

THE ISRAEL – LEBANON BORDER ENIGMA

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INTRODUCTION

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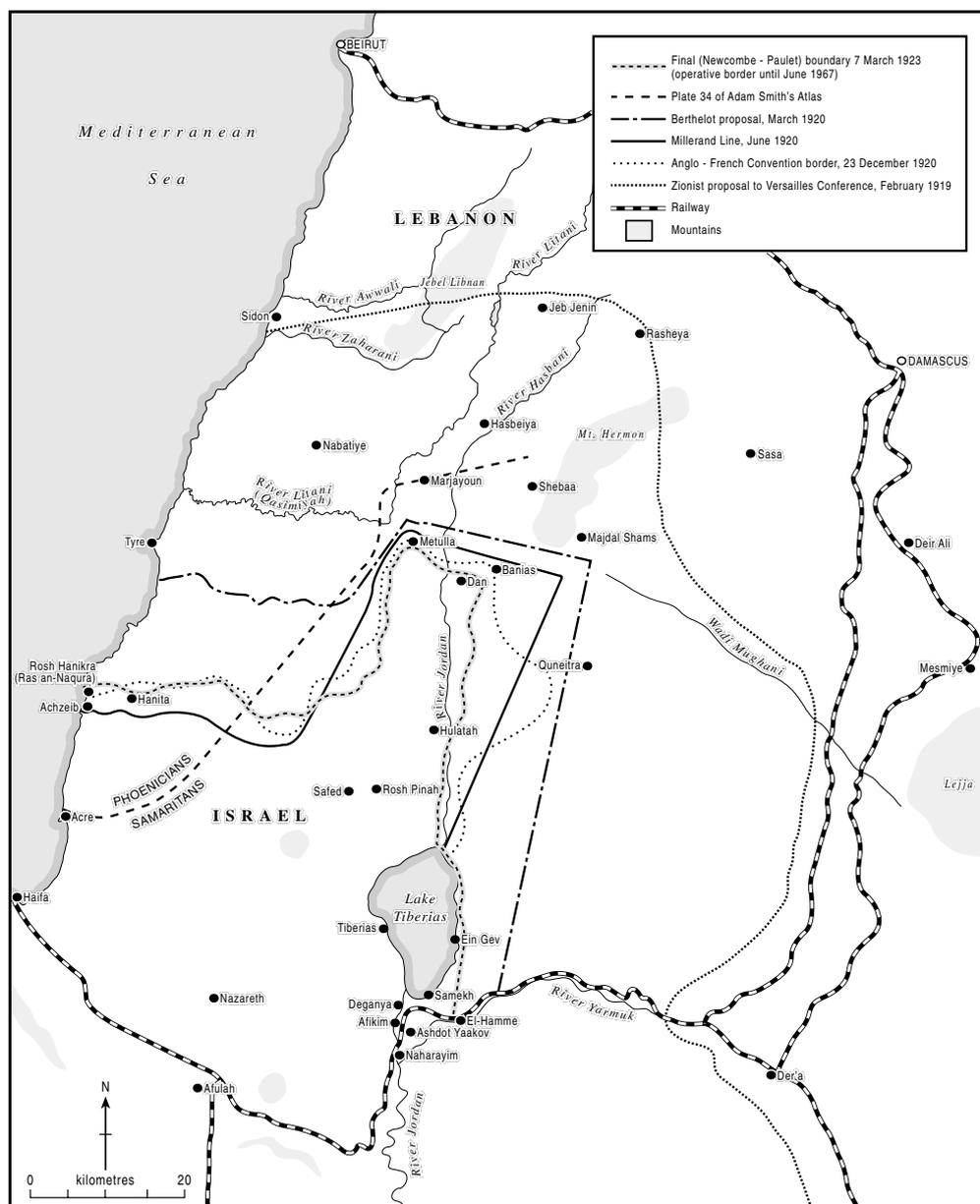
On 24 May 2000 the last Israeli troops deployed in south Lebanon pulled back into Israel, closing and padlocking the border gate behind them. Less than a month later the UN Security Council endorsed UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's assertion that Israel had "*withdrawn its forces from Lebanon in accordance with Resolution 425*" – bringing to an end Israel's 22 year presence in south Lebanon. These events have focused worldwide attention on a hitherto relatively insignificant issue – the definition of the Lebanese-Israeli boundary. The legacy of political and strategic problems associated with this border, the result of short-sighted decisions and compromises prompted by colonial concerns some eighty years ago, means that to date this border is neither properly defined along its full length nor fully accepted by the nations either side of it.

