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Lebanon's border areas in light of the Syrian war: New actors, old marginalisation

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Executive summary

Historically, the borders between Syria and Lebanon have been contested and porous. Between 2011 and 2013, the border areas witnessed mobility on both sides of the border: from Syria into Lebanon, where a steady flow of Syrians escaping war moved to and settled in Lebanon, and from Lebanon into Syria, where fighters and weapons entered Syria and were deployed to support either the regime or the opposition. Since then, these areas have become a central zone of contention and competition between several groups.

Governance mechanisms in the border areas between Lebanon and Syria have therefore come to light as key determinants of stability or instability.

Governance of these areas has historically been inscribed in a policy of marginalisation, state abandonment and reliance on Syria. Rather than the nature of governance in these areas, it is the actors involved that have changed after 2011.

Marginalisation has remained a key feature in the governance of the border areas, despite the presence of a variety of new international and domestic actors, such as Syrian refugees, international NGOs, UN agencies and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Moreover, the Lebanese government response to the Syrian crisis and that of international agencies have further reinforced the marginalisation of these border areas within the Lebanese space. This is evident in the absence of development projects on the one hand, and the establishment of mechanisms of dependency on foreign aid on the other.

Protecting the Lebanese national borders has become a key element in the discourse of both Hezbollah and the government. Beginning in 2014, the LAF gradually deployed its troops along the Lebanese borders. However, with Hezbollah's intervention in Syria, a porous Syrian-Lebanese space has re-emerged through the military control of Hezbollah on the two sides of the borders.

While the border areas are key to Lebanon's stability and to political competition, they have remained economically and politically marginalised. This is largely due to their disconnection from an economic centre and to a principal reliance on precarious economic mechanisms, such as smuggling.

The Lebanese state, along with the international organisations supporting it, should undertake development projects that render these areas less dependent on aid and more reliant on development and productive economic projects.

These development projects would secure economic and social stability for the dwellers of these areas and would help to move away from governance at distance and marginalisation towards a type of inclusive and developmental governance.

It is also important to create economic hubs within the Lebanese space on which the border areas can rely and integrate.

Humanitarian and development organisations should also put in place more robust coordination mechanisms in order to prevent corruption and waste. Such mechanisms should start by setting up an open database, including the number of refugees, their needs but also the resources of each and every border area.

There is a need to include local NGOs and grassroots movements in the coordination and implementation mechanisms since they often have a deeper knowledge of and better accessibility to the field.

The international community should remain committed to preserving the refugee rights in Lebanon, mainly by recognising such rights and status as refugees and not as displaced.

Introduction

Historically, the Lebanese-Syrian borders have been contested, ill-defined and porous (Picard 2006; Kaufman 2014; Picard 2016). The construction and dismantling of the Lebanese-Syrian borders have depended upon a multitude of actors, historical events, and the wide political conjuncture. While the Lebanese border areas existed for a long time in the shadow of the political centre, they nonetheless remained reliant on and influenced by neighbouring Syria.

This paper looks at how governance operated historically in Lebanon's border areas and what changes have occurred since 2011, when the uprising in Syria erupted. It examines questions around who governs these areas and how marginalisation and (in)security are produced respectively.

Fieldwork for this research was conducted from the period of January 2017 until May 2017. It relies primarily on snowball methods, through in-depth interviews with local activists, local and international NGOSs UN agencies, as well as with state representatives.

The paper examines five case studies, geographically located along the Lebanese borders from North to South Lebanon. The first four are: Chebaa, a village in the South Governorate that shares borders with both Syria and Israel, Arsal and el-Qaa in the Baalback-Hermel Governorate, and Wadi Khaled in the Akkar Governorate, North Lebanon (see Map). The four areas share direct borders with Syria. The fifth case covers Barr Elias in the Bekaa Governorate, a village that does not share direct borders with Syria but is located five kilometers away from Masna'a, the largest official border crossing with Syria.

These border areas continue to be abandoned by the state and geographically isolated from the political centre, with the exception of Barr Elias which is located on the main Damascus Road and benefits from direct access to both capitals, Beirut and Damascus (Bennafla 2006).

The marginalisation of these areas is the result of an acute absence of development projects, a lack of political representation, and geographical distance from the political and economic centre in Lebanon (e.g. Beirut). As any border region, these areas have developed a structural dependency on the countries they share borders with. In this instance, the five areas have historically turned towards Syria and have largely become dependent on it. Reliance on Syria took several forms, from everyday smuggling to direct access to commodities and services including health care, education and consumer products that are less expensive than those available in Lebanon.

