interventions of state security institutions, specifically, the municipal police, ISF, and LAF.

Local party networks were particularly activated for any neighborhood incident with a political or sectarian dimension, where party members or their direct emissaries were reportedly almost always the first to respond. According to interviewees, in such cases, the ISF or LAF intervene only after obtaining a political green light to do so. One respondent relayed a common quip: “Whenever the army shows up, we know that the fighting has ended.”¹³ Ultimately, though official uniformed personnel may be the visibly acting security provider, their actions are regularly underwritten and qualified by local party approval. To quote a local analyst, “Those who should be seen as doing the job on the ground are the mandated, uniformed institutions, even if the process of how and where they show up is wired through the parties. This status quo serves the parties and the state; there is consensus.”¹⁴

In this way, boundaries between state and informal security become porous, and lines of authority entangled. Across state and nonstate spheres and even despite political or sectarian antipathies, these networks enable political and security actors to communicate and negotiate sundry practical agreements necessary to maintain local security and order. Although this makes for a constellation of actors bewildering to any outsider, it seems to be largely accepted by most residents. However, the inbuilt ambiguity can reportedly result in confusion about which security provider to resort to when. As many respondents indicated, “There’s a difference between who you call and who shows up.”¹⁵ Key to this observation is that such intricate arrangements cannot merely be the result of spontaneous or improvised coordination and ad hoc concession; rather, it indicates a system that operates under a certain prevailing logic, a system that is *managed*. In practice, these hybrid systems nimbly traverse conceptual boundaries between public and private provision, or formal and informal actors.

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Municipal government actors interviewed for the research openly recognized the need to work directly with political parties; some viewed it as one of the more relevant functions of local government. It is not uncommon for senior police officers to regularly refer to and meet with security committees composed of representatives of the major parties.¹⁶ In Hayy al-Selloum, a municipal official described the important role he and his office played in helping facilitate coordination between local representatives of the March 8 and March 14 camps: “We call them to come here; they all sit at this table. Everyone has my phone number.”¹⁷

So, too, did the research detect a unique and varied role of the *mukhtar*, an elected official at neighborhood level, who seems to sit precisely at the intersection of all these dynamics.¹⁸ The mukhtar simultaneously acts on behalf of the state, through its monopoly on notarized registrations, and is a mechanism for recourse for people in relation to the state or its agencies. Often, this person is also a representative or associate of the dominant party in a neighborhood. As such, the mukhtar provides a link between the resident population, the political parties, and the state. And though not all mukhtars wield the same power at local level, some can leverage their state-sanctioned authority and party affiliation to act as key intermediaries between those with official security roles and those with the capability and legitimacy to do so in practice.¹⁹

Quelling sectarian and political conflict

The highly networked local security arrangements just described are largely calibrated to prevent and mitigate local-level sectarian clashes, and thus to avoid catalytic disturbances escalating upward and outward, upsetting the national political balance. Quelling sectarian and political conflict requires highly structured and coordinated networks, not only between actors operating at different levels, but also between those leveraging the authority of the state and those acting on the basis of local, popularly derived legitimacy.

Security actors keep tensions in check despite close quarters, inadequate public service provision, and socioeconomic competition, performing in the interest of keeping the peace among local sectarian communities.²⁰ In practice, this means that neighborhood residents describe security provision to be the purview of a wide array of players, from thuggish youngsters who intimidate outsiders, to elder community leaders who mediated disputes between neighbors. Interviews revealed how the role of security actor appears to be locally defined in terms of performance, rather than according to mandate or uniform.

By maintaining a detailed knowledge of what happens on the streets, the parties and their associates make it their business to prevent neighborhood-level conflicts from escalating. A resident in Zuqaq al-Blat, a neighborhood with a potentially explosive mix of sectarian

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inhabitants, recounted how even seemingly mundane incidents involving youths from different sectarian backgrounds immediately implicated the neighborhood hierarchy of Amal (the predominant party in the area). In this neighborhood, an agreement between Amal and the Kurdistan Democratic Party explicitly forbids interethnic or sectarian fighting and provocations. Citizens are aware of this settlement and few dare to exceed the parties' tolerances.²¹

In the event of conflicts, particularly those between people overtly affiliated with different parties, the preferred mechanism is to consult the party authorities directly. Hyperlocalized and discrete arrangements to prevent escalation are often facilitated through social mediation mechanisms, typically arbitrated by communal or religious leaders. Party members are said to discourage people from referring to official or state institutions such as the Lebanese court.²² Thus, whether as a mechanism of prevention or appeasement, maintaining a stable status quo appears to be the predominant security priority political parties assert in their communities.

It is essential to note that, according to interviewees, these actors only deign to interfere if and when circumstances threaten to take on meta-repercussions beyond the neighborhood. That is, these informal security actors do not necessarily provide protection or general assistance, or at least not to the average Beiruti. They prefer instead to operate primarily in a reconnaissance and enforcement role. Because of this, security in Beirut's neighborhoods is reportedly neither perceived nor provided as a public good: security appears for the most part to be governed and activated in the interests of political parties rather than citizens. Nor can it be assumed that those actors to whom residents turn are necessarily trusted per se; they may simply be the actor with the most local clout.