The Israeli withdrawal in May was to a line defined by the UN and designated as the "*Blue Border Line*", which is more or less consistent with the Anglo-French 1923 accord. However, disagreements between Lebanon, Israel and the UN as to the exact line of the border and the consequent refusal of Lebanon to deploy troops to southern Lebanon and allow the UN to deploy to the border created a dangerous void along the border. Hezbollah, which had been instrumental in speeding up the Israeli withdrawal were still in place in the area and the existence of several controversial issues along the border meant that the border region could be a major flash point in the volatile Middle East. The aim of this article is to examine this border region from a geopolitical and military viewpoint and to highlight the various flash points, which could become the next battleground, if peace should elude this unfortunate region once again.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The story of the border between Lebanon and Israel, delineated between French Syria and British Palestine between 1916 and 1923 is regarded as one of the strangest enigmas of modern times. The result of high handed colonial politics undertaken in ignorance of the realities on the ground, it has already led to years of dangerous confrontation and may yet be the cause of more in the near future.

During the First World War, when it became evident that the Ottoman Empire was crumbling to pieces, the then world powers, France and Britain discussed future plans to share the spoils in the Middle East. France, which had historic ties with the Maronite Catholic community in the Levant focused its attention on northern territories in Lebanon and Syria, while Great Britain sought contacts with the Arabs becoming increasingly important due to the recently discovered oil in the Persian Gulf. There were also other groups interested in Palestine, apart from the Arabs – the Jewish Zionists, who had been promised a national home in Palestine in 1917, by the then British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour. But the roots of the Lebanon-Israel border lie in the May 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, the outcome of secret negotiations between Sir Mark Sykes MP and the French Arabist, François Georges Picot, former consul general in Beirut.¹ The spheres of influence created by the agreement would have left the watersheds in the region divided in a particularly convoluted manner: the Litani (otherwise known as Quasimiya) river and the Jordan headwaters would be under French control, while the Sea of Galilee would be divided between Britain and France. The reasons for this oversight, a tragic one for a future state of Palestine, were the strategic locations of railway and oil lines, which British negotiators at the time viewed as of utmost importance to their imperial

