

Case Study: The Lebanon-Syria Border

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Since Lebanon gained independence in 1943, international attention has focused much more closely on Lebanon's volatile southern border with Israel rather than on Lebanon's other land border with Syria. Decades of Israeli incursions, invasions and occupation of southern Lebanon continue to reverberate even though the southern border is currently witnessing its longest period of calm since the late 1960s.

In the past decade, however, the international community has paid greater attention to the long-neglected Lebanon-Syria border. The withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon in April 2005 and the month-long Hezbollah-Israel war in summer 2006 led the international community to begin applying pressure on Beirut and Damascus to formally demarcate their joint border and to tighten security along what has traditionally been a porous frontier. International interest in the Lebanon-Syria border in the wake of the 2006 war was less related to concerns about commercial smuggling of commodities such as cigarettes or diesel fuel but primarily about the ability of Hezbollah to rearm itself with new and improved weaponry brought in from Syria.

UN Security Council Resolution 1701, adopted in August 2006, called for the delineation of the international borders of Lebanon, especially in those areas where the border is disputed or uncertain. It also called on the Lebanese government to "secure its borders and other entry points to prevent the entry in Lebanon without its consent of arms or related material".

In August 2008, in a meeting between then President Michel Suleiman and President Bashar al-Assad, it was announced that Syria would establish formal

diplomatic ties with Lebanon for the first time and that steps would be taken to jointly demarcate their border, also another first for the two countries. The decision entailed beginning the demarcation along Lebanon's northern border and ending with the Israeli-occupied Shebaa Farms area in the south. However, to date no steps have been taken to begin the process of demarcation, and none are likely in the foreseeable future given the situation in Syria.

Lebanon's modern borders were defined in 1920 with the creation of the state of Greater Lebanon. The frontier began at the confluence of the Kabir River at Arida on the Mediterranean coast (see Fig. 1). It then headed east following the course of the river before running along the watershed of the Kabir and Assi rivers. The border then followed the northern limit of the qada of Baalbek (see Fig. 2) then ran southward following the watershed of the anti-Lebanon mountains down to the Shebaa Farms area near the trilateral border of Lebanon, Syria and Palestine (see Fig. 3). The eastern border incorporated the qadas of Baalbek, Rashaya and Hasbaya.

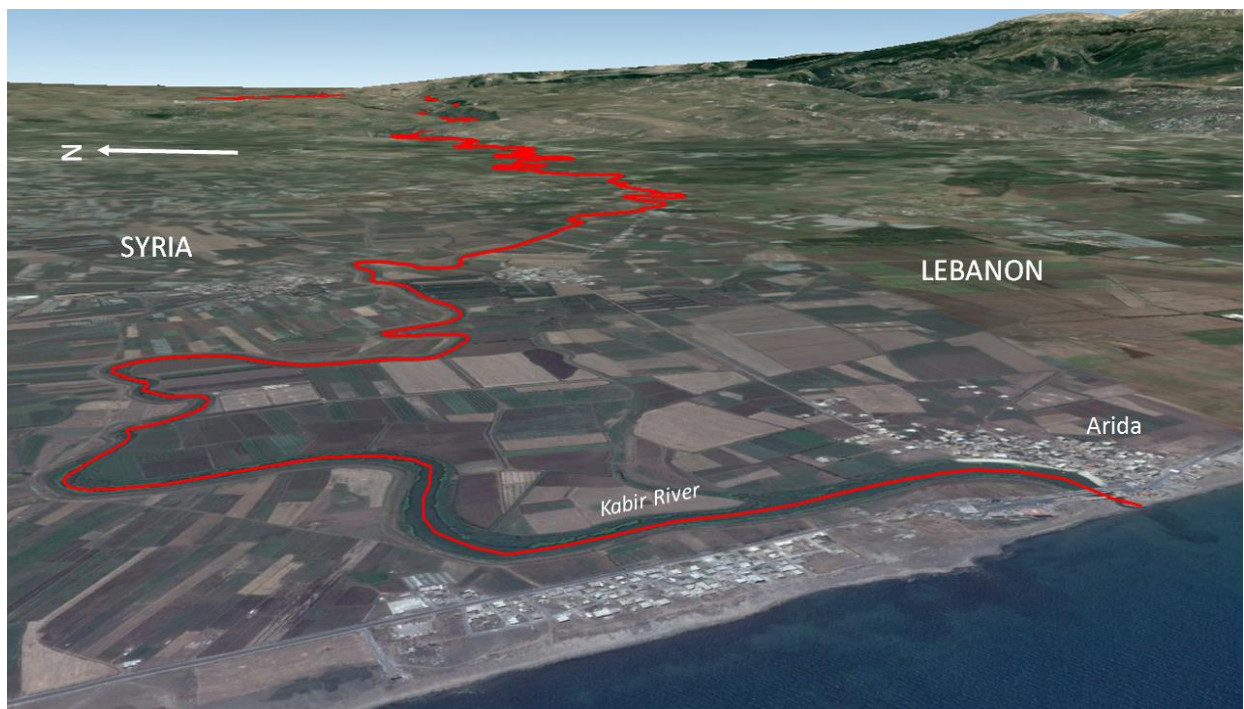


Fig. 1: Eastward view of Lebanon's northern border with Syria from Arida on the Mediterranean coast

