

The Lebanese-Syrian Border A Dance of Death around a Political Black Hole

A UN Middle East Envoy noted this month that a “dance of death” is occurring daily along the Lebanese-Syrian border.¹ The all-time high in arms smuggling, cross-border clashes, kidnappings and killings can only lead to one conclusion: the border has gone rogue. Lebanon’s government led by Prime Minister Najib Mikati, who remains committed to a policy of “dissociation” that neither supports nor opposes the Syrian regime, seems unable to manage the situation.² Already caught up in international squabbles, Lebanese officials are juggling Syrian demands to decrease arms smuggling with Gulf Arab pressure to back opposition and international pleas to support refugees.

The flow of Syrian refugees into Lebanon exemplifies the border’s porous and unregulated nature. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Lebanon had received more than 24,000 Syrian refugees as of May 6, 2012, while activists claim that the number approaches 30,000. For Lebanon, this torrent has stretched already scarce resources, spiked national tensions, and exacerbated the long and troubled history it shares with Syria, which brings with it the potential to incite violence and instability. In fact, clashes have already begun to claim victims, including a 70-year-old woman and a TV cameraman—both Lebanese. It is widely believed that the Syrian regime regularly violates Lebanese sovereignty in its pursuit of the opposition; three instances have been reported this year in which Syrian dissidents were snatched from Lebanon

and returned forcibly to Syria. Of these conditions, Shadi Hamid of the Brookings Institution in Doha says, “I think we can expect more violence along the borders; I think that’s going to be the new norm. The more refugees there are trying to escape, the more skirmishes there will be.”³ Beyond the involvement of Lebanese citizens in the opposition, these clashes demonstrate both the ineffective management by the Lebanese government and the volatility of the border region. On a similar note, security sources at a Western embassy stated “It is necessary to pay attention to the dangerous direction of recent incidents [along the border] and to be on alert to prevent repercussions, especially as some Lebanese areas are sympathetic to different sides of the Syrian conflict.”⁴

The Lebanese-Syrian border has become a tricky issue partly due to the Lebanese government’s refusal to recognize the Syrian opposition, which simply means that it has no bargaining power with the rebel forces that now dominate large portions of the border.

The most telling evidence of Mikati’s failed strategy can be found in the May 17, 2012 “abductee swap.” After a series of retaliatory kidnappings involving Syrians and Lebanese, the powerful Bekaa-based, Shia Jaafar clan orchestrated an “exchange” with the opposition “Syrian Free Army.”⁵ According to reliable sources, the exchange involved two Lebanese who had allied with pro-Assad Syrian troops and the bodies of two others killed fighting against the rebels. Apparently, Hezbollah/Syria “outsourced” the operation to the Jaafar clan, which relieved it from having to deal directly with the Free Syrian Army, an organization Hezbollah consistently refers to as a “gang of terrorists.” Assuming the veracity of this information, it reintroduces concerns about potential Hezbollah involvement in the Syrian

حل مشكلة زيتا السورية بتبادل المخطوفين آل جعفر تسلموا اثنين وأطلقوا 19

السورية على مراحل، واحتجازهم داخل الأراضي اللبنانية.

وجاءت عملية التسليم بعد تدخل عشائر المنطقة التي كانت شكلت لجنة ضمت من الجهة اللبنانية كلاً من: علي عواد، خضر كامل ناصر الدين والدكتور علي زعيتر، ومن الجهة السورية علي الجاسم ومحمود رحال، وتولت التفاوض وإيجاد مخرج وفقاً لخصوصية العلاقات بين البلديات والقرى الحدودية "انطلاقاً من ضرورة وعي خطورته خصوصاً مع حصول اشتباكات خفيفة بالأسلحة الرشاشة بين الطرفين قبل ثلاثة أيام من دون وقوع اصابات كادت ان تترك البلديات والقرى الحدودية، مما عجل في عملية التفاوض.

بعلبك - " النهار"

قراءة الساعة الأولى بعد ظهر أمس، سلم معارضون سوريون المخطوفين اللبنانيين خضر حسين خليل جعفر (44 عاماً)، وعبدالله الزين (25 عاماً) وسلمت عشيرة آل جعفر 19 سورياً، وحصل التبادل داخل الأراضي السورية في المنطقة التي خطفوا فيها، بلدة زيتا الحدودية، وهي بلدة سورية يقطنها لبنانيون. وكانت مجموعة معارضة سورية مسلحة من عائلة عرب المجادلة وبعض العائلات الاخرى خطفت قبل تسعة ايام جعفر والزين من البلدة، وعلى الاثر عمدت عشيرة آل جعفر الى خطف 19 سورياً من داخل الأراضي

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An-Nahar detailed the events leading up the Jaafar exchange on May 17th <http://www.annahar.com/article.php?t=mahaly&p=12&d=2473>

crisis by placing its own fighters on Syrian territory. A resident of the area stressed that "we usually forget that in the border region between Hermel and Homs there are several Shia villages, which are under Syrian control now. These people used to move freely between the countries. The same families living in Hermel have their relatives living in Syria and they come back and forth to schools in Lebanon, for example." One can conclude that Hezbollah intervention, therefore, takes a family-oriented shape.

