

“Le Monde de L’Entre-Deux”

Conflict Analysis Study of the Border Areas of Akkar and Baalbek El-Hermel Governorates

August 2021

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Vienna, Austria

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Acknowledgements

This report is the first of a series of studies produced under the ‘Strengthening Capability for Integrated Border Management in Lebanon’ (EU-IBM III) project funded by the European Union. The purpose of the report is to have a better understanding on the conflict issues and dynamics in the border areas of the Northern and Eastern Governorates in Lebanon to inform further assistance to border communities.

The report is based on desk research and fieldwork conducted between the months of February 2021 until June 2021 with the purpose of identifying trends in conflict and power dynamics at the community level, the stakeholders involved and their relationships, and the potential avenues for transforming the conflict.

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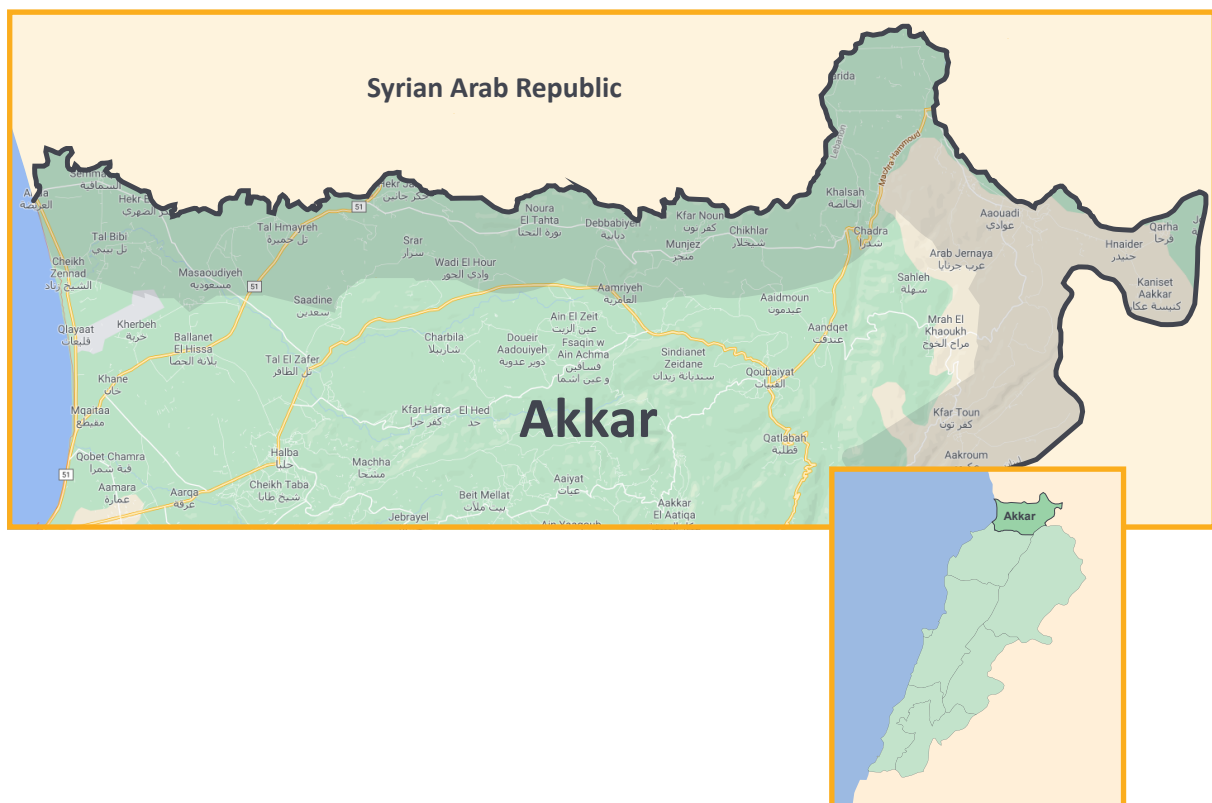
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AKKAR ON THE BRINK OF A SOCIAL COLLAPSE

Introduction

This chapter details and analyses conflict dynamics in the Lebanese-Syrian border areas of the Lebanese governorate of Akkar. It identifies the main actors and causes of tension, the conflict drivers and mitigation factors, and the overall dynamics of conflict.