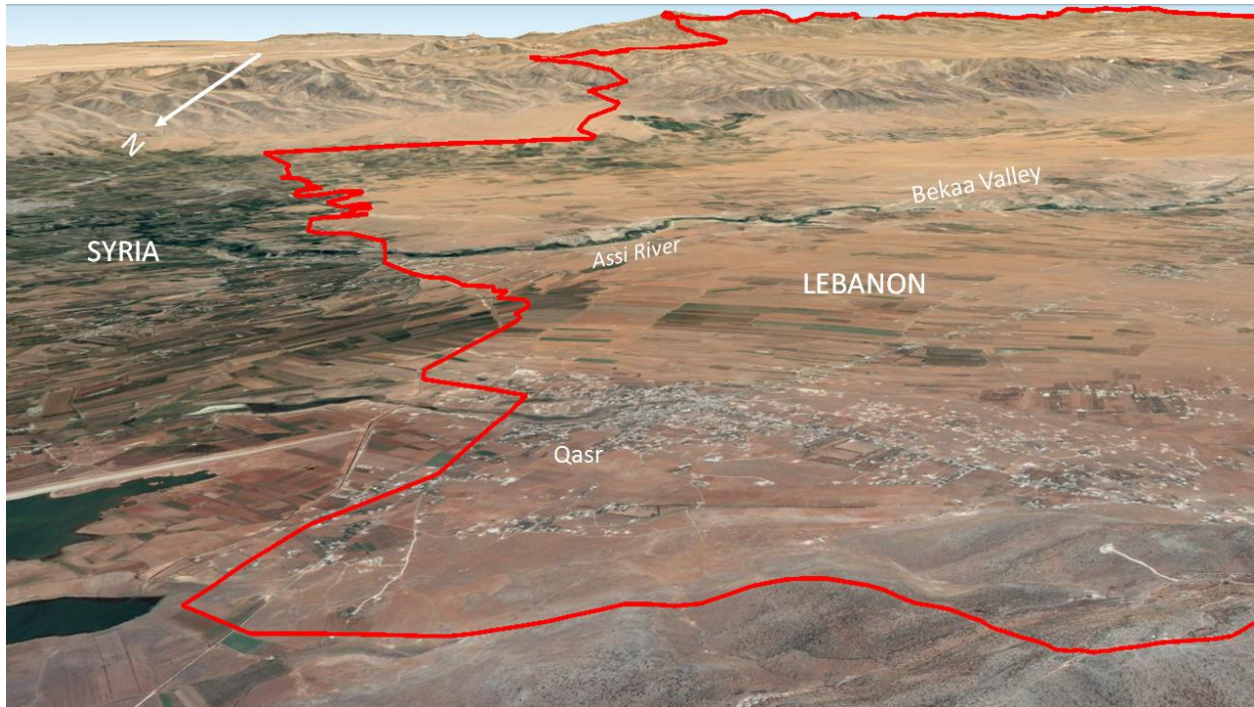


Fig. 2: South west view of Lebanon's northern border in the Bekaa Valley

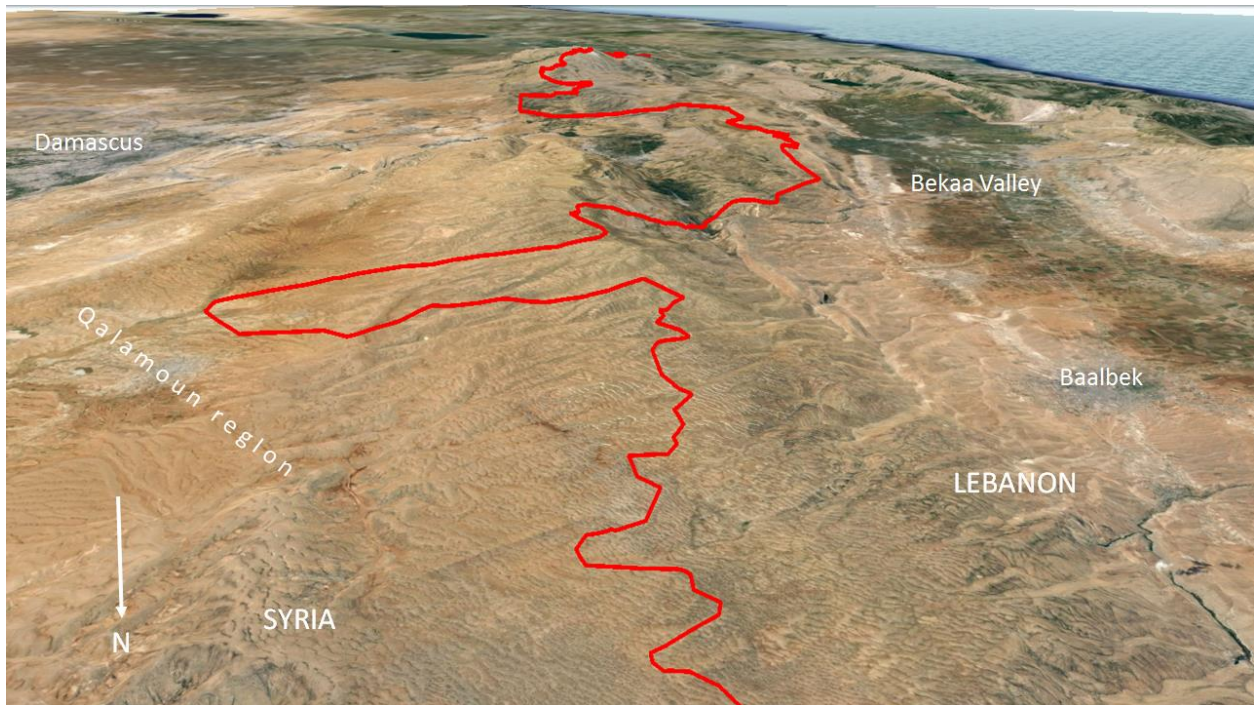


Fig. 3: Southward view of Lebanon's eastern border with Syria

It is beyond the scope of this case study to give a detailed explanation as to why these two neighboring countries have never formally demarcated their joint

border and ratified it with the United Nations. But in brief, one reason is Syria's historic reluctance to truly accept the notion of an independent Lebanese state. Syria's traditional view, one that precedes Baathist rule in Damascus, is that Greater Lebanon was ripped from the motherland at the behest of separatist Maronites and the indulgence of their French colonial patrons. The other reason is perhaps more practical in that the border was never properly demarcated on the ground by the French mandatory authorities in the first place. That left much of its path open to dispute by the time the French mandates over Lebanon and Syria expired in the 1940s. Indeed, the French mandatory authority's ambivalence toward the integrity of Lebanon's border with Syria was demonstrated in 1925 during the Druze uprising when parts of the Qalamoun region north of Damascus and adjacent to the Lebanese border were in the hands of rebel groups. The French army decided to establish a military post in the tiny village of Tufayl in the Qalamoun area on the eastern side of the Anti-Lebanon mountain chain in Syria. But instead of treating it as a military post inside Syria, the French decided to incorporate it into Lebanon by looping the border eastward in a finger-shaped peninsula (see Fig. 4).

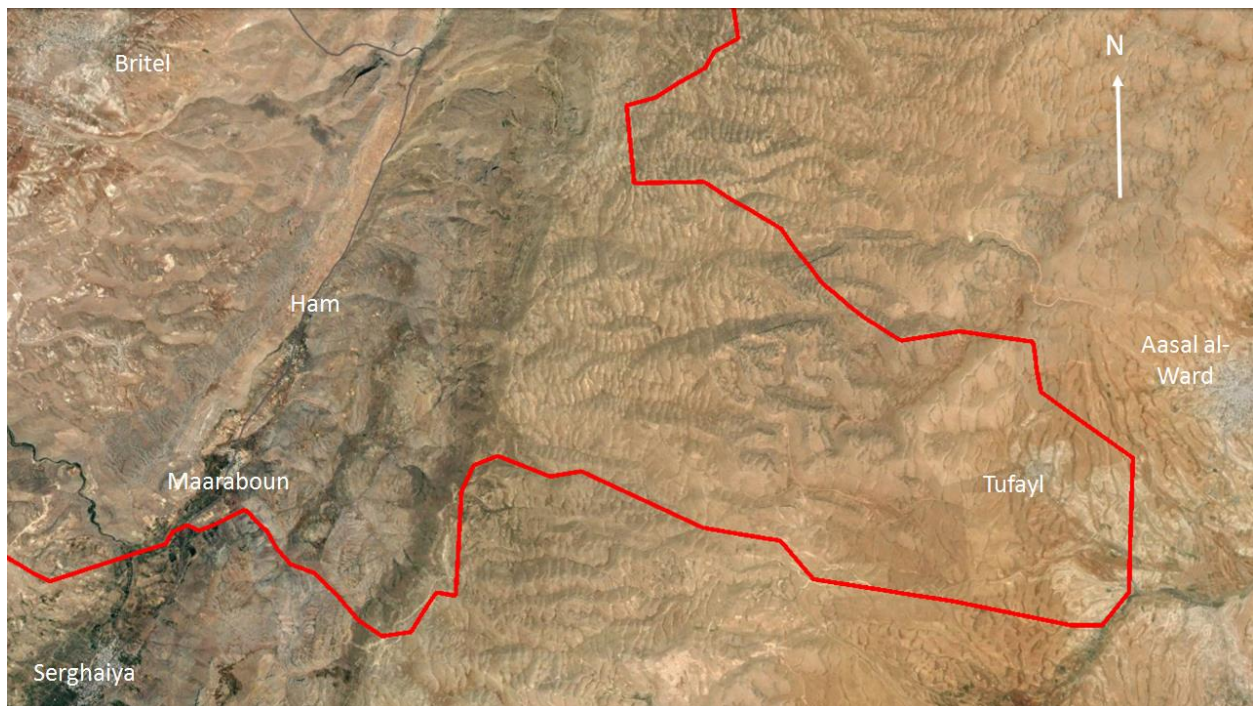


Fig. 4: The Tufayl peninsula

This peculiar decision has turned Tufayl into the most isolated community in Lebanon, connected to the rest of the country by two dirt tracks that in winter are closed by snow. The residents speak Arabic with Syrian accents, use Syrian currency, their children go to Syrian schools and universities and they buy their goods from nearby Syrian towns and villages but they vote in Lebanon's parliamentary elections.