The Lebanese-Syrian border has become a tricky issue partly due to the Lebanese government's refusal to recognize the Syrian opposition, which simply means that it has no bargaining power with the rebel forces that now dominate large portions of the border. *Yalibnan News* was quoted as saying the border is "a lawless 'no man's land' where local clans rule" following the abduction of a Dutch military attaché who was forcefully taken to Syria via the border region in 2011. Syrian allegations regarding arms being smuggled into Syria from Lebanon also offers proof that at least some of the border lies outside the control of any unofficial, pro-Syrian groups, such as Hezbollah or other paramilitary organizations.⁶

Although a joint subcommittee was formed by

the Syrian-Lebanese High Council to mediate the border issues, most Lebanese actions to date have focused on the flow of weapons into Syria rather than those being smuggled into Lebanon. In fact, a shipment of arms that included heavy machine guns, artillery shells, rockets, rocket launchers and other explosives intended for Syrian rebels was seized on May 18 as it attempted to cross the border into Syria. Similar events have become the norm along the border, whether land or maritime. Syria's UN representative wrote that some incidents "confirm that terrorist groups in Syria are being supplied with arms and that terrorists are being smuggled across the Lebanese-Syrian border." He noted further, "the offices of some charitable societies supervised by Salafist groups and the [Future] Movement in Lebanese border areas ... have been turned into places for receiving and harboring terrorist elements from the al-Qaida and the Muslim Brotherhood organizations." The



The prevalence of arms smuggling between Lebanon and Syria presents the most obvious manifestation of the porous border. Most border clashes occur along the Northern Bekaa, and the Hermel and Akkar districts, where Shia families used to move freely across the border. Syria has accused Lebanon of hosting terrorist groups who supply to the Syrian opposition in this region, demonstrating that neither official authorities nor unofficial groups, such as Hezbollah, have control.

<http://www.boomantribune.com/story/201277898/13273/8/2/>

statement prompted speculation about terrorist groups dwelling in Lebanon's north that could intensify the effects of this porous border, namely, the war spilling over into Lebanon.

Speaking in Lebanon about the border issue, one reporter observed that "responses have predictably broken down along party lines,"⁷ thus straining the already precarious Lebanese peace. On one side, members of the defunct March 14 alliance have criticized the government's silence on Syrian border actions and accused Hezbollah of harboring weapons intended for Syria: "Citizens feel that there is no state to protect them."⁸ Syrian activists claim Hezbollah has led an internal crackdown on

the Sunni opposition in Lebanon, a timely reminder of Lebanon's pervasive Syrian legacy. Alternatively, while Hezbollah calls for reprisals against Syrian abusers, its position on border security is certainly not a consistent one. UNSCR 1701, which was established to secure Lebanon's territorial autonomy, still has not been fully implemented. Hezbollah's position becomes even more precarious when it must comment on the non-state arms of others. While addressing violence in Lebanon's north, Hezbollah official Sheikh Nabil Kawouk insisted, "the weapons of militias represent a threat against Lebanon's stability." No doubt the Hezbollah-led government will find itself increasingly backed into a corner as "resistances" collide.

¹ "Roed Larsen: There is no flow of arms through Lebanon-Syria border." *Naharnet*. 9 May 2012. <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/39597-roed-larsen-there-is-flow-of-arms-through-lebanon-syria-border>

² Translated typically in English as "dissociation," the vague concept of an-naii bin-nafs can also be rendered as "shying away from."

³ "Syrian Violence Spreads Across Borders." *Bangor Daily*. 9 April 2012. <http://bangordailynews.com/201209/04//news/world-news/syrian-violence-spreads-across-borders/>

⁴ "Borders Heats Up as Syria Slides Towards Civil War." *The Daily Star*. 21 May 2012. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2012/May-21/174095-/border-heats-up-as-syria-slides-toward-civil-war.ashx#ixzz1vn8blnL>

⁵ "Prisoner Swap Takes Place Between Jaafar Clan, Syrian Opposition at Border." *Naharnet*. 17 May 2012. <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/40473-prisoner-swap-takes-place-between-jaafar-clan-syrian-opposition-at-border>

⁶ "Miqati Hits Back, Says Syria Letter to Ban 'Inflames Disputes.'" *Naharnet*. 18 May 2012. <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/40701>

⁷ "Syrian Fallout in Lebanon." *Fikraforum*. 25 October 2011. <http://fikraforum.org/?p=1641>

⁸ "Future bloc: Citizens do not feel protected by government." *Now Lebanon*. 11 October 2011. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=320815>