With the outburst of the Syrian conflict in 2011, these areas witnessed major changes starting with the influx of refugees to the gradual militarisation and closure of the borders. Hence, the dwellers of these areas lost their historical and often unregulated access into Syrian territories, while succumbing to the pressure of the humanitarian refugee crisis. Previously absent actors have landed in these areas, specifically international humanitarian and development organisations, with the exception of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which was deployed to the South in 1978. A limited number of state

agencies have also recently marked their presence in these areas, beside those already in existence[2].

This paper first sheds light on the historical patterns that have defined the governance of the border areas in Lebanon. It then unpacks the political weight that these areas carry for Lebanon's political leadership, when they become central to national politics despite their geographical marginalisation. It analyses the international response to the refugee crisis in these areas and its impact. Finally, it enquiries about these areas' representation in the current political context and presents some key ideas on how to eventually contribute to their stability and development.

Patterns of the Lebanese-Syrian Border Areas

Areas that are historically hostile to the Lebanese state and marginalised by the political centre

Since the declaration of the State of Greater Lebanon in 1920, these areas, previously not part of Mount-Lebanon, lost their direct social, economic and trade relations with Syria. Thereafter, they were annexed to Mount-Lebanon to form present-day Lebanon. At the same time, however, these areas were not economically, politically and socially integrated into the Lebanese state and they were governed at distance. This marginalisation and abandonment by the Lebanese state took several forms. For instance, the borders with Syria were not demarcated. In fact, borders and cadastral surveys were not conducted, leaving some of these areas under contestation with Syria (Hamadé et al. 2016). As a result, the borders were unitarily controlled by Syria, especially at times when the Syrian military was present in Lebanon (1976-2005). In addition, development projects were not implemented in these areas, which reinforced their sense of marginalisation.

State disengagement from these areas was felt by the local populations in all respects. The state, however, was only present through its use of force against the latter. In 1958, for instance, most of these areas joined the revolution against Maronite President Camille Chamoun, receiving arms and support from Syria, and in turn causing violent reprisals by the state. Arsal in particular was bombarded from the air by the LAF in 1958, and seized by the security forces as a result of the 1963 contested local elections (Obeid 2010). In another episode in 1964, the LAF, according to local sources, also bombarded Wadi Khaled in order to suppress a local rebellion to protest the refusal of the state to grant dwellers the Lebanese nationality. Nationality was only granted later in 1994. In addition, the Arqoub area, which encompasses Chebaa, constituted the terrain for the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) to conduct resistance against Israel, in accordance with the Cairo Agreement of 1969 (Norton and Schwedler 1993, 62).

[2] For instance, the Social Development Centres (SDCs) at the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) continue to play a major role under the framework of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP). In addition, the Primary Healthcare Centres (PHCCs) at the Ministry of Health offering healthcare services to both Lebanese and Syrians. Public schools have a double shift (afternoon shift) to offer Syrian children education. And finally, in an attempt to face the so-called 'security threats' of the Syrian refugees, municipalities have recruited part-time municipal police officers, which were previously non-existent in some areas.

These patterns have contributed to hostility towards the Lebanese state and its political centre, which has reduced these areas' security. On the other hand, these areas were less affected by the civil war between 1975-1990. El-Qaa, a Christian village, however, was not spared the impact of sectarian conflict with its Shiite surrounding (Hermel and Labweh). Wadi Khaled similarly witnessed sporadic sectarian clashes with neighbouring Qbayat.

In the post-war period, these areas gradually fell under Syrian tutelage through the direct presence of Syrian military or secret services, with the exception of Chebaa, which was under Israeli occupation until 2000[3].

To date, these areas continue to be neglected by the Lebanese authorities. This neglect takes multiple forms, whether political, through the lack of political representation, or economic, with a near-complete absence of state public development projects, in addition to infrastructure that might facilitate access to Beirut, except for the case of Barr Elias. In Sunni-majority Arsal and Chebaa, for instance, political representation is subject to the alliance between Shiite political parties Hezbollah and Amal. El-Qaa and Chebaa further suffer from population decline due to rural-urban migration or emigration outside Lebanon, which accelerated during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990).

Reliance on Syria and border economy

Against the backdrop of historical marginalisation, these areas oriented themselves towards Syria; more specifically towards Homs for Wadi Khaled, Arsal and el-Qaa and towards Damascus for Chebaa and Barr Elias. Therefore, economic life in these areas revolved around smuggling or what is locally known as "border trade" (Hutson and Long 2011). Locals simultaneously became 'consumers' of goods and services coming from Syria to meet their basic needs (food, medicines, schools and hospitals…), or/and 'traders' smuggling goods from Lebanon into Syria in order to meet the demands of Syrian society for 'global products' that are unavailable in Syria (electronic, cigarettes…). Economic exchange varied from large-scale formal trade, with el-Qaa constituting a transit zone to Syria, to everyday smuggling. Barr Elias witnessed the emergence of a large souk to cater for commuters' demands between Syria and Lebanon on the Damascus Road. In the case of Wadi Khaled and Arsal, smuggling was profitable to such an extent that young people became less interested in securing jobs within public institutions. Economic exchange generally fostered relationships between Syria and Lebanon (marriages) and established continuous exchange between the areas and Syria (seeking leisure in Homs). Despite being economically profitable, however, informal trade made these areas vulnerable and dependent on Syria, as they were not immune to the economic consequences of the war in the neighbouring country.