The border became an issue of contention between Lebanon and Syria in the late 1950s. During the 1958 civil war, Syria, then part of the United Arab Republic with Egypt, supplied weapons to Lebanese rebels via smuggling trails near Aarsal in the north east Bekaa Valley. The Lebanese government complained that the UAR was engaged in a "massive, illegal and unprovoked intervention in the affairs of Lebanon". The UN dispatched an observer force to Lebanon to monitor breaches of the Lebanon-UAR border. But it had difficulty in monitoring such an ill-defined frontier which witnessed the plentiful free movement of individuals each day.

In 1964, the Lebanese and Syrian militaries formed a joint border demarcation commission to address the various anomalies along the frontier and to properly demarcate the border on the ground. One of the decisions undertaken by the border commission was to include the Shebaa Farms inside Lebanon. The 14 Shebaa Farms were owned by Lebanese citizens from Shebaa and Kfar Shuba villages but the mountainside was usually marked on maps as located on the Syrian side of the border. However, despite the existence of the Lebanon-Syria border commission, no actual demarcation took place and the maps went unamended.

The status of the Shebaa Farms as Syrian rather than Lebanese territory was enshrined in international eyes in 1974 when the area was incorporated into the mandate of the UN Disengagement Observer Force in the Golan Heights (see Fig. 5). Similarly, four years later, the Shebaa Farms was excluded from the mandate of the UN Interim Force In Lebanon (UNIFIL) established after Israel's 1978 invasion of Lebanon.

In 2000, after Israel formally announced it would withdraw its troops from Lebanon, the government in Beirut declared that the Shebaa Farms was Lebanese territory and requested that the UN include it on the Lebanese side of the Blue Line.

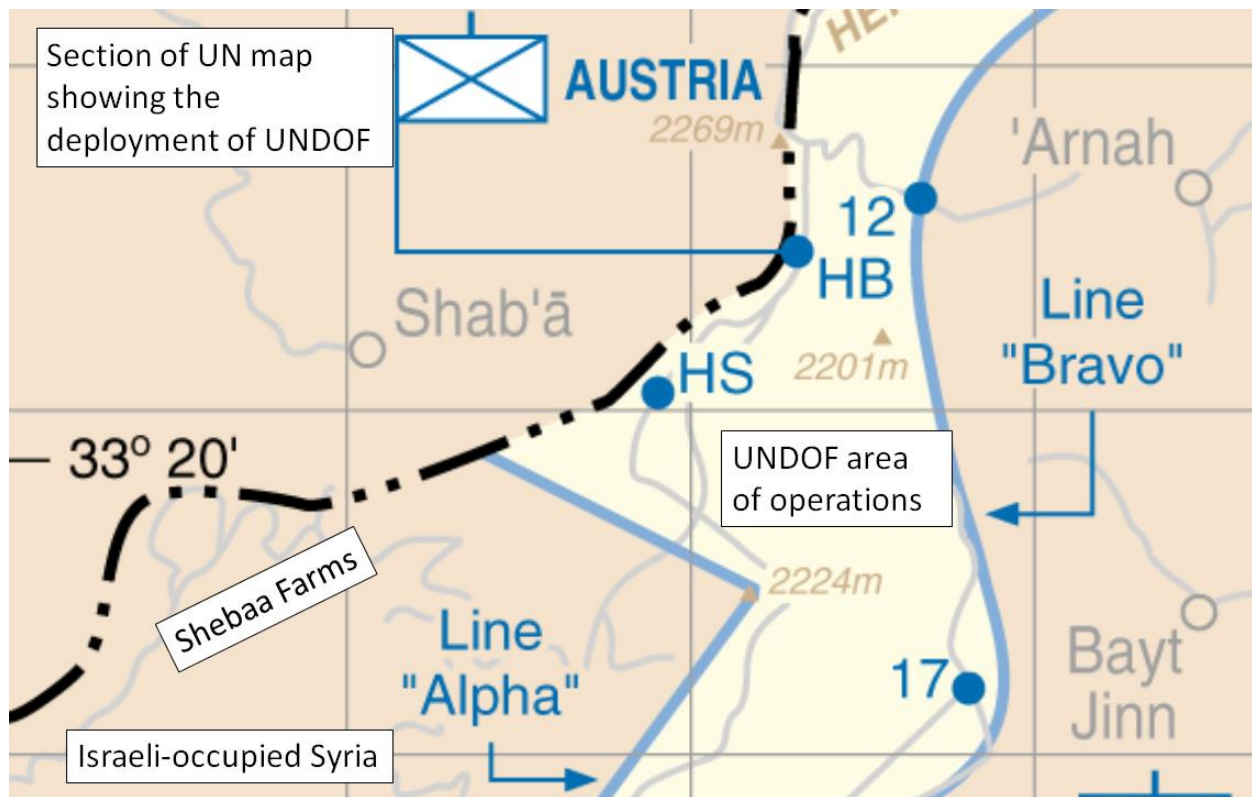


Fig. 5: Section of a United Nations map of the deployment of the UN Disengagement Observer Force showing the Shebaa Farms as being in Syrian territory.

The Blue Line was a boundary created by the UN that was supposed to correspond as closely as possible to Lebanon's southern boundary behind which Israel was obliged to withdraw its forces to satisfy UN Security Council resolutions. The UN adopted the Blue Line concept to forestall what would have been endless bickering between Israel and Lebanon over the exact path of their joint border. The border was last verified on the ground in 1950 and during the occupation had been unilaterally altered in several places by Israel.

The Shebaa Farms imbroglio put Syria into something of a corner (see Fig. 6). If Lebanon and Syria agreed that the Shebaa Farms was Lebanese territory and lodged that agreement with the UN, Beirut could have justifiably asked the UN Security Council to include the Shebaa Farms in the area from which Israeli troops were to be withdrawn. But the Syrians could not bring themselves to declare to the UN in clear and simple terms that the Farms were sovereign Lebanese territory.

UN envoy Terje Roed Larsen told me an anecdote that illustrated the Syrian mindset at the time. In 2000, Larsen met with Farouq al-Sharaa, then Syria's foreign minister, to discuss the sovereignty of the Shebaa Farms area ahead of Israel's planned troop withdrawal from south Lebanon. But when Larsen explicitly asked Sharaa to state whether the Shebaa farms belonged to Lebanon or Syria, the foreign minister responded "It's occupied Arab land". When pressed by Larsen for a clearer answer, Sharaa repeated "It's occupied Arab land". And that was the best answer Larsen got from Damascus at the time.