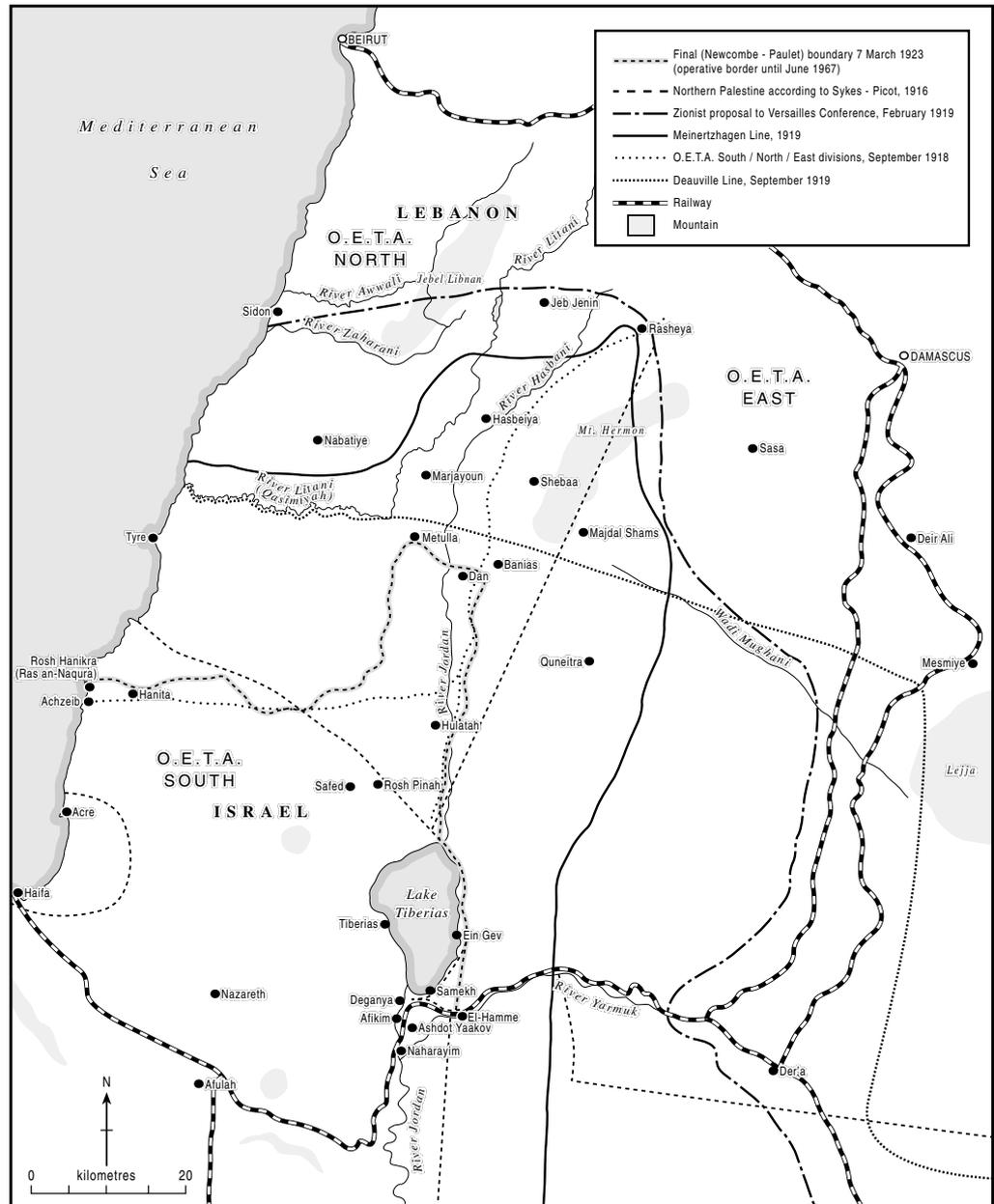


strategy. Water resources were regarded as of marginal importance in the border demarcation process, but British strategists were to regret their short sighted benevolence only a few years later when attention became focused on vital practical aspects of Palestine's northern borders.

The British deviated from the Sykes-Picot line and adopted the Biblical "Dan to Beersheba" concept for Palestine

In December 1918, following General Sir Edmund Allenby's conquest of Palestine and Syria, the British Government no longer felt obligated to defer to French political interests and during preliminary negotiations on the delineation of the boundaries, signalled a more determined attitude. The British were also prepared to consider Zionist requests in a more positive way. The British deviated from the Sykes-Picot line and adopted the Biblical "Dan to Beersheba" concept for Palestine, as based on a map of ancient Erez Yisrael under Kings David and Solomon.² The French did not agree. In the ongoing negotiations over the temporary boundaries of the "Occupied Enemy Territorial Administrations" (OETA) the British persisted in their demand to stretch the northern border line of Palestine up to the Litani River and across to the Banias springs on the slopes of Mount Hermon,³ an attitude that was more than welcomed by the Zionists, who regarded their water requirements as a vital issue.

The British negotiators, mostly military veterans of the late war, considered Britain's strategy from a purely security oriented point of view. They realised that the Litani



gorge presented the only natural border between Palestine and Lebanon. It is unfortunate, in view of subsequent events, that this viewpoint with its far-reaching strategic implications was a casualty of lengthy political haggling and was ignored. The resultant 'impossible' geopolitical situation has haunted Middle Eastern politics ever since.

During the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, the Arab delegation headed by Emir Feisal of Hejaz actually supported the Jewish demands in Palestine and tried to assist Zionist leader Chaim Weizman's position against the French policies in Lebanon. During the discussions the two parties agreed that all water and boundary issues should be settled directly through direct bilateral negotiations, the first, and sadly last time that such a proposal was officially aired by an Arab leader.⁴ It could have become an important turning point, but shortsighted colonial considerations soon rendered this proposal null and void.

At the Versailles conference in February 1919, the final decisions over the demarcation of the Palestine-Lebanese border were left to British and French negotiators, for them to hammer out their differences and find a mutually acceptable solution. The talks continued without reaching a result, until the decision at San

Remo in 1920 as to where the final boundaries between the two spheres of interest should be drawn. The French supported the Lebanese claim that the “*historical and natural*” boundaries of “*Greater Lebanon*” should include the sources of the Jordan River.⁵ This was totally unacceptable to the British and in 1919 they suggested the so-called *Meinertzhagen Line* as a compromise, which fulfilled most of Britain’s security requirements. In fact, this line was similar to the Zionist proposal and was rejected by the French, for that very reason. There followed another British proposal, a compromise called the *1919 Deauville Proposal* which granted Palestine less territory than the Zionists demanded, but still included the southern bank of the Litani, which at least retained in place the natural obstacle for security. As the French negotiators hesitated and were about to reject that proposal as well, the British proposed a border line running from Acre, on the Mediterranean coast to the Litani river bend and then east to Mount Hermon, which would increase Lebanese territory, but still maintain the Litani gorge as a buffer zone.⁶ Although the French rejected each of these proposals and still insisted on the original Sykes-Picot line, they did agree to some concessions, especially on the issue of the Jordan headwaters.

On December 1920, a final agreement was reached on the border issue

In June 1920 the French negotiators finally presented their own proposal: Palestine’s northern border should run from Ras en-Naqoura to a point near the Jordan just north of the Jewish settlement of Metulla and some nearby villages. Last minute appeals were made by both British and Zionist to include the Litani river, but the French remained adamant. On December 1920, a final agreement was reached on the border issue, which mainly addressed French and British rail and oil interests, but totally ignored any topographical requirements for a feasible border line which could be defended through natural obstacles, or secure vital water resources for British Palestine (and later any Jewish National Home).