[3] It is important to clarify that the village Chebaa is not 'the farms of Chebaa', despite the connection that the inhabitants of the village established between the two areas. The Farms of Chebaa remain under the occupation of Israel and are subject to border delimitation controversies between Syria, Lebanon and Israel (Cimino 2010).

New development on the long-neglected Lebanon-Syria borders

Following the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon in 2005 and the Israeli war against Lebanon in July 2006, the international community called upon both the Lebanese and Syrian governments to initiate a process of border demarcation. The objective of these emergent calls was not to put an end to the smuggling of goods and commodities. In fact, the main aim was to prevent the flow of arms into Lebanon for Hezbollah from across the borders (Blanford 2016). In this context, the UN Security Council Resolution 1701, adopted in August 2006, called explicitly for the delineation of the international borders of Lebanon, including areas where the border was historically unclear. 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 2008, the Lebanese and Syrian government finally agreed to establish diplomatic ties, previously non-existent in the history of the two states, and to begin the process of demarcating Lebanon's northern border. This did not take place before 2011.

With the eruption of the Syrian conflict in 2011 and until very recently before the liberation of the Lebanon eastern border towns (the outskirts of Arsal and Ras Baalbeck) from ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra by Hezbollah and the LAF, the border areas were at the heart of major transformations succumbing to a double pressure of fighting in Syria and border closures. Although they were impacted negatively and dramatically, instability and insecurity in these areas cannot be strictly attributed to the so-called spillover of the Syrian conflict into Lebanese territory (Salloukh 2017). In fact, the conflict unfolded in such a way that Lebanese and Syrian actors became involved in it, transforming and placing these areas in the middle of an increasingly entangled conflict.

Beginning in 2011, these areas experienced two main transformations. On the one hand, they saw varying degrees of military confrontation (clashes, bomb shells), except for Barr Elias and Chebaa. The latter remains strategically dependent on the evolution of the conflict with Israel. On the other hand, they faced an influx of refugees, which placed an unprecedented burden on the already feeble infrastructure.

The events led to gradual border closures, at different times for each border area according to the evolution of the conflict in nearby Syrian towns. Between 2011 and 2013, the border areas witnessed mobility on both sides of the borders: from Syria into Lebanon, where a steady flow of Syrians escaping war moved to and settled in Lebanon, and from Lebanon into Syria, where fighters and weapons entered Syria and were deployed to support either the regime or the opposition. This period witnessed a temporary loss of control by the Syrian regime over parts of Syria's territory, including some of its border crossings. The period was also marked by the involvement of Hezbollah in the Qusayr battle (2013).

Between 2014 and 2017, the influx of refugees decreased. In October 2014, the Lebanese government adopted policies that prevented Syrians' entry into the country (Favier 2016). In 2016, forces allied with the regime including Hezbollah regained control over some of the lost territory, specifically those located close to the borders with Lebanon. Accordingly, the security of the Lebanese border areas cannot be dissociated from the security of the adjacent Syrian border areas, which are largely controlled by Hezbollah. This control turned

Hezbollah into a major actor in the Lebanese border areas. In July 2017, the refugee crisis in Lebanon witnessed an important yet very timid development, with some 30 refugee families returning to Syria from Arsal after Hezbollah after an agreement was brokered to secure their return. The Lebanese government was not involved in this process and the LAF's role was reduced to escorting them to the borders[4].

More importantly, in August 2017 Hezbollah solely took upon himself the mission to liberate the outskirts of Arsal that were under occupation by ISIS militants. The victory was considered by Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary General of the party, as the 'Second Liberation', the first being the liberation of the South from Israeli forces in 2000[5]. As a result, Hezbollah brokered an agreement with ISIS to deport their fighters and families into Syria.[6]

Political Leaderships' competition over border areas

With the outbreak of the Syrian war, the Lebanese border areas became strategic zones in the power struggle between Lebanese and Syrian actors. The 'return' of the Lebanese state to the areas has been secured mainly through its military 'face', echoing with the strategies historically adopted towards these areas. At the same time, these border areas were also key in determining the balance of power among the Lebanese political leadership, specifically the Future Movement and Hezbollah.

