Repurposing the Northern Ireland Experience: Contributing to a Just, Sustainable and Economically Resilient Lebanon Through Community Policing

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Compounded crises in Lebanon

Lebanon is undergoing multiple overlapping national crises, creating what has been described as the worst economic outlook in the country since the civil war (Mackinnon, 2020). On October 17th 2019, Lebanese citizens took to the street to protest rapidly deteriorating economic conditions, which arose in a large part from deep-rooted confessional clientelism, longstanding political corruption and structural ossification. These protests were quickly dubbed the 'Lebanese Revolution' (*thawra*, in Arabic), and the movement continues at the time of writing. The Lebanese public call for wide-reaching governance and financial reforms, to include more accountability, transparency and recognition of citizens' needs and rights.

Sitting Prime Minister Hassan Diab's government was inaugurated amongst much controversy on 21st January, some 53 days after the previous government resigned under the weight of nationwide disaccord. The ensuing dollar liquidity crunch, coupled with the stark devaluation of the Lebanese pound, resulted in hyperinflation and widespread unemployment in 2020. Many Lebanese have been pushed closer - or into - poverty. The devastating effect of the crises has further been compounded by the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, and its wide-reaching impact on an already battered country. Lebanese authorities detected the first case of coronavirus in the country on 21st February, after which point the state introduced incremental counter-measures. Cabinet declared a state of "general mobilization" on 15th March, and by 18th March, Lebanon closed its land, sea, and air borders. Wide-reaching lockdown measures were implemented after the general mobilization was announced, including closing all non-essential shops and businesses, and compelling citizens to work from home. Cabinet has since extended the lockdown four times at the time of writing and containment measures will now be reviewed on 24th May 2020 (Houssari, 2020)

Policing challenges in uncertain times

Amidst these stark conditions, public unrest has come in waves, and coupled with changing demographic poverty profiles, have presented new challenges to policing in Lebanon. In the last eight months, public protests have often escalated to clashes with security forces. The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), the Internal Security Forces (ISF), and particularly, the Mobile Forces (ISF's public order department)[1], have been responsible for managing civil unrest since October 2019, which fundamentally includes upholding the right to demonstrate peacefully. Additional objectives of this operation have included protection of public property (preventing entrance to the centre of Beirut, for example), and ensuring operating conditions for governmental meetings and ongoing economic activity. This has left the ISF to balance the legitimate rights of people to protest and contest their governance, against the need for continued economic and societal function - a difficult position not unique to the Lebanese police. There have been allegations of excessive use of force during these protests, as well as unfair detention and mistreatment of detainees (HRW, 2019), and large numbers of injuries of varying severity to both the police and protesters. Arguably, the ISF's approach has been largely directed by state, rather than human, security interests, at times blind to protesters' objectives, and in turn often stoking retaliation against police forces (Francis, 2020).

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[1] This paper's focus is solely the police – Internal Security Forces (ISF) – and it is therefore not within its scope to assess the posture or actions of other security agencies, including the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).

Additionally, the police have been called to guard banks against retaliation from customers frustrated by strict capital control measures, which has generated further accusations across social media of a tone-deaf policing response to the public's needs and realities. Finally, in the last two months, crime profiles have changed and there are anecdotal reports of increased theft and robbery. In line with global trends since the start of home confinement, Lebanon has also seen a marked rise in domestic violence, particularly against female partners, domestic workers and members of the LGBTQ community (Hamdan, 2020; Azhari, 2020). This gender-focused crime phenomenon is timely, following an earlier theme of the *thawra* that highlighted widespread sexual harassment in Lebanon. The wider state has not sufficiently and sustainably addressed these issues, although the ISF has recently carried out a campaign to raise awareness for its domestic violence reporting hotlines.

Community policing: a window of opportunity

Among the complexities of the Lebanese context, this paper postulates that the crises have distilled a unique opportunity to evolve the ISF's policing approach to be more community-focused, providing a more effective mechanism to help insulate Lebanese citizens from future shock. International thinking redefined public health crises as "critical pervasive threats to human security" (1994 United Nations Development Program) because they "jeopardize health security as well as many other components of the human security agenda such as economic security, food security and community security" (Rollet, 2014). In line with this thinking, the COVID-19 pandemic, along with its obvious practical challenges of managing public order and detention at a time of social distancing, offers an opportunity for the ISF to commit to a community policing approach that has human security as a central organizing principle.

Furthermore, there is much to be learned from previous public health crises abroad in regard to policing and community trust, which have immediate implications for the Lebanese context. During the recent Ebola crisis in numerous western African countries, for example, retroactive review found that a securitized approach to safety increased community resistance to comply with health protocol, because of widespread lack of trust in security forces (Freudenthal, 2019; WHO, 2018). Although these national contexts and policing challenges differ vastly from Lebanon, learning from the Ebola health epidemic nonetheless highlights the core need for strong community and police trust for wider and sustainable benefits.