The final boundary between the French and British mandates, which later became the border between Lebanon and Israel, was worked out by a joint Anglo-French commission set up to trace the final border demarcation on the ground. That was the intention but, unfortunately, it never materialised as such as the line agreed upon was never demarcated on the ground. The primary considerations, which determined the outcome of the compromise, were based on the wishes of the local inhabitants, who lived in the border region, mainly the Lebanese Shi’ites, and to a lesser extent, the few isolated Jewish settlements in the Jordan rift valley sloping uphill towards the western mountain ridge.

The commission, consisting of two officers, the French Lt. Colonel M. Paulet and British Lt. Colonel Stuart Newcombe, submitted its reports in February 1922 and these were signed by their respective governments a year later in March 1923.⁷ The result proved disastrous for future generations. Today’s problems stem mainly from two major problems, which were overlooked at the time.

1. The two officers decided to choose distinct physical landmarks to determine temporary ground features along the line traced by them on their maps. Yet many of these features were stones, trees and ancient foundations, which over the years disappeared completely, or shifted with the heavy winter flow of rivers and wadis.
2. What proved even more confusing was the fact that the border delineation was conducted on 1:100,000 scale military maps which did not match, due to different techniques, the British using the standard topographical contours, and the French using their own shaded maps, which indicate the ground contours in visible terms. These were not always accurate at the time, lacking as they did modern survey technologies.

The inevitable result was that important tactical topographical features were ignored or failed completely to register during the demarcation, a failure which has direct

bearing on the present problems being experienced in defining a line which can be accepted by both sides.⁸

THE OUTCOME: CREATING A BATTLEGROUND BORDER

From the start, the 1923 borderline existed only in theory. In practice it almost did not exist, at least for the inhabitants living alongside it. Both Jews and Arabs living in the *Galilee Panhandle*⁹ close to the border region, as well as the Lebanese Christians and Muslims living on the other side, virtually ignored the line and went about their daily business, crossing into each other's territory unheeded. Travel and commerce continued throughout as before. In fact, removed from the political centre in Beirut, the mostly Shi'ite South was neglected by the central Lebanese administration, and thus remained a virtual economic extension of northern Palestine, in spite of the new border.

The northern border region became a prime strategic focal point

The result was twofold: on the one hand, the traditionally good neighbourly relations between Jews, Christians and Shi'ite Muslims remained close, but on the other, the lack of governmental control produced a haven for irresponsible elements, such as smugglers and armed Arab bands infiltrating into Palestine. It was a dangerous vacuum, and the situation grew substantially worse as the tension between Jews, Arabs and the British authorities finally erupted in the ferocious 1936-39 Arab Revolt. Arab irregulars backed by Muslim radicals used South Lebanon as a staging area for recruitment and training and cross-border attacks became a daily routine. For the British authorities in Palestine, the northern border region became a prime strategic focal point and urgent measures to counter the dangerous infiltration routes had to be taken if Northern Palestine was to remain under firm military control. It was here, for the first time, that the British military commanders realised how erratically their predecessors had negotiated the border demarcation. None other than the British Army in Palestine was the first to pay the price for this political negligence.

It became strikingly obvious that while the negotiators in the 1920s had concentrated mainly on economic, strategic and religious interests, they had almost totally neglected security issues, an approach which was now about to backfire with serious consequences.¹⁰

A significant event, during the riots of 1938, was the arrival in Palestine of Sir Charles Tegart who had been sent to advise on counter terrorist activities. Tegart immediately set about reconnoitring the borderline and his first report was straight to the point: it could not, from a military viewpoint be defended along most of its length, under the prevailing topographical conditions.

In an attempt to seal off the border against incursions from Lebanon the construction of a frontier road, with barbed wire fences along the entire length was authorised. Furthermore a number of concrete blockhouses were built at vantage points, at prescribed intervals along the fence. But it was of little use. With the topographic disadvantage of so many potential flash points remaining unchanged, the infiltrators had little difficulty in overcoming the fence, circumventing the manned pillboxes, as well as evading the mobile patrols along the frontier road, which was usually under full observation from vantage points inside the Lebanese border region. "*Tegart's Wall*" as it was nicknamed did have strange effects on wildlife however: it was ideal for keeping the wolf out of northern Palestine while keeping the gazelles safely in!¹¹

During World War Two, the Palestine-Lebanese border region was the site of further conflict, when the British Army invaded Vichy-French controlled Lebanon and Syria. Throughout the period of the war, there were several campaigns in the border area and it was again evident that the border was strategically unsound and difficult to defend. Lebanon was granted independence in 1944 (Syria in 1946) and the border

officially closed down again. Also during this period there were some initiatives that, if brought to fruition could have possibly reversed some of the worst effects of the colonial legacy and contributed to peace in the area. One such plan was the ambitious project to harness the Litani River for hydroelectric power through a joint Lebanese-Palestinian-Jewish company, funded by American Jewry. But the French authorities opposed such a move and the plans were discarded.¹² An opportunity was lost, which could have dramatically repaired one of the drastic colonial mistakes, which had created the difficult problems in the border region. Before long, great tragedies would turn the Israel-Lebanese frontier into an endless battlefield.