The return of the State through the LAF

The LAF's return to these areas represents the most salient face of the Lebanese state. The deployment of the LAF along the borders in these areas, however, was first and foremost subject to a political consensus among the Lebanese political leadership. Previously not present in both Arsal and Chebaa, the LAF began marking its presence along main border points in 2014. By contrast, the Internal Security Forces (ISF) are not present in at least three of the four border areas. The LAF's return was welcomed and was often called for by the local populations, especially after the 2014 Battle of Arsal.

The LAF mandate remains nevertheless oriented towards the fight against terrorism and the dismantling of Jihadi groups or terrorist networks. It is sometimes extended to include

[4] Hassan Abdullah, "Refugees Return to Syria from Lebanon in Hezbollah-mediated Deal", *Reuters*, July 12, 2017; https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-lebanon/refugees-return-to-syria-from-lebanon-in-hezbollah-mediated-deal-idUSKBN19X1Y6

[5] Refer to the full speech delivered by the Hezbollah Secretary General, September 30, 2017; https://english.alahednews.com.lb/essaydetails.php?eid=40517&cid=385#.WgL5T3Zx3IU

[6] For more information, see: Osseiran Hachem, "What Hezbollah's Safe Transfer Deal with ISIS Means for Lebanon, *NewsDeeply*, August 28, 2017; https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/community/2017/08/28/what-hezbollahs-safe-transfer-deal-with-isis-means-for-lebanon-syria

border control and the barring of Syrian refugees into Lebanon, according to a decision of the Council of Ministers to close the borders in October 2014. Despite the state's return to these areas, and despite LAF presence along the borders, control is not complete and these areas remain 'grey zones'. In fact, smuggling is still active but restricted to mafia-like networks, and according to some sources, the authorities turn a blind eye to these trans-border interactions, which have become a fundamental part of the war economy.

LAF presence in the border areas has had direct consequences on local life in these areas. Both the Lebanese and Syrian populations residing in these areas have been encircled. This is specifically the case for el-Qaa, where the Syrians remain trapped in neighbouring Machari' el-Qaa, as well as Arsal and to a certain extent Wadi Khaled. In Wadi Khaled, for instance, and from the outset of the crisis, the Syrian regime closed and militarised its side of the borders, while the LAF established a checkpoint in Chadra village, the main entrance into Wadi Khaled. This contrasts with Barr Elias, which remains accessible and part of a larger contiguous geographical unit. In fact, the security measures carried out by the LAF in Barr Elias are not visible and most probably operate through the local community and through distant control. Therefore, it is important to highlight that the border areas are not homogenous, and despite similarities in their governance, security measures vary according to the development of the Syrian conflict on the other side of the border.

The waning power of the future movement and the increasing power of Hezbollah

If the state has returned through its security apparatus to these areas, the role of political parties remains essential in defining their future. With the exception of el-Qaa, the other four areas are majoritarian Sunni and have not been spared the communitarian polarisation between the 14 March political alliance, led by the Future Movement, and the 8 March political alliance, led by Hezbollah. This polarisation, which dates back to 2005, was reactivated in 2011 when the Sunni leadership in Lebanon and its constituency pledged unconditional support to the Syrian revolution against the Assad regime. This support, however, has waned as a result of the power disequilibrium between the Future Movement and Hezbollah, since the latter is increasingly consolidating its power due to its intervention in the Syrian war. While both parties have agreed internally to distance Lebanon from the war in Syria, both continue to be engaged in the conflict inside the Syrian territory to varying degrees, independent of Lebanon's state institutions and government policies.

The Future Movement's position has gradually changed over time from unconditional support to abandonment of the Syrian revolution. Following its military and political defeat in 2008, the Movement considered the Syrian revolution as a pretext and an opportunity to weaken Hezbollah, and to reestablish a new balance within Lebanon. The Future Movement championed the Syrian rebel fighters within Syria, with the result that the Sunni border areas were considered to be a 'safe haven' not only for Syrian refugees but also the Syrian opposition, especially the border area of Arsal. Some radical and Islamist opposition groups took advantage of this platform and replaced the mainstream Sunni leadership in Arsal. With the Syrian regime and Hezbollah gaining ground in Syria, the Future Movement's role has been reduced to negotiating internal deals such as the recent electoral law, despite some speeches by its leader Saad Hariri to criticize Assad.