The borders have always been porous, but the current economic crisis and the involvement of Hezbollah in the Syrian War have rendered conflict in border areas a matter of national and regional significance. Although these border areas fall under Lebanese territory, their social, political, and economic realities and any attempts to ameliorate them can never be dissociated from their historical interlinks with Syria, as most of the border areas depend heavily on cross-borders trade and as well smuggling.



1. Context

Akkar is the northernmost governorate of Lebanon. Its population is estimated to be around 428,600 of which 36% are Syrian refugees and 5% are Palestinian refugees (OCHA, 2019). Akkar governorate includes the single district of Akkar and a total of 121 municipalities, however, this report only covers the borders areas of Akkar, extending from Arida to Akroum. The area is historically known for its agricultural nature and its slow rate of urbanization compared to other Lebanese areas. The governorate is bounded to the north and the northeast by the Syrian governorates of Tartus and Homs, a matter which played a significant role in the conflict dynamics analyzed in this report. The governorate is home to a range of different cultural and social backgrounds, and three main religious groups: Sunni, Alawite and Greek Orthodox, with Shiite and Maronite minorities concentrated in border villages. Its demography however is witnessing extreme changes with the influx of Syrian refugees due to the developments of the Syrian war. With the magnifying economic and socio-political crisis, Lebanon is becoming increasingly unstable, and the border areas have been confronted to a plethora of difficulties, most of which are far from being resolved any time soon.

2. Main actors

- **Security Sector Agencies**

The relationship between local community members and the security agencies, mainly Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF) across Akkar can be described as everything but uniform. It can be described as pragmatic, as it tends to adapt to the local context.

In Christian-dominated villages, the relationship between local community members and the security agencies is harmonious, as most of the families have members in the Lebanese Army or Interior Security Forces, and collaboration to improve the local security is constant. For example, in Oweinat, where smuggling is rampant, locals and Lebanese Army forces often coordinate to spot these operations and locals often act as night guards for the town to protect the community and avoid any escalation.

In the Sunni-majority town of Wadi Khaled, the relationship between local community members and the Lebanese Army and Internal Security Forces is highly affected by a long history of conflict, smuggling, and negative media reports, which portray the area as a hub of extremist groups. There is a general perception among the local population that the Lebanese Army maintains an “Iron Hand” control over the local community, as described by interviewees. Lebanese Army have a higher number of checkpoints in the area compared to other villages, and as locals expressed, the Lebanese Army scrutinizes locals disproportionately in comparison to other areas. This might be attributed to the fact that the area witnesses a higher number of conflicts including illicit trade, smuggling, and trafficking that requires higher presence of security agencies to enforce the law. In addition, interviewees highlighted that a large part of the population is not in possession of all requested legal documents and licenses, many people don’t have their cars or motorcycles registered for example, which necessarily enhances their feelings of alert towards security forces and increases tensions at time of security controls.