THE ARAB-ISRAELI WARS ON LEBANON'S FRONTIER

Although the small Lebanese army did not play a significant role during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, it nevertheless attacked and captured two small Israeli villages along the international border. During Operation *Hiram*¹³ in October 1948, the Israelis counter-attacked and gained control over the entire Lebanese border region, capturing 14 Lebanese villages and reaching the banks of the Litani, for the first, but not last, time. Here once again opportunity presented itself, when some of the Christian and Shi'ite village heads approached the Israeli commanders and asked for their protection against the Sunni Muslim marauders who had for years maltreated them. Unfortunately, the Israeli authorities refused, and when the Israeli forces withdrew under the 1949 armistice agreement, the entire matter was shelved. Years later Israelis were to look back on those missed opportunities with great longing, but by then it was too late, the border had turned into a battlefield.

The border, and especially its northern and eastern sectors, was once again turned into a killing zone

The March 1949 Armistice Agreement between Israel and Lebanon produced no controversy, except for a small stretch of border in the eastern sector. In general the old 1923 borderline was reinstated and remained intact, in relative peace, even during the 1957 and 1967 wars. However, following the eviction of the Palestine Liberation guerrillas from Jordan in September 1970, the PLO established its base in South Lebanon, filling the vacuum that existed there. They then exploited the chaotic situation that prevailed in Lebanon following the civil war in 1976. The border, and especially its northern and eastern sectors, was once again turned into a killing zone as Palestinian guerrillas carried out deadly cross-border raids into northern Israel, which culminated in a major confrontation in 1978, as Israel retaliated by force with Operation *Litani*. Because the fighting did not subside, the Israelis struck again in 1982, this time reaching Beirut and forcing the PLO to leave Lebanon and go into exile.

Eventually Israeli Defence Force (IDF) started to withdraw from Lebanon in 1985 another opportunity to form some sort of a peaceful coexistence with the Shi'ite population was again lost, when the moderate Shi'ite Amal party approached the IDF for assistance in their struggle against the newly created radical Shi'ite Hizbullah, but due to short sighted Israeli policies, which still favoured the Maronite Christians in the north, rather than throw in their lot with the Shi'ite neighbours who were the real co-habitants of the border region, this was refused.¹⁴ Years later, when the Iranian-backed Hizbullah fighters fought a fierce guerrilla war against the IDF in the Israeli established Security Zone in South Lebanon, the Israelis were sorely to regret this and would pay dearly for these short sighted mistakes until finally forced to withdraw under extremely inopportune circumstances in May 2000.

THE GEO-POLITICAL BOUNDARY AND ITS TOPOGRAPHIC SEGMENTS

For convenience here, the international boundary ratified by Great Britain and France in 1923, which is about 120km in length, is divided into four different topographical segments:¹⁵

Sector A – stretches from Ras-en Naqoura to Sarit, about 15kms in length;
 Sector B – traces a twisted line along about twice that length from Sarit to Malqiye;
 Sector C – runs along the high ground from Malqiye to Metulla; and,
 Sector D – is the eastern segment, stretching from Metulla to the Syrian border.

Sector A

Leaves the Mediterranean coast at the cliffs of Ras en Naqoura and follows the crest of the spur towards Hanita, then running southwards it follows the thalweg¹⁶ of Wadi Qutaya, a deep crevasse-like gorge. It then runs up the thalweg of a small tributary, turns into Wadi Iddam and then circumventing an area of high ground to the south, follows the thalweg of Wadi e-Dalib. Up to this point, the borderline offers good defensive positions and little advantage to infiltrators from the north. However in the stretch that follows up to the Sarit settlement, which is located right next to the international borderline, the ground on Israel's side is nearly impossible to defend. On the Lebanese side of the border there are several 700m high hills, which dominate the entire length of the Israeli border road, and place the Jewish settlements under constant threat from small arms fire. This was one of the reasons the IDF maintained its security zone, constructing outposts to control the area from well placed observation sites. Now that these have been withdrawn, the settlements and the border road are vulnerable to hostile fire.

Sector B

This is one of the more dangerous segments of the border, with no natural obstacles at all and most of the Israeli border section under full hostile observation. Except for the cover offered by a few 600-700m crests, which are bisected by the international boundary, the Jewish border settlements of Shetula, Dovev, Baram and especially Avivim, which is directly along the border line, are all vulnerable to hostile fire from vantage positions in Lebanese territory. What are even more dangerous are the wadis running in a southerly direction and offering excellent infiltration routes.