Further developments indicate that the Future Movement is weakening in these areas, specifically the closure of healthcare centres in Chebaa (2015) and Arsal (2016), which previously opened as part of Hariri's philanthropic and political project. For the local populations in Chebaa and Arsal, and to a lesser extent in Wadi Khaled, Hariri is losing credibility and is no longer showing support, or it is unable to represent the aspirations of the Sunni community. This is clearly reflected in the weak political representation in those areas, where both Sunni parliamentarians in Chebaa and Arsal are not chosen by the Future Movement but rather by Hezbollah and Amal. Also, the Future Movement has retreated in the municipal elections and avoided direct confrontation with Hezbollah. In Chebaa specifically, and during the 2016 municipal elections, the Future Movement withdrew its support for an electoral list in favour of a consensual list with Hezbollah. This led some local activists to see the Future Movement's political support as ephemeral and 'treason'. In this context, the void left by the Sunni leadership has been replaced by Islamist groups, until 2014 financed and supported by Gulf countries. These groups, such as the Jamaa Islamaiya and Salafists movement, continue to support the Syrian refugees in these areas.

At the same time, the hegemony of Hezbollah is more and more evident. Engagement in Syria in support of the regime has not only given the party military control of the Lebanese border areas but also leverage to broker local deals that prevent sectarian clashes and secure the party's constituencies in Lebanon.

The involvement of Hezbollah in Syria, in addition to its political and military control in Lebanon's border areas, has paved the way for the establishment of a trans-border zone under its direct and immediate control. It has effectively replaced the role previously played by the Syrian intelligence and army at least since 1990. The presence of Hezbollah on both sides of the border contributes to its porousness, despite LAF presence .

Wadi Khaled and Barr Elias versus Arsal, el-Qaa and Chebaa

These five border areas face similar problems. Due to the confessional homogeneity of Wadi Khaled and Barr Elias, these areas do not experience sectarian tensions with their immediate environments. Neither do they contend with internal security concerns and political sectarian competition. Homogeneity prevents the emergence of local sectarian discourse or identity politics similar to those found in Arsal and el-Qaa, which are Sunni and Christian villages respectively surrounded by Shiite-majority villages.

By contrast, confessional diversity is often manipulated by national sectarian parties to serve their political interests. In Arsal and el-Qaa and to a certain extent in Chebaa, for instance, political parties carry weight and enjoy local representation while Wadi Khaled and Barr Elias have remained immune to the national political polarisation of 2005. In fact, local politics in Wadi Khaled and Barr Elias continue to be strongly and strictly defined by family politics with little interference or influence from the leading national political parties. It is precisely for these reasons that political parties are less present in Wadi Khaled and Barr Elias, unlike other areas where contentious politics constitute the playground for political parties. Such areas therefore become central in defining or enriching the discourse of national sectarian parties.

The international response to the refugee crisis

With the influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanese territory, the international community through its humanitarian and development agencies undertook the mission to support the refugees and Lebanon. It should be noted that the infrastructure for aid was already well-established since the 2006 Israeli war against Lebanon, when numerous local and international NGOs were involved in development and humanitarian projects.

Rethinking state weakness

The generally-stated objective of the international response plan is to support the Lebanese state in the face of an unmatched refugee crisis and the risk of collapse, given its alleged weakness. The international community also aims to support the control of the border areas through the comprehensive Integrated Border Management (IBM) programme, for instance, which is funded by the EU[7].

The United Nations along with the government and civil society developed the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) to ensure that the humanitarian response equally benefits Lebanon and contributes to stabilising the country. In this sense, state agencies have become key partners in the humanitarian response and development. In fact, some ministries continue to take advantage of power to block some decisions and projects. For instance, some ministries refuse to implement projects that do not fall within the scope of the LCRP. At the same time, however, ministries do not have a strong presence on the ground, with the exception of the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), which is a key partner of UNDP in the Maps of Risks and Resources (MRR). It should be noted that the MRR is not a development plan but rather a mechanism to identify priorities for host communities through local municipalities. By contrast, the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities does not figure as a major actor in the LCRP despite wielding an extensive national administrative and security apparatus, including the Qa'imacan, governors (Muhafiz) and the International Security Forces (ISF).

Despite the involvement of state ministries in the crisis, it is important to rethink state weakness in Lebanon (Mouawad and Bauman 2017). In fact, this weakness serves the interests of different actors who tend to legitimise their interventions or to fulfill their own political agendas in the name of the 'weak' state. It is in this context that the establishment of the 'Ministry of State for Refugee Affairs' took place. The ministry has acted as a key agent in promoting a narrative of insecurity and tension between host communities and Syrian refugees. This has enabled the government to request additional aid to foster the resilience of host communities and to provide services to the Syrians. During the 2017 Brussels

[7] According to the European Council "Lebanon is the first country in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to benefit from a comprehensive Integrated Border Management (IBM) programme which entered its second phase in 2016 with an additional envelope Of EUR 9 million", *Joint Staff Working Document Report on EU-Lebanon relations in the framework of the revised ENP*, Brussels, May, 23, 2017, p. 3; http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10658-2017-INIT/en/pdf

conference, for instance, Lebanon's government built a case to donors requesting funding of up to $10-12bn over 5 to 7 years to invest in infrastructure projects[8].