- **Clans and Tribes**

Clans and tribes are key actors in Akkar especially in the areas of Karha and Wadi Khaled. The clans’ histories go back hundreds of years. They play a major role in the social and political life of the villages. History of revenge and vendettas also influence the local social fabric: for instance, the Obeid clan, was displaced to Karha from Baalbeck El Hermel due to the disputes and murder tensions between the Obeid family and the Nasreddine family, but when offered to go back to Bekaa and settle there they preferred not to do so as to avoid resurgence of tensions. Throughout the clan’s histories, armed conflict was common, and inter-clan relations have been fragile. Mixed marriages between individuals from two rival clans were strictly forbidden, and in some cases caused the exclusion of individuals who challenged the rule. An agreement between the powerful clans in the area, namely the “Arabic clans” (especially Al-Ghannam and Al-Atik), in the 1990s had a powerful reconciliatory impact. Additionally, members of rival clans attended the same schools, which helped in mitigating tensions and generated a more moderate *modus operandi*. Based on interviews, clans in Wadi Khaled and Karha play an important role in mediating conflicts and reaching common grounds when it comes to disputes within the villages, but this role also extends to coordinating with clans from surrounding areas. With sectarian tensions playing a major part in the Syrian war, clans from Sunni-majority Wadi Khaled coordinate with clans from Shiite-majority Bekaa to prevent an escalation of tensions and the outbreak of a Sunni-Shiite conflict in the area, especially that Wadi Khaled community members support the Syrian opposition, contrary to the Bekaa communities, which are mostly pro-Syrian regime. In addition, clans often support the Lebanese Army in solving tensions and mediating conflicts, which in turn renders the relationship between both parties pragmatic but as well ambiguous.

- **Religious Figures**

Religious figures play a major role in Akkar’s social life. They are usually revered and well-connected persons in their towns and serve key functions in resolving and mediating day-to-day conflicts. In multi-sectarian areas, they often act as religious representatives and negotiators in sectarian-based agreements.

- **Municipalities**

A feeling of disappointment vis-à-vis municipalities is dominant amongst residents of border towns and villages of Akkar. Local community members often feel excluded from developmental projects or are disappointed by the lack of proper infrastructure management. In some cases, interviewees considered municipalities to have almost no role in the areas’ daily affairs. Corruption is reported as affecting many municipal boards, which in some cases are supported by powerful local entities (i.e. clan members, politicians, or powerful families). Additionally, there is a general impression among interviewees that some municipalities do not properly manage international funds dedicated to local developmental projects and may use public budget for their patronage networks.



3. Prelude to Conflict

A region exceptionally damaged by the economic crisis and the Syrian war

Lebanon’s current unprecedented multi-faceted crisis exacerbated pre-existing uneven development and economic marginalization issues, and subsequently had a particularly severe impact on northern regions, including the governorate of Akkar. Since 1997, the Lebanese pound has been pegged to the U.S. dollar at a rate of 1507.5 LBP per USD. Starting August 2019, the black-market exchange rate started diverging from the official exchange rate at an exponentially increasing pace, surpassing 20,000 LBP in 2021 in an unprecedented economic crisis characterized by Central Bank decisions that have deprived most bank depositors of their money, shortages in fuel, drawn-out electricity cuts, an increasing rate of unemployment, an ever-rising public debt and a huge wave of migration especially by the country’s younger generations. This was further exacerbated by the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Beirut port explosion.

As one of the poorest areas in Lebanon already, Akkar was exceptionally affected by the crisis. A significant section of Akkar’s residents rely on the public sector for employment (mainly army enlisting and public schools), their purchasing power is daily decreasing as the crisis accentuates. Akkar’s economy is also heavily reliant on cross-border trade and illegal smuggling, which enhanced its economic and socio-political fragility, since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict.

The main daily tension points depicted are the increasing rates of robberies, crimes, unemployment, and drug use in the communities, all of which have intensified with the aggravation of the economic crisis, and the lack of proper protection by official governmental institutions and local authorities, and in some cases their complete absence. The situation in Akkar is arguably more difficult than other regions of the country due to its heavy financial dependency on cross-border trade and illegal smuggling operations. In the Alawite-dominated villages of Massoudiye and Aabboudiye, for example, the outbreak of the Syrian war has had a unique impact. The latter led to the closing of the borders and consequently halted trade and illegal smuggling operations there, which the villages’ local communities depended on for their livelihoods. Locals even went as far as describing Syria as their “lungs” and that all what they were surviving on at the moment were the savings of past smuggling activities, additionally they explained that all their consumption, including food and basic items (e.g. toothbrushes) came from Syria. This is a very dangerous phenomenon as smuggling has created an informal economy that the citizens of border areas depend highly on for their survival. A similar development took place in the Sunni-majority area of Wadi Khaled, whose community members believe that the Syrian regime and its allies punished them due to their support to the Syrian opposition. Wadi Khaled’s local economy depended on nearby Syrian markets for food, basic items, health, and sometimes education. With the war becoming rather stable for the last few years, the official borders were reopened, but with limited capacity as a daily quota has been set due to Covid-19 restrictions. However, local communities of Akkar border villages still did not get back to their usual smuggling operations due to the ongoing “punishment” by the Syrian regime to the communities who supported the Syrian opposition. Very few smuggling roads are still operating, some on the Northern borders are completely closed and smugglers are now using new roads in Al-Qaser area (in the Baalbek El-Hermel governorate). Needless

