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Driving in Lebanon Buckle up

Will a new law do anything for road safety?

Jul 25th 2015 | BEIRUT | From the print edition



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AS ANYONE who has ever set foot in Lebanon knows, the country's drivers are a force to be feared. Motorists on the winding mountain roads think nothing of overtaking on a blind corner, at twice the speed limit. Keeping up-to-date with phone messages is a must, in the driver's seat or otherwise. Seat belts? Often still covered in plastic wrapping.



Little wonder then that three months after a tough new law on driving came into force it is still the topic of conversation around Beirut, the traffic-clogged capital. As regulations go, this one is particularly stringent. Status-enhancing yet dangerous manoeuvres, such as driving a motorbike on one wheel, can entail a fine of up to 3m Lebanese pounds (\$2,000) and even time behind bars. Dark-tinted windows are banned. Children under ten cannot be taken on motorcycles, thereby outlawing one of the region's favourite modes of family transport. Learner drivers must take proper lessons rather than being taught by relatives, themselves home-schooled in the art of dodging pedestrians and potholes.

Lebanon's government says all this is to improve road safety. The UN reckons the tiny country of 4m has an annual fatality rate on the roads of 22.3 per 100,000. That is better than Saudi Arabia, where young men lacking any other entertainment race cars for fun. But Lebanon still fares worse than parts of Africa.

There are signs that hitting citizens where it hurts—their wallets—is working. Drivers hastily pull on seat belts when entering central Beirut. They pay a little more attention to red lights, at least in the city centre. Passengers may even detect the odd taxi driver putting a lighter touch on the gas, especially in areas where police are known to linger.

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Yet, like the widely ignored smoking ban, few reckon even these superficial signs of compliance will last for long. Lebanon is so corrupt that people with *wasta* (connections) are effectively above the law and others can pay a bribe to get off the hook. Most Lebanese think it a joke that the government, which even when it isn't in one of its frequent periods of collapse cannot ensure regular electricity, is trying to enforce such a thing. And they would like to know where the money from fines goes. "They want us to act like Europeans," says Imad, a motorist. "OK, but in return we'd like some European-style services."

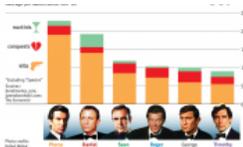
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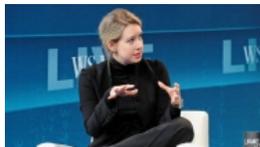
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