A further compelling factor in the argument that the ISF is in a prime position to instigate key changes, is the fact that the ISF's strategic plan covering 2018-2022, seeks to bring ISF capabilities up to par with international standards, including standards in community policing. The five-year strategic plan sets a roadmap for the ISF's transformation into a modern police service, whose emphasis is on maintaining security and order, upholding human rights, and – crucially – developing a solid partnership with the communities it serves (ISF, 2018). The adoption of this strategic plan is groundbreaking in Lebanon, with its intent to provide a police service that is sensitive to community needs, accountable, and goes beyond previous reactive crime-fighting strategies. It is imperative now that the ISF take additional concrete steps towards realizing this plan at a time when both community need is high, and policing needs demand a lot from individual officers. It is fundamentally important to balance state and human security needs today in Lebanon (ISF, 2018), particularly in light of the *thawra's* calls for transparency and accountability.

Importantly, there is also much to be repurposed from other countries' policing reform, with Northern Ireland's recent policing transformation being the most relevant example of a consociational society fundamentally addressing issues of public trust, accountability and human rights.

Northern Ireland experienced a complex, low-intensity conflict – marked by sporadic upticks in extreme violence – for 30 years, between approximately 1968 and 1998. The conflict (locally known as 'the Troubles') saw predominantly Catholic nationalists pitted against largely Protestant unionists, to determine

the six north-eastern counties' future as part of the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland (Wallenfeldt, 2019). The police service at the time, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), was formed by the United Kingdom's Government of Ireland Act in 1920, and throughout the conflict there were questions around the police's ability to operate in a way that reflected the needs of both sides of the community, and its overall accountability to the law. The RUC had a complex, dangerous - and often fatal - challenge to police the country during a period of violent counterinsurgency and widespread partisanship, coupled with a persistently poor national economic climate. Following a brokered peace agreement in 1998, the RUC was subject to sweeping reforms, and underwent fundamental changes in operations, mandate, accountability mechanisms and staffing. The seminal Patten report, released in 1999, proposed 170 reforms, with a key focus on respect to the police's commitment to human rights, external accountability and responsiveness to the community (Bayley, 2008).

The report laid out three core objectives for policing;

[The police] should conform in all their actions to international standards of human rights; they should be accountable to expert, well-organized external auditors with respect to both their law enforcement effectiveness and their individual behaviour; and they should 'police with the community', meaning that what they do should be guided by public needs expressed in multiple forums, carried out cooperatively with the public and emphasizing long-term solutions to public safety problems. (Patten, 1999)

The police – now known as the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) – implemented the vast majority of the reforms, and because of the governmental and public consensus around the peace agreement, meant that the police could move away from a militarized style of policing, with its previous major focus on the protection of the state, citizens and officers, to today's driving principle of working with and for local communities. Today, the services enjoys strong support from all sides of the community, and annual perception surveys indicate that 68% of the population (disaggregated to 65% Catholic, 71% Protestant) believe the police do a 'very/fairly good job', and 86% (84% Catholic, 87% Protestant) demonstrate confidence in the service's ability to provide day to day security and safety for the population. (NI Policing Board, 2018). Crucially, the police transformation in Northern Ireland was enabled at a strategic level because it occurred within the backdrop of a political agreement to move towards peace, and was externally guaranteed by oversight bodies and various other international actors. This strong level of accountability effectively renders the PSNI directly accountable to the communities in which it works.

From a force to a service: human security at the heart of policing

In light of the intricacies of the current national crises, this paper highlights two main socio-economic impacts of the ISF's role as a security 'force' rather than a 'service'. Firstly, excessive focus on state security rather than human security is resource intensive, and can be inefficient and ineffective as an approach if it does not recognize or address societal or structural roots of (arguably recurrent) security problems. Secondly, state security objectives rather than human security objectives do not encourage trust between citizens and the state, limiting opportunities for time and cost-effective preventive security measures. A policing service that focuses on community partnership and needs allows for preventative, rather than reactive action, and facilitates long-term citizen-state cooperation in a way that better manages the use of publicly-financed resources, and encourages resilient, just and ultimately, more sustainable communities.