to say, since the onset of the Syrian war and the aggravation of the economic crisis in Lebanon overall, Akkar’s overall economic activity on the borders has been at an all-time low, affecting every sector and household in its areas, and increasing instability and tensions within the communities.

Prelude to Conflict – Day-to-Day Tension Triggers

This section identifies key drivers of day-to-day triggers and sources of tension. Drivers are listed in ascending order of severity. The second section of the report highlights major and larger scale conflict dynamics and potential points of contention.

- **Land and Property Disputes:**

A common point of tension between local communities in Akkar is the lack of proper land and property demarcation. According to interviewees in the villages, this has been a consistent source of dispute, and land related tensions and disputes are not exclusive to internal matters within villages but are also commonplace among surrounding villages. Local sources listed tensions of this sort between Wadi Khaled and Akroum, and between Akroum and Andaket. Intra-village disputes over land are usually minimal and are resolved through the mediation of local religious figures and notables.

- **Infrastructure**

Another common point of tension within border communities of Akkar is the frailty and mismanagement of infrastructure. There is a big blame on municipalities on one hand and on the lack of decentralization of development projects in Lebanon that repeatedly marginalizes border areas on the other. Interviewees highlighted that the pressure on infrastructures was compounded with the influx of Syrian refugees and the displacement of people from Beirut towards their villages during holidays. The lack of proper wastewater management is omnipresent in almost all the border areas. The lack of proper sewage networks in the towns or villages and the odor and pollution caused by the wastewater are a source of daily dispute between local community members and municipalities, especially in towns where it gets crowded during the summer. In addition to this, several infrastructural developmental projects cause tension due to cartographic, environmental, or even sectarian issues, as matters of favoritism come into play when deciding who benefits from the projects, and who is excluded. There is a general impression among interviewees that some NGOs are being complicit with corrupt local authority offices, especially on the level of municipalities and unions and that there’s a lack of transparency in the implementation of local projects, such as the installation of sewage networks or the rehabilitation of schools. While this cannot be independently verified, it is important for all donors and development agencies to set-up transparent governance structures to manage any funds dedicated to such projects and put in place strong monitoring mechanisms that will diminish mismanagement of money, clientelism and ineffectiveness in projects by implementing parties be it governmental or non-governmental institutions.



- **Increase in Drug Usage**

In the border areas of Akkar and especially in the area of Wadi Khaled, the increase in drug usage has been an extremely alarming issue especially to the schoolteachers. They have noted the accessibility of drugs, especially Fenethylline, otherwise known as Captagon, to school kids and the overall local communities. In one extreme case, an interviewee mentioned that some well-connected dealers have their own Captagon factories and use the youth as “lab rats” to test the dosage and quality of the pills. The pills are often distributed for free and are regarded as an increasingly worrying source of tension and conflict in the area especially with the increasing rate of unemployment. Advocating against drugs also poses security threats for anti-drug activists, as interviewees indicated that anti-drug activists often receive threats and are even attacked if they are too vocal in their advocacy and awareness campaigns.