Ultimately, the international community's agenda is coordinated with the political leadership, allowing both parties to secure their interests. The international community continues to pledge money in an attempt to keep the refugees in Lebanon away from Europe, while the Lebanese ruling elite at different levels of state institutions, either through ministries or municipalities, serve and feed their patronage and clientelism networks. In this sense, state agencies become key actors among an array of many others working on the ground, and the public state as a result does not rise above the fray of tensions and conflicts.

In sum, the state is present in its ability to block decisions or to man the national borders through the LAF, along with the support of the international community, but it remains absent when it is most needed by the local community. This paves the way for more calls on the state by local populations for additional protection and support in order to deal with the vulnerable situation, and perhaps more importantly the unilateral control of Hezbollah over these areas.

The municipality

With the absence of efficient centralised policies towards the refugees due to political deadlock and institutional stalemate, the local municipal councils are considered to be the main implementing partners for humanitarian and development projects. The municipality emerged as an alternative to an inactive parliament and an uncooperative government. In fact, these local councils were judged efficient given its proximity to host communities and Syrian refugees alike.

Despite being an important actor, however, the local municipality did not necessarily contribute to a more comprehensive and transparent implementation of the response. In most of the border areas, the municipal council's role is limited to the figure of the mayor, who benefits from advanced executive prerogatives according to the Lebanese law. Most municipal council members lack experience in development work and coordination. This prevents the consolidation of a clear local development plan. The situation is further exacerbated when local feuds and family problems block council decisions and inhibit the council from acting as a neutral actor above the fray of local conflicts.

Moreover, the municipal council is also seen by its members as an institution that might accumulate resources and expand the network of patronage on the local level, similar to how the government is perceived by the national ruling elite. In general, the municipality acts without oversight by international donor agencies, which do not have direct presence on the ground and govern by 'remote control' as not all their offices are in these areas, ultimately preventing accountability and monitoring.

[8] Jad Chaaban, "Should Lebanon get more funds for hosting refugees?", *Al Jazeera*, April 5, 2017; http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/04/lebanon-funds-hosting-refugees-170405082414586.html

Nevertheless, the municipality benefits from a margin of leeway for actions and initiatives that are independent from the central authorities, which leads a municipal council in one area to have a completely different policy to that of another. In this sense, three border areas out of the five host a very high number of refugees, often exceeding the local population. As a result, the presence of the international community is considerable in Wadi Khaled, Barr Elias and Arsal, compared with a very limited presence in Chebaa or el-Qaa. The municipalities of the former have accumulated an ability and interest to negotiate with the international community in order to raise funds or influence aid projects. By contrast, in el-Qaa and Chebaa, the municipal councils have a limited role to play, aside from the implementation of security measures through the municipal police or a curfew. This disinterest on the part of the councils might be related to a lack of funds or a result of the limited numbers of refugees. At the same time, in el-Qaa and Chebaa, religious institutions have taken the lead in providing aid and/or services to the refugees.

Finally, the role of the governor (*Muhafiz*) varies from one governorate to another. When an initiative is undertaken to coordinate the response and the implementing actors on the ground, it is not institutional but rather personal. Consequently, it might be driven by political and sectarian considerations (Bekaa) or nourish clientelism (Akkar). In Akkar, for instance, the governor has established a Local Development Office (LDO) and has appointed the head of a local NGO, who is politically allied with him, as a consultant to this office. This action is seen by a number of local actors and organisations as a way to promote a project for political advantage. As for the governor of the Bekaa, he has decided to close down shops owned and run by refugees, which is often appropriated locally by some mayors to pressure Syrians and push them to leave for another area. Accordingly, the governor is not acting as a neutral actor, but rather as an actor embedded in a network of personal gains or sectarian considerations.

"Civil Society": Local Lebanese and Syrian NGOs

It is worth nothing that many local and grassroots initiatives are active on the ground and play a major role in the response plan. Most of these initiatives, however, remain dependent, at least in their funding, on UN agencies and international NGOs.

There are three kinds of local NGOs. On the one hand, there are those that monopolise funding and, given their presence in interagency meetings at the regional level, actively take part in the decision-making process of the response, such as Amel, LOST and Iqra', which benefit from a nation-wide presence. On the other hand, there are local initiatives that remain marginalised and do not take part in interagency meetings. They are very present on the local level and have in-depth knowledge of the situation. Finally, others have recently been created in order to take advantage of the funds and aid available.