The convergence of crises in Lebanon presents key opportunities to explore new ways of policing that puts human security at the heart of service, through a community policing approach. Community policing has gained momentum in recent years as police and communities across the world search for more effective ways of promoting safety and enhancing quality of life. This new policing philosophy encourages community-police partnerships to diagnose and address local problems. Community policing differs from

traditional policing in two main ways: firstly, in how the community is conceptualized and secondly, through the approach's expanded policing goals (Kelling and Moore, 1989). By adopting a community policing approach, the police seek to reshape their role within communities and their engagement with the public. This can be accomplished through a variety of methods, including increasing foot patrols and visibility in targeted localities, shared community problem solving activities, establishing community organization and consultations, responding to emergency calls for service and many other initiatives that foster "an intimate relationship between police and citizens" (Kelling and Moore, 1989). Community policing philosophy advocates listening to community input, and moving away from an exclusive focus on crime fighting (Skogan, 1990).

Classical definitions of security aren't sufficiently broad to capture all the approaches needed to foster community safety and well-being; human security is therefore essential for a comprehensively - and sustainably - more secure future. A human security centric approach to policing in Lebanon is needed to respond to the complexity of both old and new security threats – from poverty, ethnic violence, human trafficking, climate change, health pandemics, crime and the implications of economic downturns (UN OCHA, 2009). Such threats move beyond traditional notions of state-centric conceptions of security that focus primarily on securitized action. Human security concentrates on the safety and security of individuals, as well as their protection and empowerment, advancing people-centered solutions that are locally driven and sustainable (idem). Importantly, human security cannot be solely achieved by one group or actor. Civil society, military and police all have important roles to play in achieving human security. The growth and consolidation of civil society amidst the *thawra*, with its emphasis on secularity, presents yet another window of opportunity for the ISF to further develop functional and reciprocal partnerships with organisations and individuals whose focus is the improvement of civic life in Lebanon.

Next steps

Lebanon is currently experiencing multiple human security threats, and at this critical juncture in the country's stability, the ISF has an important role to play in addressing the structural and root causes of these insecurities, contributing to more resilient and just communities in the near future. However, policing reform goes beyond the remit of the policing institution alone, and the ISF needs to be supported by strong inter-governmental policies and practice to be able to truly become transparent, accountable and trusted community partners.

The ISF has much it can adopt and adapt from the practicalities of Northern Ireland's community policing practices, most notably in regard to how it conceptualizes, and then seeks to work with and for, Lebanese communities. However, unlike Northern Ireland, there is currently no governmental consensus on policing approaches. Importantly, it must be noted that the government's formal ability to hold the ISF accountable is very weak – a by-product of long-term and systematic denigration of transparency and oversight mechanisms throughout Lebanon's political infrastructure.

Additionally, demand for reform of the ISF comes from many actors, but notably, does not always come from the actual government. Instead, ISF works with the international community and donors to deliver reform of certain parts of the system, who request that the ISF meet specific standards. Within the institution itself, there are numerous changemakers who are innovating and changing practice within the remit of their individual work. On the ISF's periphery, there are established relationships with some civil society organisations, who work to better the ISF's approach to specific issues. The Lebanese public have also been calling for overall governmental reform during the *thawra*, with the understanding that the police service must adapt to Lebanon's future. However, these demands for reform and the ongoing efforts to transform institutional practice are not coherent and are largely not coordinated. Because calls for reform are sporadic, not systematic and not directly driven by clear government mandate, they leave the ISF as an

institution open to the counterbalancing pull of the religious and political elite within the country, many of whom have a vested interest in not having a more efficient and accountable police service.

In light of the above analysis, and with an understanding of the imperative need for wide-reaching government transformation to truly drive any police reform, the authors believe there are none the less certain steps the ISF can take at this time - adapting learning from the Northern Ireland experience – that will help the Lebanese police put community needs and resilience at the heart of its work.

1) *Conform to international standards* – the ISF is already committed to change, as outlined in its strategic plan. It is imperative that the ISF immediately work towards complying with international human rights standards in order to forestall any major deterioration in trust with the Lebanese public.
2) *Accountability to external auditors* – beyond government-wide reform of accountability mechanisms, the ISF's potential for true accountability remains severely stunted. However, the ISF could make some concrete steps to promote change from within the organization, including publishing outcomes of internal investigations, empowering oversight bodies like the Inspector General or the National Human Rights institute to have a wider remit, or indeed, exploring using civil society organisations in an oversight role. In this period of transformational civic action, there is more space to further consolidate and develop these essential partnerships.
3) *Policing with the community* – changing the face of policing in any society takes time and patience. The ISF has already been working on burgeoning community endeavours, and in the current climate of increased transparency and accountability, the most effective and sustainable way to pursue these aims is through establishing lasting partnerships with representatives of all communities in Lebanon. The ISF must be empowered at higher governmental levels to turn its focus towards local communities, and thus change its emphasis to delivering local solutions to highly localized problems – the differing presentation of COVID-19 across different communities in Lebanon is a prime example. The system must be allowed to evolve such that there is space to delegate police authority to local commanders, empowering them to problem solve in partnership with the people they serve.

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