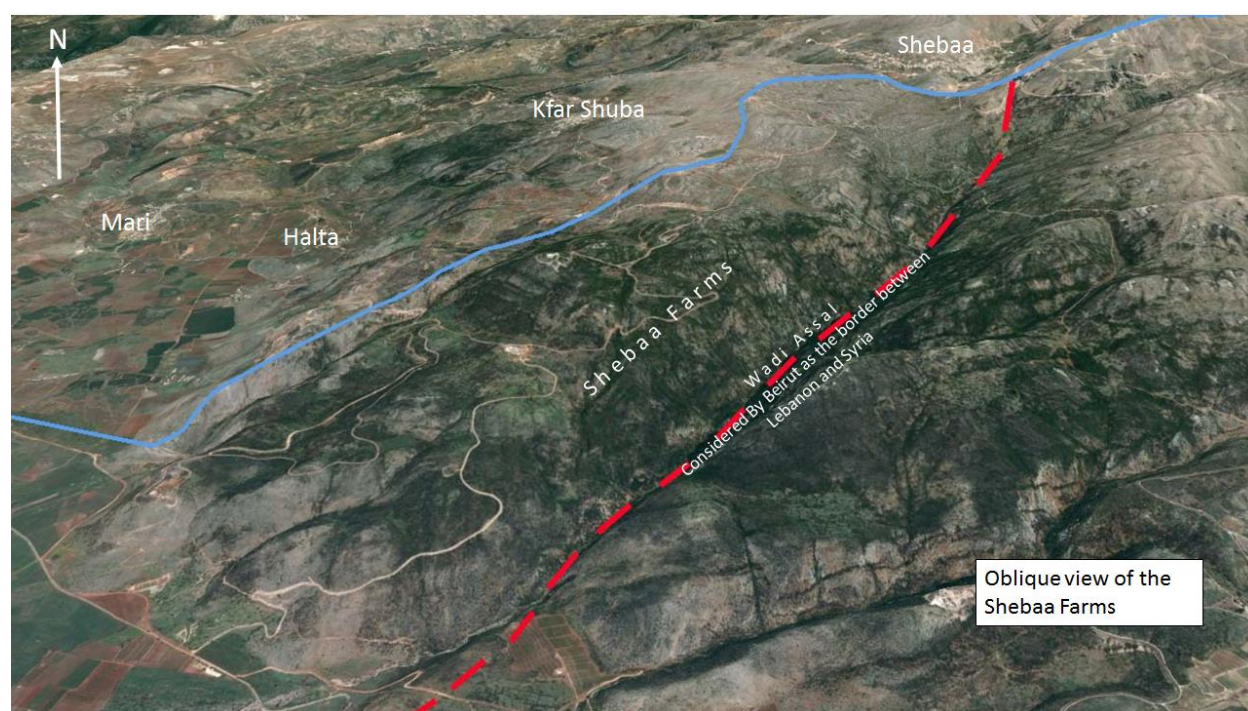


Fig. 6: Oblique view of the Shebaa Farms marking the Blue Line and the path of the border recognized by Lebanon as the international boundary with Syria which follows the thalweg of Wadi Aasal

Lebanon, of course, lost the argument for the retention of the Shebaa Farms and it remains occupied to this day by Israeli troops and subject to UN Security Council resolutions related to the fate of the Golan Heights.

There is an aspect of the Blue Line's delineation in the Shebaa Farms that is little known and reveals a sleight of hand by the UN to the advantage of Israel.

When the UN drew up the Blue Line, the Israelis realized that the boundary actually cut through some of their military outposts that straddled the border.

The Israelis were obliged to dismantle these positions and reconstruct them on the Israeli side of the Blue Line.

One example is the large Israeli outpost that sat on Sheikh Abbad hill near the village of Houla. Today a UNIFIL position is located where part of the old Israeli outpost lay (see Fig. 6).

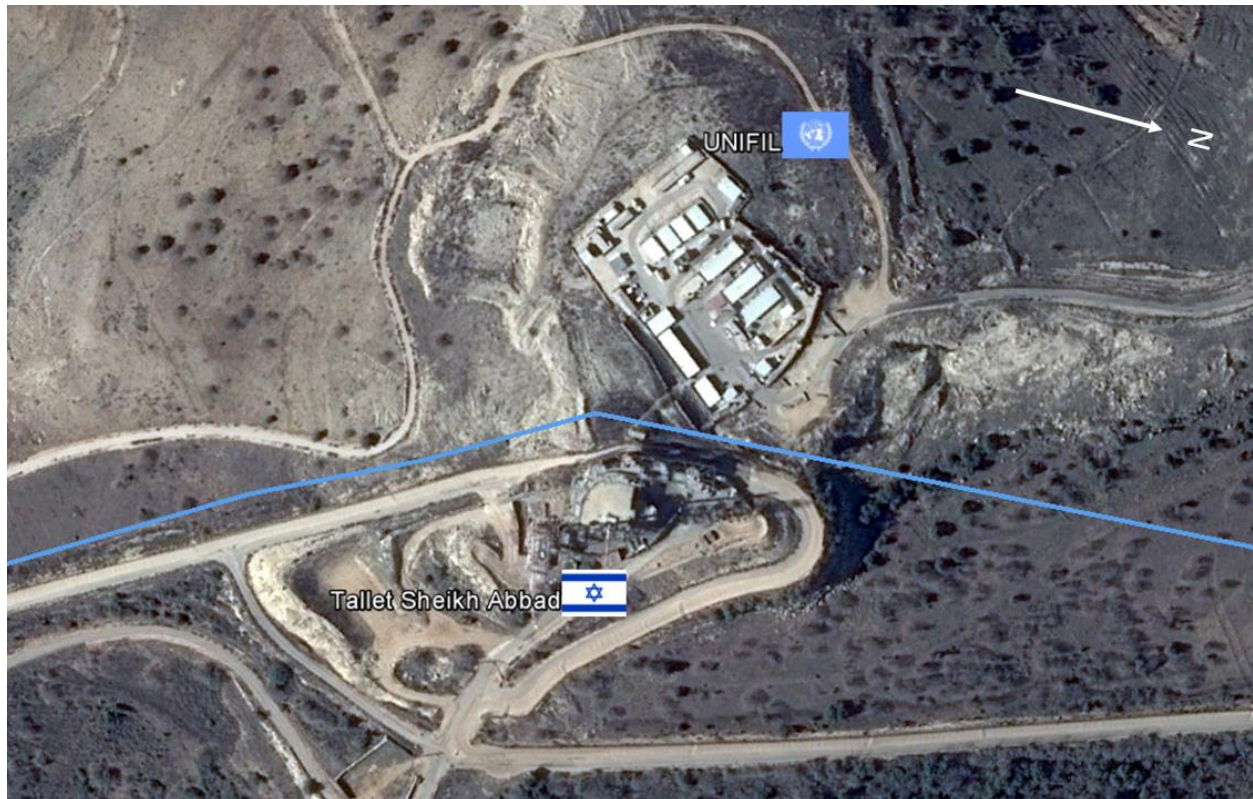


Fig. 7: The Israeli army outpost on Sheikh Abbad hill today. Before 2000, it straddled the border and was therefore bisected by the Blue Line. The Israelis were obliged to dismantle the outpost and rebuild it on the Israeli side of the Line. A UNIFIL position is located where part of the old Israeli outpost once stood.

But in the Shebaa Farms, the Israelis were allowed to get away with keeping their forward border posts intact (See Figs: 8, 9, 10 & 11).



Fig. 8: The Lebanon-Syria international border as recognized by the United Nations in the Shebaa Farms area with three forward Israeli army posts. The red line is a calibrated track uploaded to Google Earth



Fig. 9: The Lebanon-Syria international border cuts through the Jabal Summaqa post



Fig. 10: The path of the Lebanon-Syria border leaves the Roweisat Allam post on Lebanese soil



Fig. 11: The Lebanon-Syria international border cuts through the "Radar" post

So why were the Israelis allowed by the UN to keep their posts intact in the Shebaa farms and not elsewhere?

The answer lies in the village of Ghajar at the foot of the Shebaa Farms (see Fig. 12). The UN found that the original border cut through Ghajar leaving the northern two thirds in Lebanese territory and the southern one third inside Israeli-occupied Syria. The UN decreed that the Blue Line must follow the same path.