In addition to the local Lebanese NGOs, Syrian NGOs are also active on the ground. The latter face numerous problems including their inability to act as Syrian NGOs, and are obliged to be registered as Lebanese NGOs. Moreover, these initiatives do not take part or are completely marginalised by the LCRP. This negatively affects their chances for fundraising. Other constraints are legal because Syrian NGOs are not able to employ Syrians

who are not eligible to receive work permits. The employees consequently have limited access to the field as they find themselves in a legally vulnerable situation.

It should be noted that in Akkar and Tripoli, Syrian local initiatives are rather absent. This is due to the fact that Syrian activists in these areas have been welcomed and endorsed by the local community, where they have integrated successfully, and they have therefore not felt the need to establish initiatives of their own. While in the Bekaa, Syrians are more organised and have established numerous initiatives since 2011 and continue to be active to date.

Finally, Syrian local initiatives are generally divided into two categories: Islamist and non-Islamist. Despite the limited funding from the Gulf that started in 2014, Islamist organisations are able to continue their work thanks to aid from the Syrian diaspora or other Islamist organisations based in Lebanon. Conversely, non-Islamist initiatives struggle to expand their work, let alone to sustain their projects on the ground.

Conclusion: The reproduction of insecurity and marginalisation

Governance of the Lebanese border areas depends upon their marginalisation. This takes several forms, from political and security marginalisation to social and economic marginalisation.

Military and security marginalisation

On the military and security level, these areas are constructed as a 'security threat', vulnerable to the penetration of 'terrorists' from across the borders and therefore menacing to the stability of the country. In most cases, the LAF is present on these areas' periphery and not inside the towns. This void is not always filled by the Internal Security Forces (ISF), which are not present in most of these areas (Wadi Khlaed, Arsal, and el-Qaa).

Over time, and without officially declaring them as such, these areas have become, 'military zones', and their securitisation through the deployment of the LAF depends on consensus among the sectarian political leadership. Additionally, the international community contributes to constructing these areas as a security threat. Most UN agencies are not able to access these areas without a prior three-day notification, a measure imposed on them by the LAF. The media further feeds into the dynamics and often appropriates the different interests of the sectarian political leadership.

Social insecurity: dependency and vulnerability

Most humanitarian projects continue to be implemented according to an emergency logic. Until now, development projects have not been implemented. In most cases, governance by international humanitarian and development organisations is led from a distance without the direct presence of the main donors on the ground, which reduces accountability and monitoring. Moreover, active local NGOs tend to monopolise funding to the detriment of other grassroots movements that are often marginalised. All these dynamics contribute indirectly to keeping the local population dependent on aid, and not on long-term development projects. At the same time, the refugees' legal vulnerability continues because the Lebanese government does not acknowledge their status as refugees and limits their ability to work. Consequently, they remain vulnerable and subject to control as the government maintains their vulnerability and inability to commute or work.

What do these areas currently represent?

Despite the advent of new actors to the border areas – such as Syrian refugees, international NGOs, UN agencies and the LAF – and despite consolidating the long-contested borders trough their closure, as well as the emergence of a discourse by the Lebanese government and Hezbollah to protect the national borders, the post-2011 period has witnessed the reemergence or even the exacerbation of the precarity and marginalisation of these border areas. This is evident in the absence of development projects on the one hand, and the creation of precarious dependency on foreign aid on the other hand.

At the same time, a Lebanese-Syrian space has been reproduced that defies the concept of borders. In fact, the border does not serve to demarcate Lebanon from Syria, but rather opens up a Syrian-Lebanese space under the supervision or control by Hezbollah that before 2005 was otherwise controlled by the Syrian army.

These areas' governance is not independent from the dynamics unfolding in the Syrian territory. Although these border areas are central to political competition, they remain economically and geographically marginalised.

It is important to look at these spaces as areas of opportunity that are central to the Lebanon's stability. There is a need to move away from governance at distance and marginalisation and towards a type of inclusive and developmental governance. This implies undertaking development projects that would secure economic and social stability for the dwellers of these areas.

According to the perceptions and aspirations of Lebanese local communities, the border areas will play a key role in Syria's reconstruction. There is a possibility that their marginalisation will persist, keeping them governed from a distance. It is exactly because of this that the Lebanese state, along with the international actors present in these areas, should rethink their approach in the future in order to avoid further marginalisation, but most importantly to connect and integrate them in the Lebanese space. Indeed, these areas will redefine the relationship between the Lebanese state and the Syrian state.

It is important to create economic hubs upon which the border areas can rely and integrate. These areas' marginalisation is not necessarily due to their location at the border, but largely due to being disconnected from an economic centre and relying chiefly on precarious economic mechanisms (smuggling etc.) The example of Barr Elias confirms that development and accessibility to major economic hubs constitute major elements of stability.