- **Weak Local Institutions and Corruption**

Corruption and mismanagement of local projects were identified as main sources of tension between the communities and the local authorities. In some places, the disputes took place between part of the community and the municipality due to the community members’ perceived exclusion from developmental projects. In other communities, protection from forest fires was seen as a main and imminent need that was not properly attended to by local authorities. In other areas like Wadi Khaled, clans and powerful families retain significant control over the community’s social, political, and economic matters. As such, major families and clans may support personnel and representatives in municipalities who do not have the required skills and transparency required to strengthen municipal work and improve perception among community members, according to interviewees. Hence, considerable work has to be done on several axis to bring back trust in these local institutions, which can be main drivers of change in those areas. Institutional building should come hand in hand with reform in the work of municipalities to meet the increasing demands of the local population. Training municipal members and developing unified and clear guidelines that govern the work of these institutions is an essential starting point. Now more than ever, it is crucial to incorporate accountability mechanisms into local governance structures to counter corruption and mismanagement.

- **Negative Media Stereotyping**

With the onset of the war in Syria, local community members of the Sunni-dominated border area of Wadi Khaled felt that the area is a target of intentional discrimination by the media and pro-Syrian government surrounding areas. Having had members supporting the Syrian revolution, local community members believe they are victims of generalizations by the surrounding villages and the media, which portray them as extremists or fundamentalists in light of the developments of the Syrian war, despite the local community members’ attempts to deny their affiliation with extremist armed groups. At times, locals of Sunni-dominated areas even receive security threats from pro-Syrian regime communities surrounding Wadi Khaled.

4. Conflict Dynamics

4.1 Main Conflict and Tension Points

Smuggling

For the last few decades, smuggling has been an ongoing practice and a major source of tension in the border areas between Lebanon and Syria. In the governorate of Akkar, smuggling takes different shapes and forms depending on the constituency of the area, its topography, and its overall context. It can range from smuggling goods to smuggling humans (militants and fundamentalists during wartime and average citizens). The local communities’ high dependency on smuggling and illicit activities is an alarming sign that both political authorities and security agencies should carefully attend to. These activities seem to be normalized in certain communities as they have been taking place for quite some time, which makes uncoordinated attempts to eradicate them difficult or even violent in some cases. Hence, dialogue and engagement at the grassroots level should be the starting point to avoid violent confrontations with the border communities. Working on alternative means to create legal economic alternatives is crucial in areas such where smuggling is the main source of income.

In the Sunni-majority area of Wadi Khaled, smuggling goods across borders suffered a significant setback with the area’s support of the Syrian revolution. This had led to a damaging of the ties between Syrian Regime officials and supporters on one side and the people of Wadi Khaled on the other. With the Syrian regime gaining control over most border areas, a lot of measures were put in place to stop illegal crossing, such as the installation of checkpoints and even the usage of mine fields. There have been attempts by individual smugglers who maintain strong connections with Syrian officials to restore ties and reactivate smuggling routes and operations. However, most of these attempts have been refused by clan representatives who regarded them as strictly benefiting individual interests. Instead, clan representatives believe that the only way to properly restore relations between Syrian officials and Wadi Khaled is to hold direct talks between the Syrian authorities and representatives of the clans.

In the Greek Orthodox town of Oweinat, the sectarian composition did not play a role like it did in the Alawite-dominated pro-Syrian regime villages of Massoudiye and Aabboudiye or the pro-revolution area of Wadi Khaled. Instead, the topography of the land and its richness with rivers, mountains, and slopes, facilitated smuggling. Oweinat has an illegal smuggling road historically known for being used to avoid army checkpoints and mainly known for smuggling humans, mostly militants from Lebanon to Syria. Consequently, the town was targeted several times in 2012 and 2015 and people were not allowed to visit parts of the town located directly on the border. This has led to an increase in coordination between the Lebanese Army and local residents so as to spot smugglers and to avoid any escalation in conflicts and tensions, especially given the fact that most smugglers are outsiders and not members of the local communities.