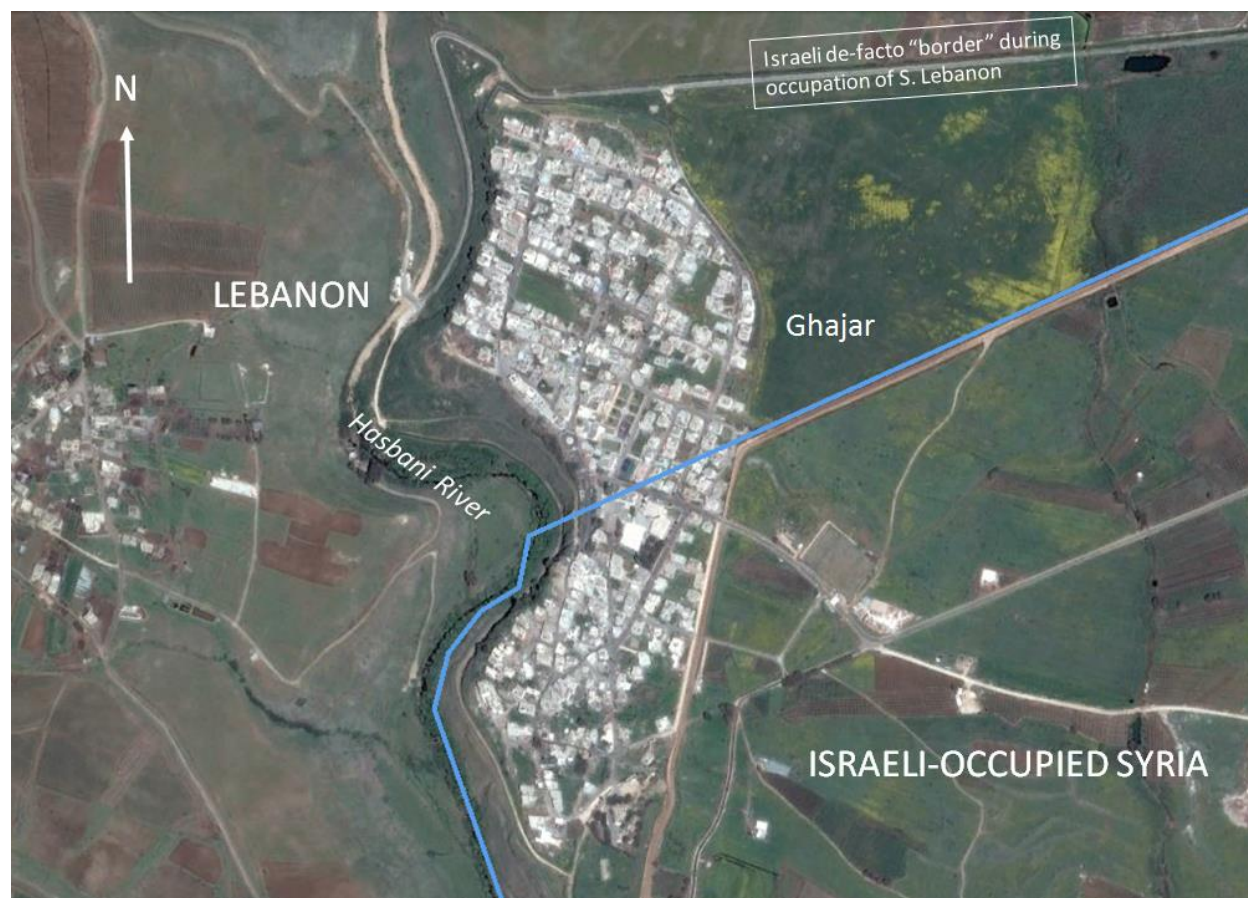


Fig. 12: The village of Ghajar is bisected by the Blue Line

The Israelis were incensed at this decision. They argued that it would pose a grave security threat. So, to mollify the Israelis, the UN conducted a secret sleight of hand by bending the Blue Line around their three forward Israeli outposts in the Shebaa Farms (See Figs: 13, 14, 15 & 16).



Fig. 13: The Blue Line in the Shebaa Farms bends around Israeli forward positions



Fig. 14: The Jabal Summaqa Israeli forward position



Fig. 15: The Roweisat Allam Israeli forward position



Fig. 16: The "Radar" Israeli forward position

UNIFIL's official maps only mark the Blue Line and not the international border so the anomaly has largely gone unnoticed. However, UNIFIL's Italian contingent created their own maps a few years ago and included both the Blue Line and the border, thus displaying the anomaly (See Fig: 17).

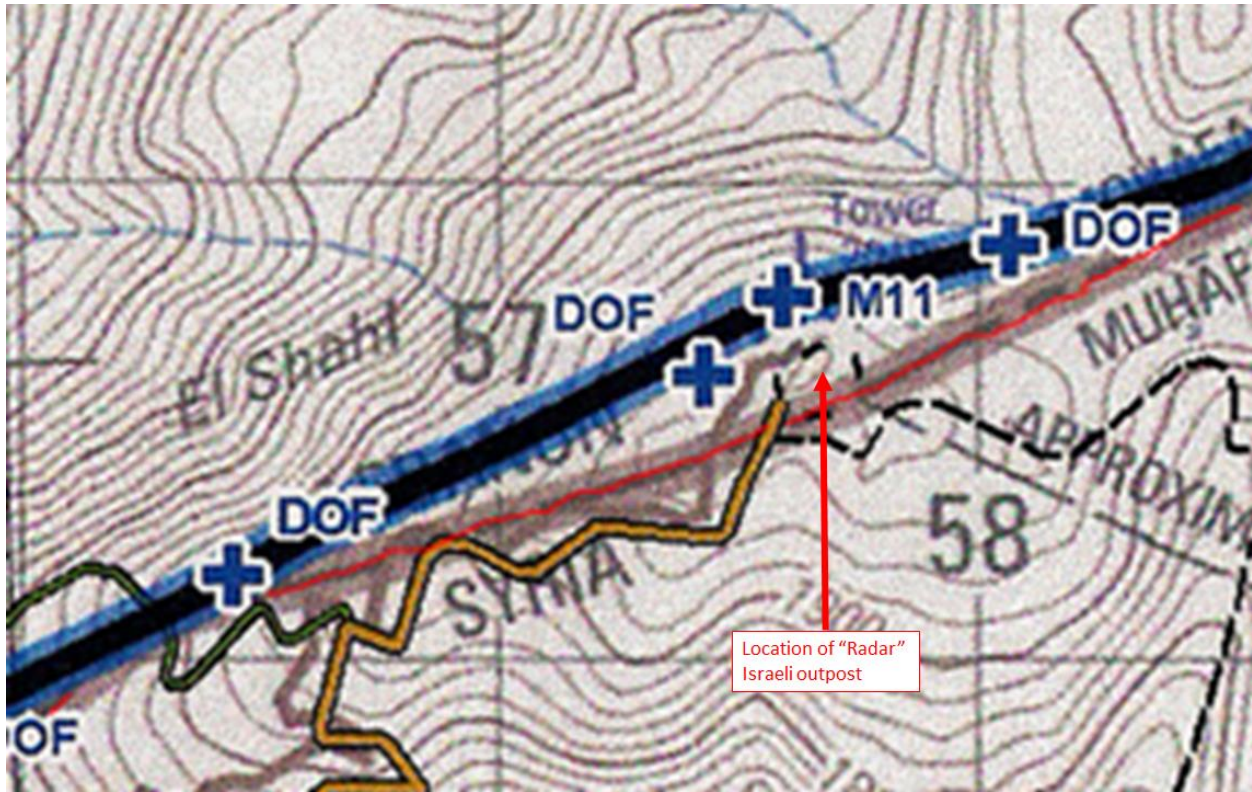


Fig. 17: The "Radar" Israeli forward position

Nevertheless, the Israeli army is not the only foreign military to be encroaching on Lebanese soil. A few miles to the north in the qada of Rashaya, Syrian troops remain deployed in an area that is recognized as Lebanon by the Lebanese government, local residents and the international community but not by the Syrian government (See Fig: 18).

In the weeks after Syria disengaged militarily from Lebanon in April 2005, a UN verification team travelled across the country to make sure the Syrian army had actually left.

