

## 'New Syria ties won't damage Hizbullah'

Contributed by herb keinson, brenda Gazzar and AP , THE JERUSALEM POST  
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Syria's announcement Thursday that it would demarcate its border with Lebanon, except for the Mount Dov/Shaba Farms area, is an obvious attempt to keep the issue alive and give Hizbullah a continued justification for its existence, Israeli diplomatic officials said Thursday.

The officials' comments came after Syrian President Bashar Assad and Lebanese President Michel Suleiman issued a statement that they agreed on "the resumption of the work of the joint committee to define and draw the Syrian-Lebanese borders."

But Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem said at a press conference that this would not include the Israeli-controlled Shaba Farms.

"Currently, there can be no border demarcation around the Sheba Farms due to the Israeli occupation," he said.

"If there is a border demarcation on Mount Dov," one Israeli official said, "then one of the reasons Hizbullah uses to justify itself would be taken away. And Syria has no interest in pulling the rug out from under Hizbullah."

Hizbullah justifies its existence and says it will maintain its huge arsenal until it "liberates" the Shaba Farms area, all of Ghajar, and seven destroyed Shi'ite villages in the north, including Yuval, Yiron, Malkhia and Margaliot.

But an independent Lebanese parliamentarian told The Jerusalem Post that the reason for excluding the Shaba Farms in demarcation talks was likely due, at least in part, to practical reasons.

Because "the land is still occupied by Israel, both Lebanon and Syria cannot demarcate that portion technically," since demarcation requires placing actual markings on the ground, the parliamentarian said, asking not to be identified by name.

"In my opinion, Israel can withdraw from the territory and hand it over to the UN irrespective of demarcation," he said. "It's not a legal requirement (to demarcate that area) under international law."

Israel conquered the Shaba Farms - 20 square kilometers of mountains on its northeast border - from Syria in the 1967 Six Day War, maintaining that it is part of the Golan Heights and its future will be determined in peace negotiations with Syria.

The UN supports Israel's position, having declared Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 complete. Lebanon and Syria claim it is Lebanese territory.

The decision to demarcate the borders between Lebanon and Syria, with the exception of the Shaba Farms, is part of Syria's and Lebanon's landmark decision a day earlier to establish full diplomatic relations between the two countries, including the establishment of embassies in both capitals.

Syria has "come to the conclusion that Lebanon is an independent state and that it's not part of Syria. This is a change" from its long-held ideology, said Moshe Maoz, a professor of Middle Eastern Studies at Hebrew University and a Syria expert.

After suffering from years of isolation, "Syria wants to look better to the West," he said. "They want to be part of the international community, to have good relations with Europe and the United States."

Part of recognizing Lebanon as an independent entity is recognizing that there has to be clearly defined borders and boundaries between the two countries, he said.

The decision to trade ambassadors was applauded loudly in the West, but Israeli diplomatic officials said it was not yet clear that the move would indeed take place.

"There is no guarantee that this will really happen," one Israeli official said, adding that the announcement on the embassies was likely timed to precede the scheduled visit next month to Syria by French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

"This is a step done for the West," the official said. "Let's wait and see if it is implemented."

The dispute over the Shaba Farms - and whether they belong to Lebanon or Syria - arose from the fact that the French colonial authorities never conducted an official border demarcation between the two countries between 1920 and 1946, Asher Kaufman, an Israeli scholar and assistant professor at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, said this week.

While French maps located the Shaba Farms within Syria, the population that lived there believed and acted as if they were part of Lebanon, paying taxes to Lebanon and conducting all their official activities vis-a-vis the Lebanese state rather than Syria.

This anomaly, which continued after the two countries became independent in the 1940s, hadn't become a problem until Israel captured the Golan Heights and the Shaba Farms in 1967, and Lebanese farmers were no longer able to cultivate this land, he said.

Although the Shaba Farms had been mentioned in the Lebanese press as early as the late 1970s or early '80s, Hizbullah made it a significant issue following Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, he said.

Thursday's statement from the two presidents also said both sides agreed to review all bilateral agreements in an "objective" way.

Many Lebanese claim that political and economic agreements signed between the two countries during the 1990s were lopsided in Syria's favor.

Syria controlled Lebanon for nearly 30 years, after sending its army in as peacekeepers during the 1975-90 civil war. Its direct hold was broken in 2005, when international pressure over the slaying of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri - blamed by many on Damascus - forced the troops to leave.

Even after the withdrawal, some Lebanese accused Damascus of trying to maintain its influence, saying it was encouraging Hizbullah to topple the Western-backed government of Prime Minister Fuad Saniora.

They also accused Syria of being behind a string of assassinations of anti-Syria figures since 2005 to intimidate Beirut and destabilize the country.

Syria denies any role in the Hariri killing or the other attacks.

The United States, which backs Saniora, welcomed the decision to restore diplomatic ties but pushed for Syria to stay out of Lebanese affairs.

"We have long stood for the normalization of relations between Syria and Lebanon on the basis of equality and respect for Lebanese sovereignty. One of the steps that has long been required is the establishment of a proper embassy for Syria in Lebanon and vice versa," US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Wednesday.

"Now, if the Syrians will go ahead and demarcate the border between Lebanon and Syria, and respect Lebanon's sovereignty in other ways, then this will have proved to be a very good step," she added.

In their statement Thursday, the Lebanese and Syrian presidents also pledged to intensify efforts to determine the fate of their citizens believed to be missing in each other's countries.

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