Humanitarian and development organisations should also put in place more robust coordination mechanisms in order to prevent corruption and waste. Such mechanisms should start by setting up an open database, including the number of refugees, their needs but also the resources of each and every border area. This database will contribute to preparing a holistic response plan that is not limited to emergency alone but directed towards long-term development projects that will eventually secure jobs for both Lebanese and Syrians.

Coordination mechanisms should be inclusive and not only restricted to UN agencies and already well-established NGOs. In fact, there is a need to include local NGOs and grassroots movements in these mechanisms since they often have a deeper knowledge of, and accessibility to, the field.

The international community should remain committed to preserving the refugee rights in Lebanon, specifically while their return to Syria will not likely happen in the near future. If return happens, it should also be safe and not by force. Meanwhile, the international community should deploy every effort possible to prevent the legal insecurity of Syrians living in Lebanon, by recognising their rights and status as refugees and not as displaced.

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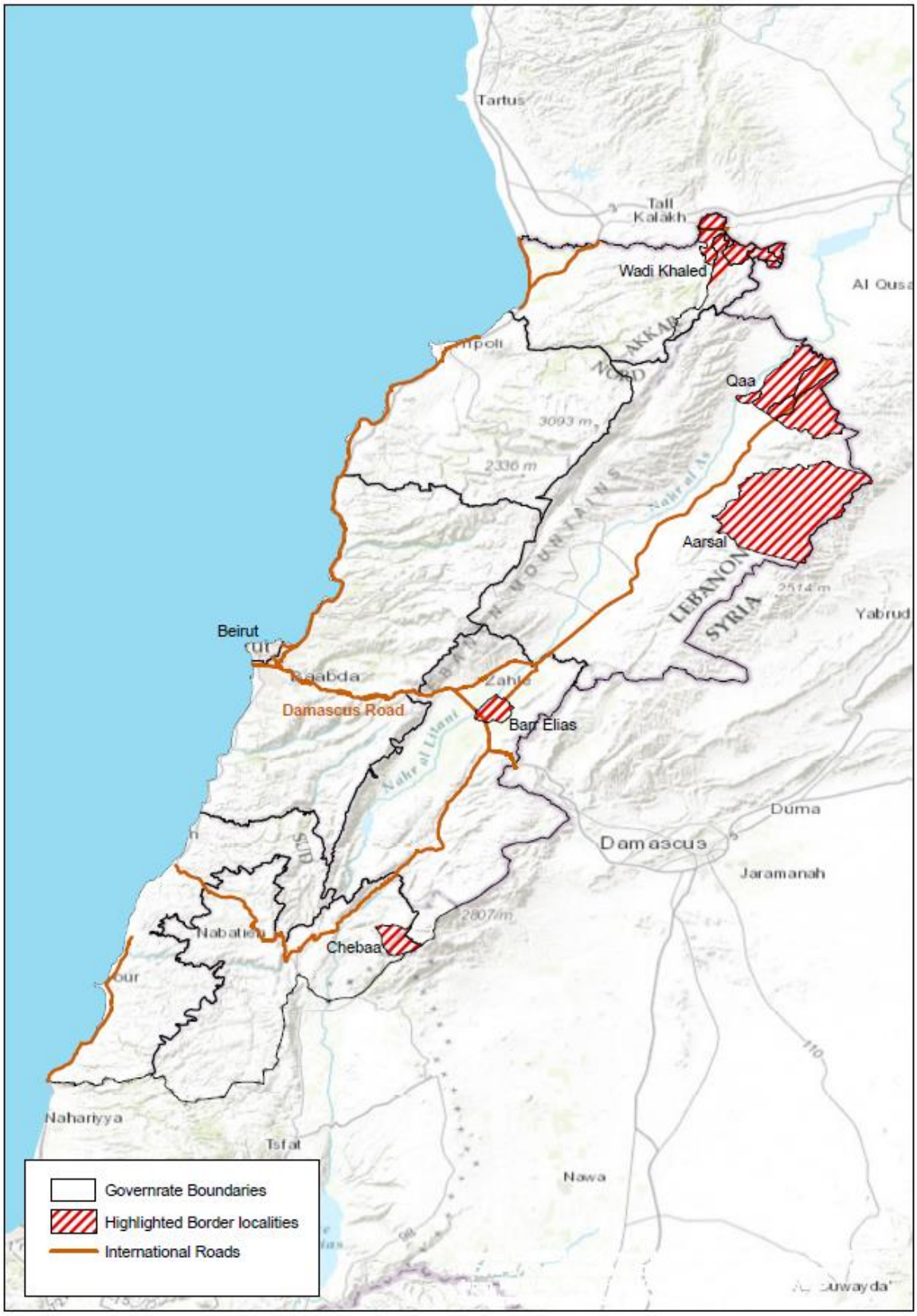
Tartus
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Wadi Khaled
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Damascus Road
Bar Elias
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International Roads

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