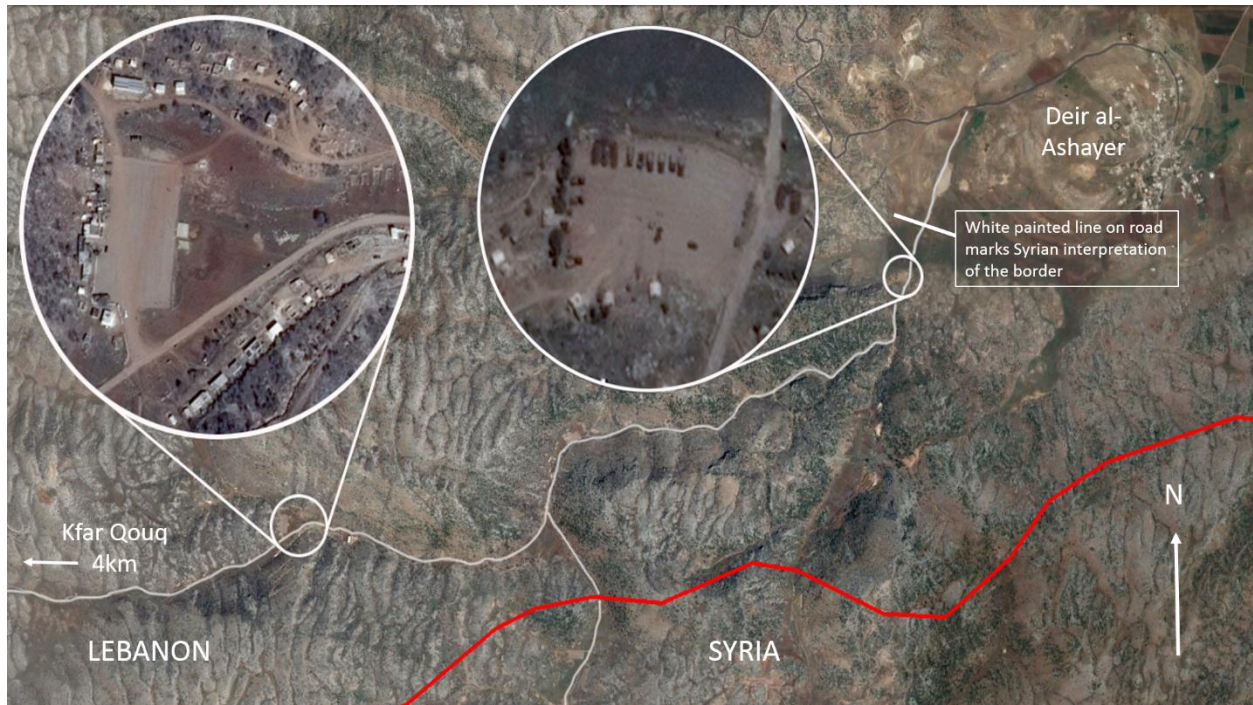


Fig. 18: Syrian troops remain on Lebanese soil south of Deir al-Ashayer. Damascus says the territory is Syrian. The red line is a calibrated from a 1:100k Lebanese army map and uploaded to Google Earth

The one spot which they could not confirm was this area south west of Deir al-Ashayer where a Syrian army battalion is based. They concluded that the status of this area was unclear.

The commander of the Syrian army battalion south of Deir al-Ashayer told the author in a May 2005 interview in his headquarters that his base was on Syrian territory and proved it by displaying his 1:50k army map of the area. However, the path of the border on his map was quite different to most maps that portray that corner of southeast Lebanon.

There are numerous other areas along this porous border where there have been encroachments onto what Lebanon believes is its sovereign territory.

This is particularly true in the area of Arsal in the north east Bekaa. Despite the arid semi-desert climate and landscape the plentiful aquifers in the area help sustain many fruit orchards. There is a long history of territorial disputes between residents of Arsal and Syrians on the other side of the border. Syrian farmers have encroached onto Lebanese territory in several places along the border which has led to gun battles in the past. In at least two places near Arsal, the Syrians have

marked the extent of their encroachment onto Lebanese soil by building asphalted roads leading from the Syrian side of the border to reach the orchards farmed by Syrians (See Fig: 19).



Fig. 19: Syrian farmers have encroached onto Lebanese soil east of Arsal in north east Lebanon, even asphalted roads from the Syrian side of the border to reach their orchards

There are Lebanese intrusions into Syrian territory as well. For example at Hawsh Sayyed Ali, a small farming village north of Hermel in the Bekaa valley and beside the Assi river (See Fig: 20). In fact the border here until recently was almost irrelevant. There are sizeable Lebanese, mainly Shia, communities living on the Syrian side of the border in the region west of Qusayr. Many Lebanese living along the northern border routinely crossed into Syria to take advantage of the cheaper prices of everyday goods. Similarly, border communities in the north and north east in particular have thrived for decades on smuggling all manner of items including electrical goods, cigarettes, cement, and especially diesel fuel.

Despite a brief period of security tension along the border with Syria in 1958, the main contention with the frontier has been its imprecise demarcation on the ground, with the attendant squabbles over localized land ownership. But the border

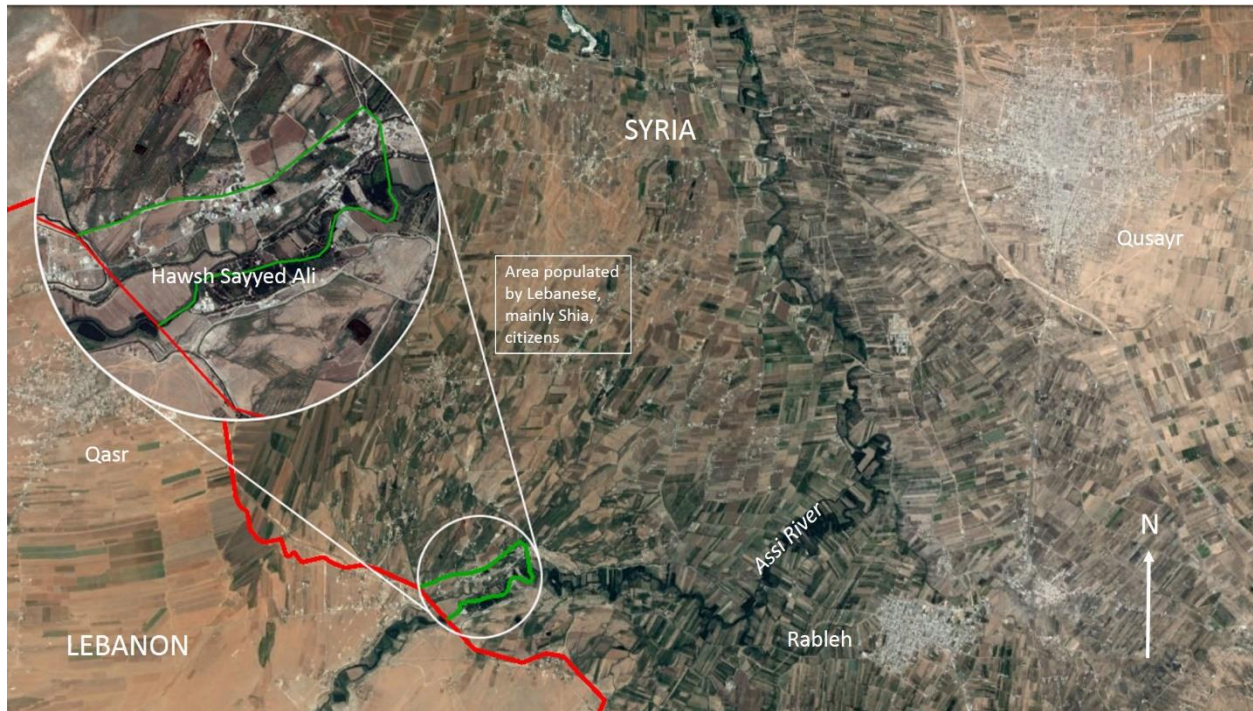


Fig. 20: Lebanon citizens live inside Syria west of Qusayr, an area where the border was meaningless before the war in Syria broke out in 2011

garnered new attention as a potential security threat following the outbreak of the uprising against President Assad's regime in March 2011.