Sector C

Here the border starts in the valley overlooked by Jebel a-Dere inside Lebanon. Thence it follows the thalweg in a generally northern direction. It then climbs to the narrow 700m+ ridge, which separates the Galilee Panhandle from the Golan Heights to the east. Along most of this stretch the two border roads on the Israeli and Lebanese side, run less than 100m from each other, with the road on the Israeli side actually hugging the border line itself in several places. The Israeli Kibutz Manara is located directly on the border, dominated by a 800m high hill. As the eastern ridge is less than a few hundred metres wide and falls steeply downhill into the Jordan Valley, Manara is highly vulnerable to hostile fire on its sole approach road from the north. A few kilometres north, the mountain village of Margaliot is dominated by two Lebanese hills, the 780m Tel a Tsebih and the 820m Tel e-Qaba. To the south is Tel Sheikh Abed, which houses a Jewish and Muslim holy site, which is now bisected right through its middle by the international border, a most sensitive point for those visiting the site. The line follows the ridge northward, to Kibutz Misgav Am, located near to the border line, a stone's throw from the Lebanese village of Odeisse and finally reaches Metulla the most northern village located at the tip of the Galilee panhandle.

Sector D

The last section, delineated in the 1923 Anglo-French agreement, turns sharply to the south east and originally followed the ancient path from Metulla to Banias. About 4km eastward it reaches the old Roman bridge over the River Hasbani. Here, near Jisr al Ghajar, was the location of the tri-border point between Lebanon, Syria and Israel, before the 1967 Six Day War. From there to the western slopes of Mount Hermon now stretches the sole remaining disputed area between Israel and Lebanon,

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**CURRENT
CONTROVERSIAL
BORDER ISSUES:
SOURCES FOR
FUTURE
CONFLICT?**

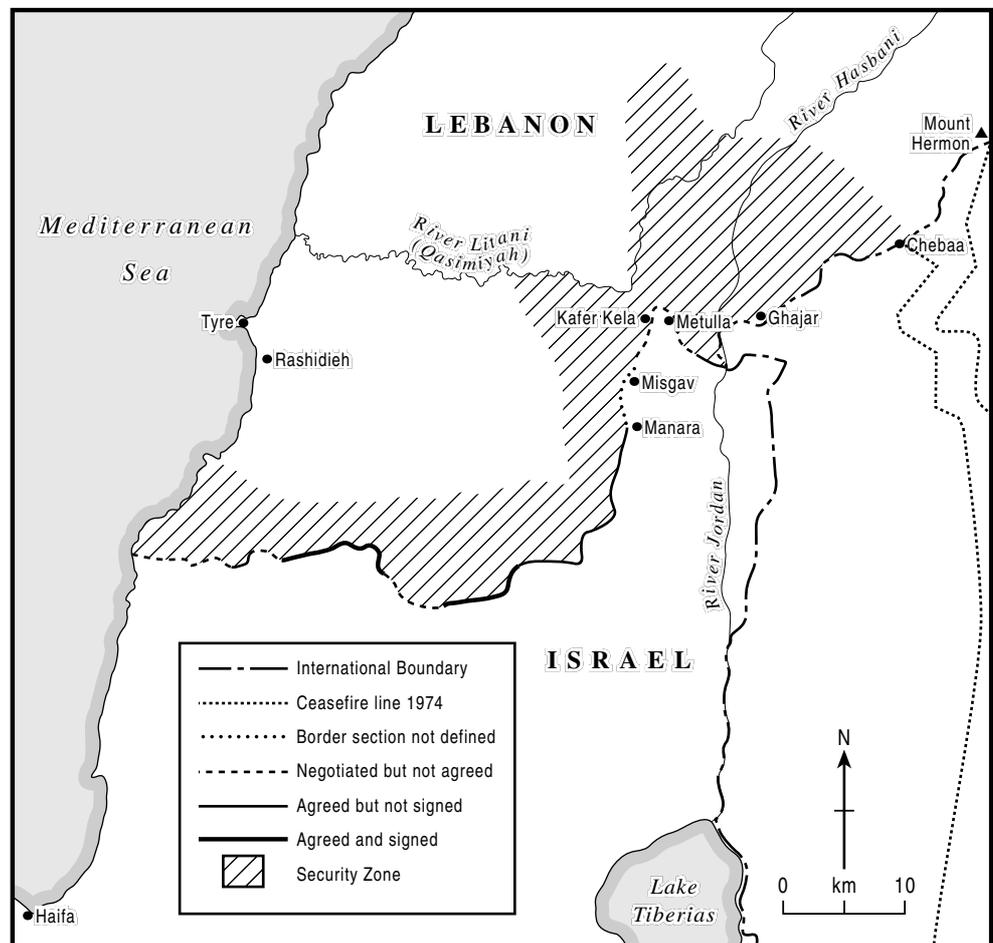
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which could become a flash point in the future, if the matter cannot be resolved by peaceful negotiation.

