

Changing approaches to local policing

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ARAMOUN, Lebanon: A new strategic framework aims to transform Lebanon's municipal police into a more "human centered" security entity, placing gender equality and communications skills at its core. Launched Wednesday by the Interior Ministry and the United Nations Development Program, the framework includes five main tools to guide municipalities on developing policing services: standardized operating procedures, a code of conduct, specialized training, a civilian uniform and gender equality in the recruitment process.

The framework "introduces new competencies and skill sets for the municipal police officers, such as the capacity to listen to the population, engage with them, mediate conflicts in the public space, as well as to respond to the differentiated and diverse needs of the people they serve," Celine Moyroud, the acting interim UNDP resident representative, said at the launch event.

Support includes training to help the municipal police with their communications skills, and how to approach working with vulnerable communities, including children, refugees and victims of sexual and gender-based violence.

So far, eight pilot municipalities and one union of municipalities have received support to shift their units to the more human-centered approach: Baalbeck, Batroun, Burj Hammoud, Halba, Majdal Anjar, Sidon, Zahle and Zgharta, and the Federation of North Iqlim al-Kharroub Municipalities.

The framework was developed by the Interior Ministry in cooperation with the UNDP, the U.N. refugee agency and funding from the Canadian and Dutch governments. It was crafted in consultation with the pilot municipalities, which were chosen to represent a diverse swath of the country. Currently, the municipal police force across Lebanon comprises 700 women and men who have received training at the Internal Security Forces academy.

"The role of the municipal police is to protect and serve citizens while bringing their voices closer to institutions. ... Their approach should be based on building trusting relationships with citizens," Interior Minister Raya El Hassan said at the launch.

Unlike the ISF, the municipal police are not a judicial entity, meaning they do not have the power to arrest. But they can detain an individual until the ISF arrives.

The municipal police typically resolve disputes, assist with traffic off the main roads and generally serve the community within their areas.

In her speech, Hassan highlighted the importance of more female recruitment to achieve gender equality in the municipal police force.

"The last most important element is promoting gender equality in recruitments, and with that we can say ... there has been a clear increase in the number of female recruitments," Hassan said.

The Interior Ministry could not provide numbers on the increase before The Daily Star went to print.

Of the eight pilot municipalities, Burj Hammoud and Zahle have introduced female officers over the last three years. A third of the 150 daily municipal police officers in Burj Hammoud are female, according to Georges Krekorian, a member of the Burj Hammoud municipal council.

In addition to routine police work, Krekorian said female officers had proved to be better at "compassionately dealing with children and victims of domestic violence and dealing with women that have specific needs." Because of this, he said one of the biggest changes resulting from more female officers had been how the public viewed the police.

"The perception of the police as an oppressive, punishing, brute force changed. Because of the female officers, people are viewing the police as a resource for assistance and help and most don't hesitate to ask for help from the police anymore," he said.

Romy Youssef, a municipal police officer in Burj Hammoud, also said that as more female officers were introduced, "people felt more at ease with the police force."

For Youssef, the most valuable part of the police training was the communications training, which she said taught her how to think about others before herself.

"When I get spoken to in an aggressive way, I now know how to be calm. I can take a step back and think: This individual is agitated because we're going to give them, say, a fine that they can't pay. It's not personal. And because of this my response to them shouldn't be aggressive. This is the biggest thing I learned," she said. "Our work doesn't require physical force. It requires patience and emotional intelligence, and for this reason it is extremely important that officers learn how to deal with people properly."