

Lebanon: Building Trust Between Police and Local communities

Written with Lena Slachmuis. Found in: Schirch, Lisa, with Deborah Mancini-Griffoli (editors). *Local Ownership in Security: Case Studies of Peacebuilding Approaches*. The Hague: Alliance for Peacebuilding, GPPAC, Kroc Institute, 2015. Found at www.humansecuritycoordination.org

Decades of civil war and regional conflict have resulted in few opportunities for the country to rally around a comprehensive security sector reform process. As a result, there is a trust deficit between civil society and the security sector, with the Internal Security Forces (ISF) often perceived as corrupt, biased or inefficient in their role of protecting local communities.

Recognizing this, the Lebanese government together with international partners decided to pilot a programme in one neighbourhood in central Beirut, Hbeish, with the aim of transforming the Ras Beirut Police Station into a 'model Police Station'. By the time that SFCG began partnering with the station, they had already adopted a code of conduct based on the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Standards and changed their recruitment and training policies in order to ensure their officers are properly trained. The ISF also set up new and easily accessible facilities and introduced regular patrols on foot, vehicle and bike as well as a digital database to collect and analyse security incidents. These organisational changes had built skills within the police to better be able to engage with the community. Yet there was little opportunity for police and community members to actually build direct human relationships with each and restore their mutual trust.

Search for Common Ground's programme 'Better Together', in partnership with the Ras Beirut Police Station aimed thus to build healthy relationships with the local community and strengthen the effectiveness of the police officers in protecting the community.

The challenge

There were tensions between security forces and local communities.

Theory of change:

Build trust between groups through joint capacity building, dialogue, and joint programming.

Building Skills for Trust-building: Separately, then Together

The Ras Beirut community is situated nearby large universities, where perceptions towards the ISF were very negative. SFCG knew that bringing together people from the community with the ISF in a face to face meeting or town hall meeting would likely end with confrontation and deepening of mistrust.

SFCG thus started by reaching out to various student and young organisations, to explain the project and identify people who were interested in gradually growing their engagement with the ISF. At first, there was deep suspicion and rejection by many young people. But SFCG was gradually able to draw the young people into the project, starting by building skills for the young people in citizen engagement and Common Ground leadership and advocacy, with an emphasis on identifying areas of commonalities with 'the other'.

SFCG then trained nominated ISF members from Ras Beirut in skills around non-violent communication, mediation and conflict transformation. They also became familiar with methods of social media outreach, to improve their ability to communicate with the community.

Trust-building through Open House and Joint Patrols

SFCG recognised that many of the stereotypes held both by the youth and the ISF were due to past negative experiences, and misperceptions about the real role and responsibilities of the ISF. SFCG worked with the ISF to host open-house days where members of the community could come in and learn about the Ras Beirut station, and talk to police officers. Many community members had never before been in the police station, or had had negative experiences in the past. The ISF also invited a group of young people to shadow them on night patrols in the neighbourhood, which was an eye-opening experience for the youth, and a humanizing and trust-building success.



Photo 21: Shadow patrols with youth from Beirut alongside police from the ISF Ras Beirut station.
Photo Credit: Search For Common Ground

Roundtable Discussions and Joint Problem Solving Workshops

After several months of working with the groups separately, SFCG facilitated a series of round table discussions. While recognizing that many of the participants still felt a need to express their anger, trauma or distrust of the other group, the facilitation gradually moved the group towards the identification of challenges within the community, which they could tackle together. Issues identified included how to tackle small café owners who put their tables and chairs on the street illegally, how to manage waste, and how to put in place a mobile application for citizens to be able to alert the Police Station when they see suspicious or criminal behaviour.

Through a series of five round tables, the relationship was developed to the point that in order to achieve progress on the above ideas, both the ISF and the community identified and contributed resources to move them forward. A *WhatsApp* group was created to enable on-going dialogue and collaboration to reach these goals.

Community Outreach

Once the bridges of trust had been built between the ISF and the young people along with other community leaders, they jointly organised other public outreach activities. This included sports

and cultural events, as well as setting up stands at large public Beirut street festivals (for example the Hamra Festival). The group also produced leaflets and posters to communicate the community security focus of the police station, and group representatives appeared on local media to talk about their initiatives.



Photo 22: Community members and ISF members hold a stand at the Hamra festival in central Beirut, explaining the role of the police. Photo Credit: Search for Common Ground

Through the trainings, joint activities, round tables and public outreach, trust gradually began to overcome the mistrust and fear. In the end, the pilot project to demonstrate how the Ras Beirut Police station could become a 'model police' station showed signs of becoming reality, as both police officers and community members understood and acted on their joint sense of responsibility for bringing this idea to reality.