One of the first flashpoints of the uprising was Tel Kalakh which lies just three kilometers north of the border with Lebanon (See Fig: 21). Tel Kalakh, is populated mainly by Sunnis who supported the anti-Assad protests. But the town was surrounded by Alawite-populated villages supportive of the regime. In April and May 2011, thousands of civilian refugees fled from Tel Kalakh and nearby Homs into the northern Akkar and Wadi Khaled regions of Lebanon.

By the end of 2011 as the initially peaceful anti-Assad protests morphed into armed conflict, some of those refugees based in northern Lebanon border villages took up arms and joined the nascent rebel groups. Many of them were living in Sunni villages close to the border from where they would cross the Kabir River and infiltrate Syrian territory. In response, the Syrian army planted land mines along the river banks, including on the Lebanese side in some places. They also routinely fired artillery shells and heavy machine guns across the border.

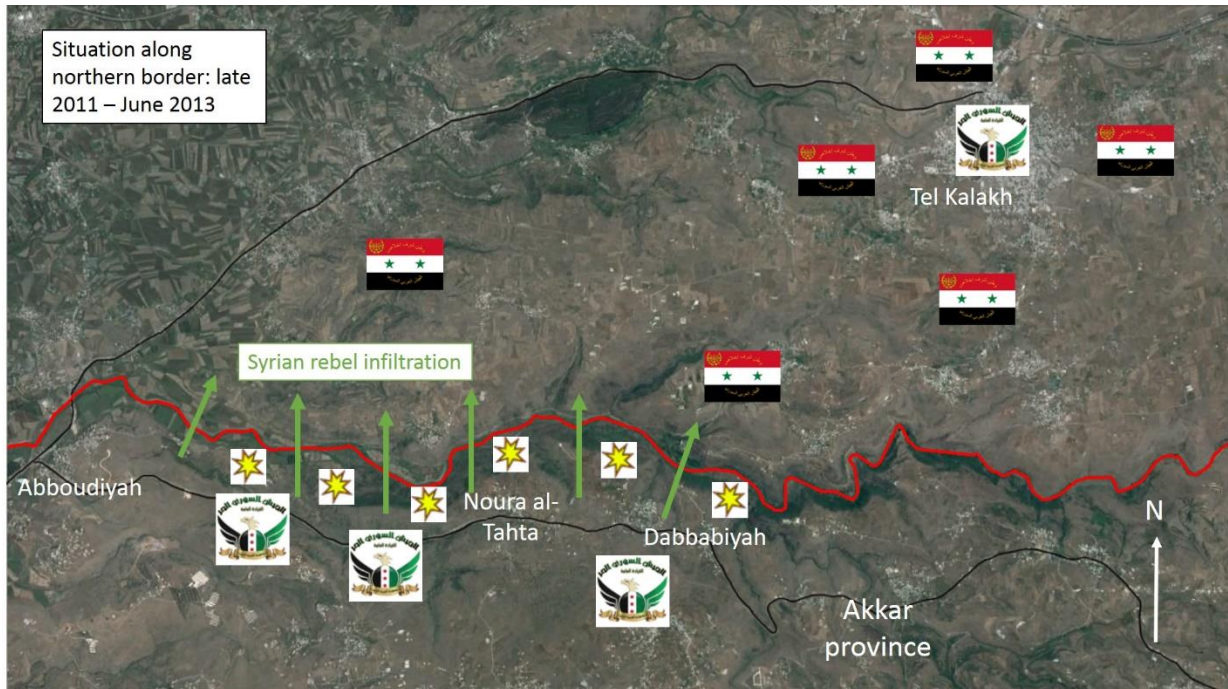


Fig. 21: Situation along the northern Lebanon border between late 2011 and June 2013

For around a year and a half, the northern border became an active front in the Syrian war. In June 2013, the Syrian army regained control of Tel Kalakh and fighting in the area calmed down.

In recognition of the security quandary posed by tensions along the border, General Jean Kahwagi, the Lebanese army commander, in 2012 requested the assistance of the United Kingdom to help secure Lebanon's northern frontier.

That led to a UK-funded project to build a series of fortified watchtowers at key locations along the northern border (See Fig:22). The UK also provided funds to help raise, train and equip the first of what will be four Land Border Regiments tasked with patrolling, monitoring and security Lebanon's frontier with Syria. By summer of 2014, five towers had been erected along the northern border. Each one is fitted with remote-control long-range cameras equipped with night vision allowing clear resolution images of up to 20 kilometers away.

In June 2013, the Syrian rebel-held town of Qusayr fell to Syrian troops and Hezbollah fighters after a 17-day battle. The fall of Qusayr led to more than 20,000 Syrians fleeing into north east Lebanon in the area around Arsal where they settled into makeshift camps.



Fig. 22: A UK-funded fortified Lebanese army watchtower near Chadra on Lebanon's northern border

Between November 2013 and April 2014, Hezbollah spearheaded a campaign to restore the Qalamoun area to Syrian regime control. This period was marked by a spate of attacks into Lebanon – including around 70 cross-border rocket barrages, several roadside bomb ambushes against suspected Hezbollah vehicles and a series of suicide car bombings against Hezbollah-supporting areas of Lebanon, mainly southern Beirut and the town of Hermel in the northern Bekaa Valley. Fourteen suicide car bombs between November 2013 and June 2014 left some 60 people dead and wounded more than 500. Many of the car bombs were manufactured in the Qalamoun region and then driven into Lebanon via the Aarsal area, underlining the critical need to secure the border. Hezbollah's Qalamoun offensive was ultimately successful in that the populated areas were returned to Syrian army control and with it ended the car bomb attacks.

However, hundreds of Syrian rebel fighters escaped the Qalamoun offensive by fleeing into Lebanon, filling the wilderness between the village of Ras Baalbek and Aarsal.

In August 2014, a combined force of some 700 Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra militants stormed Aarsal, overrunning an army barracks and killing the commanding officer. After five days of fighting between the militants and the Lebanese army, a ceasefire deal was arranged. The militants were permitted to leave Aarsal and return to their mountain redoubts, but they took with them a large quantity of looted arms and ammunition and 37 soldiers and police as hostages.

The terrain in north east Lebanon is extremely rugged and crisscrossed with smuggler trails.



Fig. 23: A Lebanese soldier in north east Lebanon

Since August 2014, the army has deployed heavily into the area, building a line of fortified Forward Operating Bases and watchtowers to guard populated areas of the northern Bekaa Valley against any further attacks by the militants (See Fig.

24). The army has surrounded Arsal with checkpoints and supporting positions, but, beyond the occasional raid, does not patrol the town itself. The Lebanese state's absence from Arsal has allowed ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra to dominate the town.