The Israeli Army withdrew from its security zone in South Lebanon in May 2000, in compliance with UN Resolution 425.¹⁷ The speed of the withdrawal, without the agreement of the UN or Lebanon took the UN Interim force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) by surprise. The UN swiftly announced that it intended to mark the international border and confirm that Israel had completely withdrawn before deploying peacekeepers along the border. The UN confirmed by 30 May that Israel and the Lebanese militia, the South Lebanon Army, had left the interior of Lebanon, but the confirmation of the withdrawal to the internationally recognised border awaited the results of UN technical teams surveying and marking the line of the border. However, although UN Resolution 425 (1978) called on Israel to pull back to Lebanon’s “internationally recognised boundaries”, by May 2000 no one could agree any more on where the boundary lay. The UN therefore decided on a blue “withdrawal line” where it thought the border should run, to allow it to certify Israel’s compliance with the resolution. The UN insists that the Blue Line is only temporary and is “without prejudice”, that it does not affect any future boundary demarcation, but the Lebanese government was reluctant to accept this compromise and raised many objections to the line of the border and claimed many “violations” of the border by Israel.

According to international experts, some 60% of the 120km borderline is not delineated in any formal agreement between Israel and Lebanon.¹⁸ Topographical constraints leave the IDF vulnerable in their new locations along the UN designated “Blue Line”, and the situation is further aggravated by the deployment close to the international border of Hezbollah strong points, from which they can reopen hostilities on Israeli military and civilian positions close to the border line.





Following the 1982 War, when the IDF withdrew from Lebanon for the first time, Israel built a sophisticated defence complex along the border, consisting of electrified fences, anti-personal minefields, patrol roads and barbed wire obstacles. Because of the problematic nature of the topography, and the need to adjust to changes due to erosion and floods, the fence did not follow the precise 1923 /49 borderline. The new line was designated the "Purple Line" by the IDF on their military maps.¹⁹

As result, on some parts of the border, the 1982 security system protruded into Lebanese territory, in others it retreated into Israel. Most of these deviations have now been rectified through the UN topographical survey commission, which worked with the Lebanese and Israeli authorities in delineating the "old" international border, to be called the "UN Blue Line."

During the difficult process of defining this line, some curious discrepancies came to light. Although substantial efforts were made to try and match the 1949 Armistice Demarcation Line (which was as close as possible to the Anglo-French boundary of 1923 and was the only one which was at least partly accepted by both Lebanon and Israel in the 1949 armistice negotiations), the UN Blue Line differs from the ADL in three places: South of Remeishe, between Odeisse and Kibutz Misgav Am and at Jisr Hasbani in the east. In fact, the situation became so absurd, that according to the UN cartographic team charged with defining the exact locations of the border, it would run through the centre of Kibutz Misgav with about half ending up in Lebanon! A compromise was finally reached under which the Blue Line would be shifted some 200 metres westward so that the border now brushes the western edge of the Kibutz, then drops downhill to the Odeisse road then follows the southern side of Kfar Kila and Metulla.²⁰

The UN surveyors depicted Al-Ghajar as two thirds inside Lebanon and the other third within Israel-occupied Syria, not only creating a security nightmare but also provoking angry demonstrations by the villagers

The other area, which remains under dispute, is even more bizarre. It concerns the Alawite village of Al-Ghajar, 4km east of Metulla. The UN Cartographers, under their chief Miklos Pinther produced one of the strangest controversies during the already very complicated delineation process. Al-Ghajar, is located on the Hasbani river alongside the Wazzani springs, an important perennial source of the river. British military maps in 1940 erroneously placed the village in Lebanon, then still under French Mandate. At the time the matter was unimportant. The Israeli Army carried the error into their own maps, and during the capture of the Golan in 1967 intentionally avoided entering the village. The residents, being of the Alawite regarded themselves as Syrian citizens and asked the Israelis to occupy the village as being part of the Syrian Golan. Some of them even applied and received Israeli citizenship fearing to become incorporated in Lebanon! Following the war, the village flourished and grew to the north, absorbing the Lebanese hamlet of Al-Wazzani. When the UN surveyors started to probe into this area, they depicted Al-Ghajar as two thirds inside Lebanon and the other third within Israeli-occupied Syria, not only creating a security nightmare but also provoking angry demonstrations by the villagers.²¹ Israel is now reconsidering whether to annex the divided village along the eastern border line as a result of UN-US political pressure, which sees no point in causing a violent confrontation with the Alawite villagers. But Israel has been warned by UNIFIL that building a fence northwards, would constitute a violation of the “Blue Line”, so the fate of Al-Ghajar is yet to be decided.²²

