

A hard sell: Motor vehicle inspection and diesel

In January 2004, the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities began to implement obligatory motor vehicle inspection in Lebanon, based on new criteria. Those criteria, the inspection mechanism that has been put in place and public opinion are explored below.

Number of cars and years in service

Over the past two decades, the transport sector has been characterized by a lack of organization, falsification of vehicle registration information on cars entering the country and a lack of monitoring of cars in or out of circulation by the Vehicle Registration Department.

On 28 January 1998, the Ministry of Interior issued Law No. 17, which replaced Law No. 356, issued on 20 August 1997, and annulled other decrees that dated back to 1979. The new law organized the methodology of coding and registering vehicles in Lebanon, whereby plates are numbered according to the place of registration and purpose of use.

Plate numbers for elected officials and diplomats were organized as follows:

- President: 1
- Speaker of the House: 2
- Prime Minister: 3
- Deputy Speaker of the House: 4
- Deputy of the Council of Ministers: 5
- Ministers: 6–36
- Members of Parliament: 37–165
- Diplomatic corps: Start at letter "D" and numbers 201–350
- International delegates: Start at letter "D" and numbers 351–375

Private touristic vehicles were coded by place of registration, as follows:

- Bekaa: "Z"
- Nabatieh: "N"
- South Lebanon: "S"
- North Lebanon: "T"
- Ouzai: "O"

Plate numbers for the above ranged from 100,001 to 490,000, while the remaining were:

- Dekwaneh: "B" (plate numbers from 200,000 to 490,000) and "J" (from 200,000 to 300,000).

New codes were also assigned to other categories, such as trucks, buses, motorcycles and tractors. The total number

of vehicles currently registered in each category is estimated at:

- Private touristic cars: 930,000
- Private trucks and buses: 91,000
- Public cars: 35,000
- Motorcycles: 31,000

Special administration for traffic control

In accordance with Law No. 4082, issued on 14 October 2000, a financially independent administration was established within the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities called the "Traffic and Vehicle Administration Committee". The Committee falls under the authority of the Minister and responsibilities include implementing traffic and vehicle registration laws.

Motor Vehicle inspection

Clause No. 20 of Law No. 671 (issued on 5 February 1998 in the 1998 Budget) had decreed that certain sections of Clause No. 114 (of Law No. 76/67) related to motor vehicle inspection be delayed for one year in order to establish an accurate inspection system with the cooperation of the private sector.

However, the project was repeatedly postponed and implementation of the motor vehicle inspection procedure was delayed until early 2004. During this period (1998 to 2004), payment of inspection fees was possible through banks and the motor vehicle authorities.

The law now exempts vehicles that have been in service for less than two years from inspection, while others are to be inspected once a year if operating on fuel, and once every six months if operating on diesel.

Decree No. 7577 issued on 8 March 2002 defined the system and process of motor vehicle inspection. After tendering, a private Saudi institution, V.A.L., was awarded the responsibility of inspections under a \$9.6 million contract, and various areas were allocated for the building of inspection centers throughout Lebanon. V.A.L. built centers in Hadath, Zahrani, Zahle and Mejdlaya.

However, some critics were opposed to assigning the inspection process to a private company and permitting it to build inspection centers on public land (especially in the Al Bahsas region of Tripoli). Opposition was also raised concerning the tender results and the fees to be paid for inspection.

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Opinion Poll

Information International conducted an opinion poll on the issue of motor vehicle inspection in January to gauge attitudes toward the new inspection routine and fees. Some of the questions and results are presented below.

Attitudes toward motor vehicle inspection

Out of the 54.2% of respondents who said they own a car, opinions on the new mechanism of motor vehicle inspection are shown in **Graph 1**, with 48.2% stating that the roads require maintenance before inspections can be implemented.

Another 16.6% felt the inspections are necessary and beneficial regardless of cases and conditions, 15.6% described them as an added burden on citizens, 14.7% suggested that the inspections be implemented gradually, 4.3% had not heard of the new procedure and a mere 0.6% perceived it to be a bad scheme.

Inspection fees

The inspection fee per vehicle was set at \$13, with further inspections within one month, if required, at no additional cost. On the subject of fees, 37.2% of the respondents thought the amount was fair, 26.3% perceived it as acceptable, 25.7% considered it high, 0.7% described it as low and 10% did not know" (see **Graph 2**).

Diesel: Back in the air?

Over the past two years, the government has banned the import and use of cars and minivans operating on diesel fuel and paid compensation to their owners. However, some vehicles have recently resumed the use of diesel and one parliamentary committee has recommended that certain vehicles be permitted to operate on it.

The majority of respondents polled, however, rejected the return of cars and vans operating on diesel fuel, as shown in **Graph 3**, compared with 17.2% who approved and 4.3% who did not know. ■

Sample and methodology

The poll was based on a random sample of 600 respondents derived from the number of residents across different areas of Greater Beirut. The interviews, which were conducted in January 2004, were face-to-face and the poll's margin of error was $\pm 2\%$. The gender distribution was 56.2% male and 43.8% female, while the age distribution was as follows: 24.8% between the ages of 18–24, 27% between 25–34, 28.6% between 35–44, 12.2% between 45–54 and 7.4% were above 55.