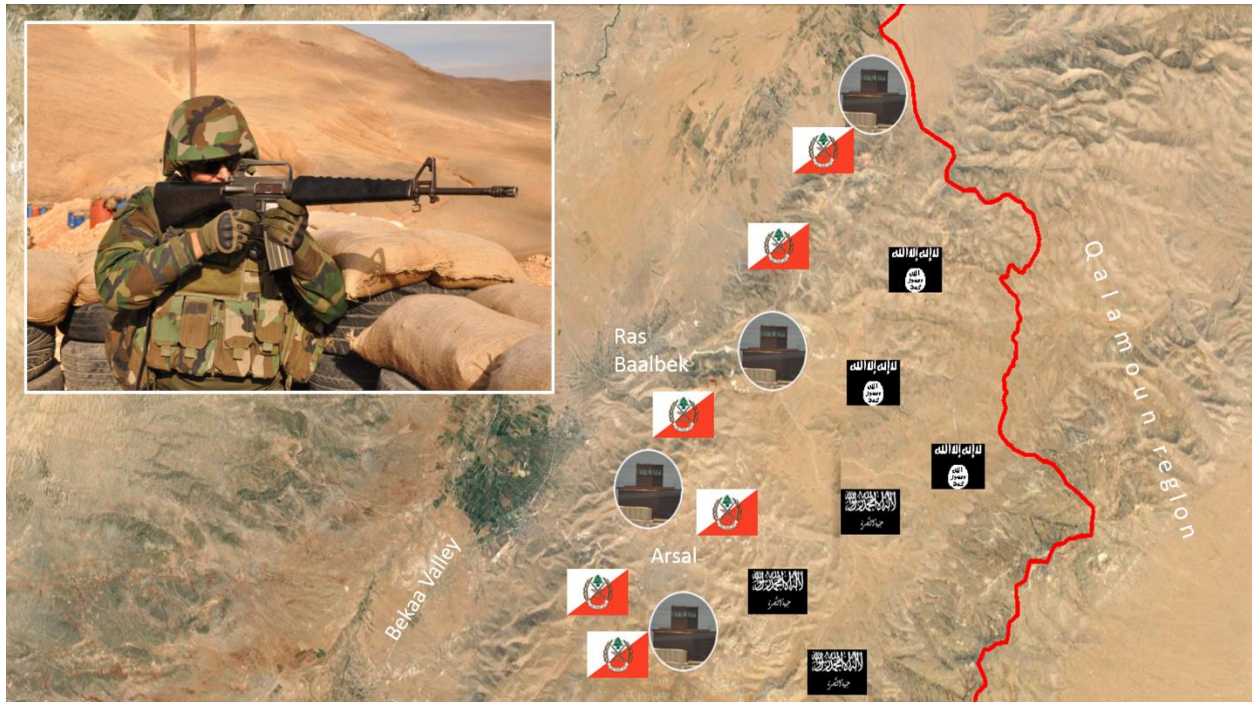


Fig. 24: The Lebanese army has surrounded Arsal and maintains a tight buffer between the ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra and populated areas of the Bekaa Valley

The strengthened army deployment in this area makes it doubtful that the militants can punch through army lines into more populated areas of the Bekaa valley, even if that were their intention. Instead a simmering war of attrition exists here. The army routinely shells the positions and movements of the militants in the rugged terrain between Ras Baalbek and Arsal. In return, ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra occasionally mount roadside bomb ambushes or rocket attacks against army positions. This area of north east Lebanon is the last active front along the Lebanon-Syria border. It remains to be seen how this situation will be resolved.

Meanwhile, the process of securing the border against infiltrations from Syria continues. Two Land Border Regiments have been raised and deployed on the ground along the northern and north east border covering the area between Arida on the coast to just south of Arsal.



Fig. 23: Deployment of the Lebanese army's 1st and 2nd Land Border Regiments

A third Land Border Regiment is being trained and in the process of being deployed along the south east border between Masnaa and Rashaya.

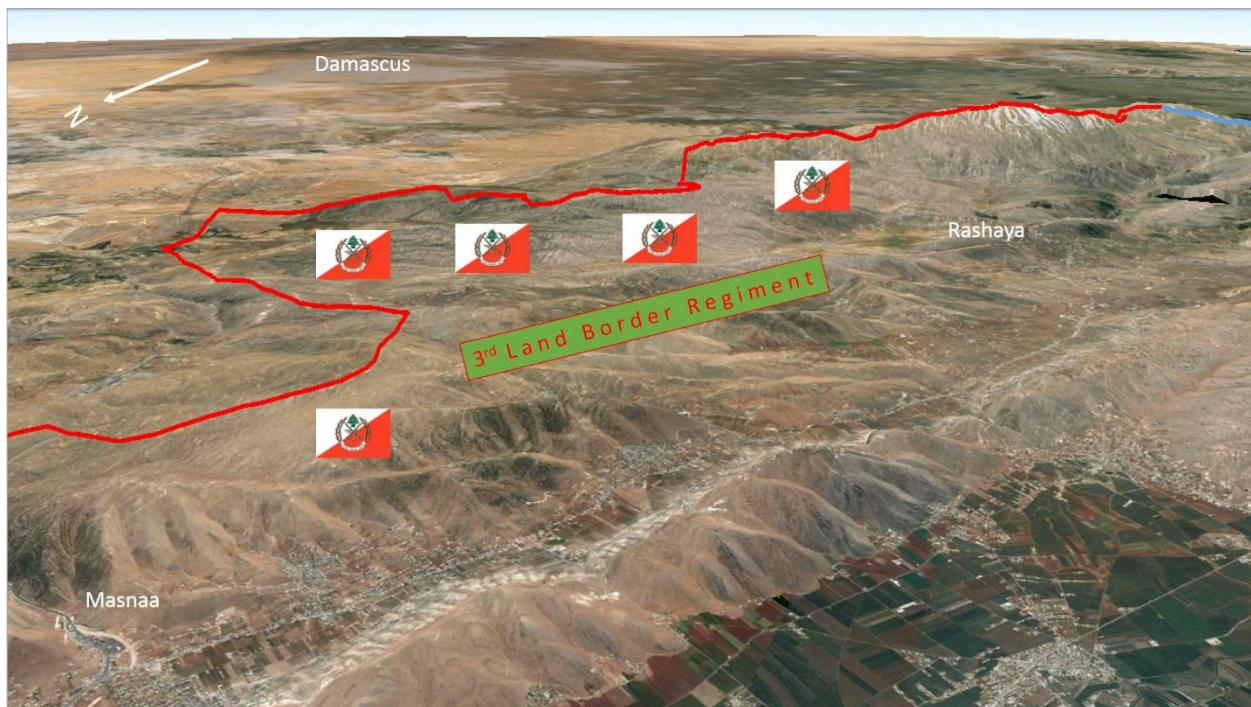


Fig. 24: Deployment of the Lebanese army's 3rd Land Border Regiment

A fourth Land Border Regiment will plug the remaining gap between Arsal and Masnaa.



Fig. 25: Deployment of the Lebanese army's future 4th Land Border Regiment

In conclusion then, there were two outstanding problems regarding the Lebanon-Syria border – one was the failure to properly Delineate the frontier, demarcate it on the ground, conclude a border agreement between Beirut and Damascus and register it with the UN. The other was the lack of security and Lebanese state control along the border. It has taken the war in Syria for Lebanon to address the latter failing. In the past year, the war in Syria has moved further away from the Lebanese border. The pocket of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra militants in the north east corner of the country notwithstanding, Lebanon's border is today more secure than it has been since the beginning of the conflict in Syria. The deployments of the remaining Land Border Regiments as well as continued international military assistance to enhance the capabilities of the Lebanese army should help ensure that the Lebanese state can maintain its control over much of the border. The international community, especially Europe, has come to recognize the importance of securing Lebanon's border with Syria given the refugee crisis

engulfing EU states and the threat posed by ISIS. Lebanon's border with Syria serves as a "first line of defense" as the British foreign secretary recently put it, in the war against ISIS.

As for the second major issue – the demarcation of the border. There is little prospect of a demarcation process beginning until the war in Syria ends. So for now border security is the paramount concern and demarcation will have to await a more peaceful time.



Fig. 26: A Lebanese soldier watches Lebanon's eastern border with Syria near Ras Baalbek