That does not end the controversy over the border issue however. The Israeli annexed strip between boundary Pillar 38,900m north-east of the village of Abl and Jisr Hasbani, has been misinterpreted by the UN cartographers, trying to match the present line with the original 1923/49 ADL. As mentioned above, the Anglo-French agreement consisted of 1:100,000 English and French military maps, mostly inaccurate in scale and missing important ground features. This now backfired sharply. The original description defines the borderline as running 100m south of the footpath between Metulla and Banias in Syria. Thus the Roman bridge should be inside Israel. The IDF has constructed a military patrol road along what it considered as the original borderline. But the ancient northern track supposed to be 100m north of the existing fence has totally disappeared with the time and consequently the UN has had no alternative but to trace the Blue Line along the existing patrol track. However a closer scrutiny of the 1923 written text suggests that the Hasbani bridge could in fact be in Lebanese territory! But as there are substantial discrepancies in the English and French versions of the documents the matter remains unresolved by the cartographic experts. So far the UN has reconfirmed the area to be under Israeli control, claiming that as long as the two parties cannot negotiate their common border issues bilaterally and formally reach an agreement, there is no point in pursuing the matter further at this stage.²³

The last major controversy between Israel and Lebanon is the Har Dov sector, on the foothills of Mount Hermon. In particular the dispute concerns the fate of the so-called Sheeba Farms. The Farms do not come under UN Resolution 425, the area being strictly, according to UN maps, in Israeli occupied Syrian territory and thus falling within the scope of UNDOF monitoring the 1974 Golan Heights IDF-Syrian disengagement. The Lebanese Government, however, is claiming the Sheeba Farms and as evidence has produced military maps from the 1960s which mark some of the Sheeba Farms, including Zebdine, Fashkoul, Mougr Sheeba and Ramta as located inside Lebanon. They substantiate their claim on the basis of a 'verbal agreement' with Syria, which was not documented with the United Nations. Lebanese farmers have reportedly produced documents also claiming their ownership of this land. It remains unclear whether legally these plots are in Lebanese or Syrian territory. Israel captured the area on the western slopes of Mount Hermon in the latter stages of the 1967 Six Day war on the Golan Heights, thus for the time being it is not directly involved, but the UN position is clearly in favour of the Sheeba Farms being on Syrian territory.

The UN stated that no one disputed the fact that the village of Shebaa itself was in Lebanon, but most of the farms fell into an undefined area that may be either in Lebanon or Syria

Israel has complied with the UN Resolution 425 and UNIFIL is in place to keep the peace, but alas, so far peace is not in sight

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The dispute between Israel and Lebanon over the Sheeba Farms poses a delicate political question. Should Damascus side with the Lebanese claims over the Sheeba Farm area, it would have to ignore its own national interests, once the negotiations with Israel over the fate of the occupied Syrian territory are resumed. While the western slopes of Mount Hermon undoubtedly have important strategic value to Syria, the latter's policy seems undecided at this stage. When in May Hezbollah said Israel must withdraw from the area of the Shebaa farms, which it said lie on Lebanese territory, or face continued attacks, Israel responded that most of the area lies on the Syrian side of the Lebanon/Syrian border and that it will only withdraw from the part marked as Lebanese territory on United Nations maps. The UN stated that no one disputed the fact that the village of Shebaa itself was in Lebanon, but most of the farms fell into an undefined area that may be either in Lebanon or Syria. The UN Secretary General Kofi Annan wrote in a report to the Security Council that the border was vague. *"There seems to be no official record of an international boundary agreement between Lebanon and Syria that could easily establish the line for purposes of confirming the withdrawal"*, he said. Mr Annan proposed that all sides should adopt the line drawn after the 1975 Yom Kippur war, pending a permanent delineation of the border. Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk e-Sharaa, after talks with Terje Roed-Larsen, the UN envoy, declared that Israel would have to withdraw from the disputed area, however, at the same time he claimed that *"the Sheeba Farms must not remain under Israeli occupation...It should be either returned to Lebanon, Syria informed the UN or Israel withdraws from it in accordance with UN Resolution 242 which calls for withdrawal from the Golan without delay"* It was not clear whether Shara's comments meant that this is a condition for confirming Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon had been completed or should be seen in the context of an eventual Syrian-Israeli accord that returned the Golan Heights to Syria.²⁴

With the Israeli Army now having withdrawn to a highly topographically vulnerable border line, in compliance with UN resolution 425 and with several disputes remaining unresolved, traditional dangers on the international border line remain and engender a highly dangerous situation. A provocative incident, one of many, which occurred recently, could indicate what might be in store if the parties cannot reach a mutually acceptable solution to the seventy-year-old border issue. On 7 October three IDF soldiers were abducted by Hezbollah guerrillas in full view of a nearby UNIFIL post, which filmed the event on video but failed to intervene. Israel has complied with the UN Resolution 425 and UNIFIL is in place to keep the peace, but alas, so far peace is not in sight and the enigma of the 1923 Anglo-French boundary remains unchanged and as dangerous as ever.

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