Social cohesion and the rule of norms

Despite the many variables that predict high levels of violence and disorder in Beirut, the city is comparatively safe and orderly.²³ When challenged to explain this, most respondents referred to social cohesion. Beirut society is highly ordered: strong family structures were credited with preventing deviant behavior, and multi-generational relationships between neighborhood families as providing vital social organization and control. Traditions and social hierarchies—what one respondent labeled “the rule of norms”²⁴—run parallel to the rule of law. Moreover, the recent experience of civil war, according to several interviewees, has created habits of inter-reliance and cooperation in highly localized spaces despite the weakness of the state.²⁵

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The strong society described by so many respondents appears to be a manifestation of familial and sectarian in-group cohesion, what Putnam would call *bonding social capital*.²⁶ However, the apparent lack of *bridging social capital* between and among identity groups, and its institutionalization in the form of an impartial state apparatus and the rule of law, can render social order vulnerable to seizures and collapse. To some extent, multi-confessionality has hardwired Beirutis for a degree of openness and tolerance of the other, and has encouraged the quick resort to problem-solving that supersedes and survives violent conflict. But, according to interviewees, security is also maintained to some extent by fear of how bad things can get, informed by living memories of the fifteen-year civil war. Many interlocutors expressed the importance of achieving and maintaining a consensus between Beirutis, parties, and the state, even if a fragile and provisional one. Several respondents indicated that, to prevent backsliding into civil war, the parties were likely to step back from the brink during confrontations. For example, despite conflicting perspectives on Syria's civil war, the parties have maintained Lebanon's rhetorical (if not actual) commitment to a policy of dissociation.

Conclusions and ideas for further research

Each described characteristic of plural security provision should be considered integral to maintaining a modicum of domestic stability in Beirut. The reality today is that nonstate actors generally, and political parties more specifically, are deeply involved in the provision of security at the neighborhood level. Some interlocutors cautiously suggested that this reality may well evolve into a more stable arrangement over time. This could be practically translated into institutionalized agreements with political parties at local and national level, as seen with Hezbollah, the LAF, and ISF in Dahiyeh.

Such arrangements leading to state institutions taking up more responsibility for neighborhood security does not necessarily imply that political parties would abandon their role as security providers. The findings outlined go some way in explaining why party politics are essentially inextricable from local security dynamics. Moreover, the status quo currently sustained by state and nonstate actors alike appears to serve both the interests of power-holders as well as the outward image of state institutions, providing no real incentives for genuine or substantial reform toward apolitical security provision. Efforts to support or reform security arrangements in Beirut will need to contend with how current systems underpin and are underpinned by the political balance and negotiations among Beirut's main power brokers—political parties.

More generally, Beirut represents a distinctive example of how plural security provision is instantiated under urban conditions, and linked to broader patterns of (political) competition and governance, but it is by no means exceptional: across countries challenged by conflict

and fragility, nonstate security providers command the state's recognition, sponsorship, or tolerance; co-opt and subvert it; are exploited to extend its rule; or are marginalized, isolated, or criminalized. Despite the prevalence of plural security provision, there remain few practical options for international donors offering security assistance in contexts of fragility to engage with this empirical reality. Donors are averse to upsetting relationships with state partners (a reflection of the hegemony of the Westphalian state in the global system), conferring legitimacy on groups with unpalatable goals or tactics, and tacitly endorsing violence as a path to political privilege.²⁷

Further empirical research is needed to ensure that donor policy toward plural security provision is informed by a nuanced, grounded understanding of how security could be delivered as a public good to local populations in contexts of fragility and conflict. Three key areas for investigation arise from the study:

- **The centrality and primacy of political parties in the security field** stands out in the study of Beirut. What motivates citizens to accept or legitimate the operation of political parties as de facto security actors: conviction, pragmatism, coercion? There is reason to believe, for example, that there are marked differences between the capacities and styles of different parties in the ways they aim to attend their publics, and that these are closely linked to their other activities, in particular welfare provision. More broadly, it is unlikely that the role of political parties in the security field is an exceptionally Lebanese phenomenon. Do currently dominant perspectives on political parties in social and political science (never mind donor policies on promoting electoral democracy) obscure certain aspects of these actors' institutional nature and functioning vis-à-vis security provision elsewhere?
- **The division of labor in plural security contexts.** The neighborhood-level security arrangements discussed in this paper are vernacular, but not necessarily singular and irreproducible. What, then, are the lessons to be learned from the development of a functioning division of labor between state and nonstate security providers in Beirut that could inform policy in other fragile and postconflict contexts? Under what conditions does the practice of networking potentially lead to a functioning division of labor that could be institutionalized and made accountable over a longer period? How can the role of local governance actors be strengthened in relation to localized security arrangements in ways that ultimately improve citizen security outcomes over the long term? It may also be relevant to look for persons or organizations that play brokering roles in networked security provision contexts, serving as bridgeheads between different kinds or scales of security provision, such as (some) mukhtars in Beirut.
- **The role of social cohesion in contexts of plural security.** The study raises a broader question about the relationship of social cohesion to everyday crime and disorder. It seems unlikely that Beirutis would be willing to tolerate a somewhat unstable system of

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plural security provision if it were accompanied by high rates of crime and disorder. Can it be posited that a high level of social cohesion is therefore a prerequisite for a system of plural security provision to function with social consent? Could a system characterized by Beirut's effectiveness in delivering everyday security (with many caveats) exist in a much more disordered and atomized society? By extension, could policies designed to strengthen social cohesion contribute to improved citizen security outcomes in a context of pervasive state fragility and informal security provision?



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