

Time: Battling Over Cherries on the Lebanon-Syria Border

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In this remote and starkly beautiful corner of Lebanon, anger is building between quarrelling Syrian and Lebanese farmers. When Syrian farmers harvest from orchards, Lebanese farmers from Aarsal village tear out the fruit trees. The altercations often end in shoot-outs. "It's only a matter of time before someone is killed," said one Aarsal resident. For these orchards nestled on the lower slopes of the Anti-Lebanon mountains in eastern Lebanon have been quietly incorporated into Syria, one of dozens of subtle encroachments along this ill-defined border that have bred resentment and sparked gun battles between feuding farmers. And given the tense relations between Syria and Lebanon, a battle over apricots and cherries will only add to the headaches bedeviling the crisis-wracked Beirut government.

Syria dominated Lebanon politically and militarily for almost three decades before disengaging two years ago amid huge anti-Syrian street protests in Beirut. Although the troop withdrawal was subsequently verified by a United Nations team, it was well known that some Syrian military units remained on Lebanese soil, mainly in remote border hills in south east Lebanon. But a report released last week by an anti-Syrian lobby group in Lebanon claims that Syria still controls 177 square miles of Lebanon, almost 4.5% of this tiny Mediterranean country. The report also highlighted dozens of illegal border crossings snaking through the rugged mountains used to smuggle weapons and militants into Lebanon as well as more benign goods such as diesel fuel and cigarettes. "Because Syria will not recognize Lebanon as a sovereign country and because it still considers it as part of Syria, it has kept the border issue alive by creating regular incidents of conflict and contention," the report said.

The traditionally porous frontier has drawn the attention of the U.N. Security Council which on Friday stated its "grave concern at persistent reports of breaches of the arms embargo along the Lebanon-Syria border." A U.N. border inspection team reported in June that Lebanese frontier security measures were "insufficient" to prevent smuggling of arms, some of them to Palestinian militant groups manning bases in Lebanon close to the Syrian border. The U.N. report added that the team's assessment was "further strengthened by the fact that not a single seizure of smuggled arms has been documented by the team." The issue is all the more pressing in light of recent boasts by Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, leader of the militant Shi'ite Hizballah, that his group is even better armed and stronger than last summer when it fought a month-long war against Israel.

The root of the problem lies in the 198-mile Lebanon-Syria border never having been formally demarcated on the ground with permanent markers such as concrete boundary pillars. The border was delineated by the French mandate authorities in 1920 when the state of Greater Lebanon was established, the line generally following the peaks of the Anti-Lebanon mountain range separating well-watered Lebanon from the semi-desert of the Syrian hinterland. But the line drawn by the French military geographers often left Lebanese-owned land inside Syria and vice versa. The result was decades of confusion over the exact path of the border which has yet to be resolved. Syrian military maps of part of the joint border seen by TIME differ markedly from Lebanese maps, although both countries insist their versions are correct.

After Damascus intervened in Lebanon in 1976 to quell the then year-old civil war, Syrian farmers began encroaching on Lebanese land adjacent to the border, enjoying the protection of Syrian troops. "When the Syrian army left Lebanon two years ago, they kept our land for cultivation," said Mohammed Hojeiry, the mayor of Aarsal. "The land should go back to its original owners." Reaching the disputed farmland entails an hour-long drive east of the village following a deeply rutted dirt track that winds across an arid plain, bisected by wadis (dried up river beds) toward the mountain peaks of the Anti-Lebanon range. The dense green orchards clustered on the lower slopes of the mountains are a welcome blaze of colour in the otherwise barren sun-blasted sepia landscape.

Rabieh Zaarour gazes at his dense orchard of apricot and cherry trees. Soon the branches will hang heavy with fruit, but it will be farmers from neighboring Syria that will benefit, not Zaarour. His land seized by Syrian farmers, Zaarour makes a living instead from smuggling diesel fuel from Syria into Lebanon, profiting from the price differences between the two countries. He points to the location of the border, about a mile to the east past the orchards to a mountain crest that towers over the dusty plain. "The Syrians allow me to pass through these orchards because I pay off the customs people, but anyone else they shoot at," Zaarour says, as he unloads jerry cans of diesel from a jeep which his Syrian partner has just smuggled across the border.

The Lebanese authorities turn a blind eye to the commercial smuggling activities which provide a crucial source of income for the impoverished and neglected communities along the Syrian border. There is little attempt to hide the smuggling. Just 100 yards away from a police checkpoint at the eastern edge of Aarsal, several pick up trucks specially fitted with fuel tanks were gathered openly as the smugglers prepared for another trip to the border. With the United

States and Israel pushing for a tighter security regime along the Lebanon-Syria border to thwart Hizballah's rearming, the deployment of international troops has been mooted. Lebanese smugglers say they have no objections if security measures are intended to block arms shipments only. But they made it clear that any attempts to stop commercial smuggling as well will mean that it won't only be Syrian farmers feeling the wrath of Aarsal's residents.

By Nicholas Blanford/Aarsal, Lebanon; Thursday, Aug. 02, 2007

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