A ticking time bomb – Smuggling in Alawite-dominated villages and the tense relationship between Syrian refugees and local community members in the border towns of Sahel Akkar

The sectarian division of social and political life in Lebanon and Syria meant that Alawite-dominated areas automatically fall within the scope of pro-Syrian regime constituencies. The cross-border trade and smuggling operations comprised “99%” of the areas’ economic activity, according to key local interviewees. With the onset of the Syrian war, the borders were closed as some towns were used as centers for military operations. Consequently, smuggling drastically decreased, thereby accentuating the financial difficulties locals were already suffering in light of the Lebanese financial crisis and decades of underdevelopment. The relative calm that the war witnessed during the last few years reactivated some smuggling routes, however most of them remain closed or heavily monitored by Syrian regime security forces, and smugglers prefer to use alternative roads in the Baalbek El-Hermel governorate. For local Alawites, this meant that their sectarian identity was a losing card from both sides: on one hand their relationship with their main partner, the Syrian regime, was jeopardized with a halt to major trading and smuggling activities, and on the other they felt “othered” and excluded from Lebanese social and political life.

There is an obvious resentment among local community members in border villages, especially Alawites, towards what they regard as favoritism from international aid organizations in favor of Syrian refugees. They believe Syrian refugees are receiving a lot of financial benefits, as they receive cash assistance from UN agencies and have daily jobs as well. Competition for lands and jobs is intensifying and social disparities are starting to show. A local informant described his experience when he went to buy meat for his family and could only afford 1 kg, while the Syrian worker at his house was able to afford 5 kgs. While such incidents cannot be taken literally, there is for certain an escalating feeling of neglect and unfairness by local communities when it comes to the receipt of aid. Some have even highlighted provocations and patronizing behaviors from refugees vis-à-vis local community members.

Hence, a main source of tension is the allocation of NGO funds to Syrian refugees. For example, each member of a Syrian family who is officially registered with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) receives 300,000 L.L. of assistance to cover for food per month through e-cards. Refugees often send this money outside of Lebanon to their families in Syria, which negatively affects the local economy’s attempts at recovery. Tensions are very high, a feeling of “it’s either us or them” is brewing and a “ticking time bomb” is in place. Most residents are worried about potential escalation, especially since there’s a possibility for any conflict to be framed as a Alawite-Sunni conflict, given that most refugees are Sunni. People generally fear that previous scenarios where Syrians were expelled from local communities could take place again, but this time on an even larger scale.

Previously in the village of Aabboudiye, ISIS and Al-Nusra held military operations, triggering tensions between local community and Syrian refugees, and ultimately resulting in the expulsion of some refugees from the area.

Syrian Regime Pressure

Political Dynamics in Syria and their Ramifications in Lebanon

With Syrian refugees constituting more than a third of Akkar’s population, elections in Syria often lead to tensions as refugees head for the voting polls.

As part of the attempts from smugglers and connected individuals in Wadi Khaled to ease relations with Syrian officials, pressuring refugees to vote for Bashar al-Assad is a common tactic. Interviewees believe that both parties involved in these practices benefit: the smugglers get to activate their trade, and Syrian officials are able to spread their control over border towns. In Wadi Khaled, elections season in Syria often means trouble as the majority of the area’s residents oppose the Syrian regime. In some cases, refugees were expelled from the area in view of the fact that they voted for Assad. However, tensions are less common in Alawite-dominated areas where the majority are pro-Assad or in Greek Orthodox areas where the number of refugees is relatively small and the relationship between them and the local communities is generally untroubled.

Syrian War Cross-border Operations

A major source of tension and worry in the border areas of Akkar is the future development of the Syrian war, given that it has developed into a proxy war with major regional considerations and ramifications. Most border areas have witnessed military operations or participation in the war in one way or another, whether it’s witnessing the smuggling of militants across border towns, supporting pro-revolutionary forces, or even being direct centers for military operations. In some cases, cells of extremist militant groups such as ISIS and particularly Al-Nusra resided and operated from border areas. This has in turn led to an increase in tensions between local community members and Syrian refugees given the different sectarian identities and their respective politicizations. With the Syrian regime army having gained control over most border areas, things have become more stable during the last few years, yet there is still a worry among local community members that any escalation or deterioration in Syria could lead to border towns getting caught in the middle of the crossfire again or used as a crossing point.

4.2 Mitigating Factors

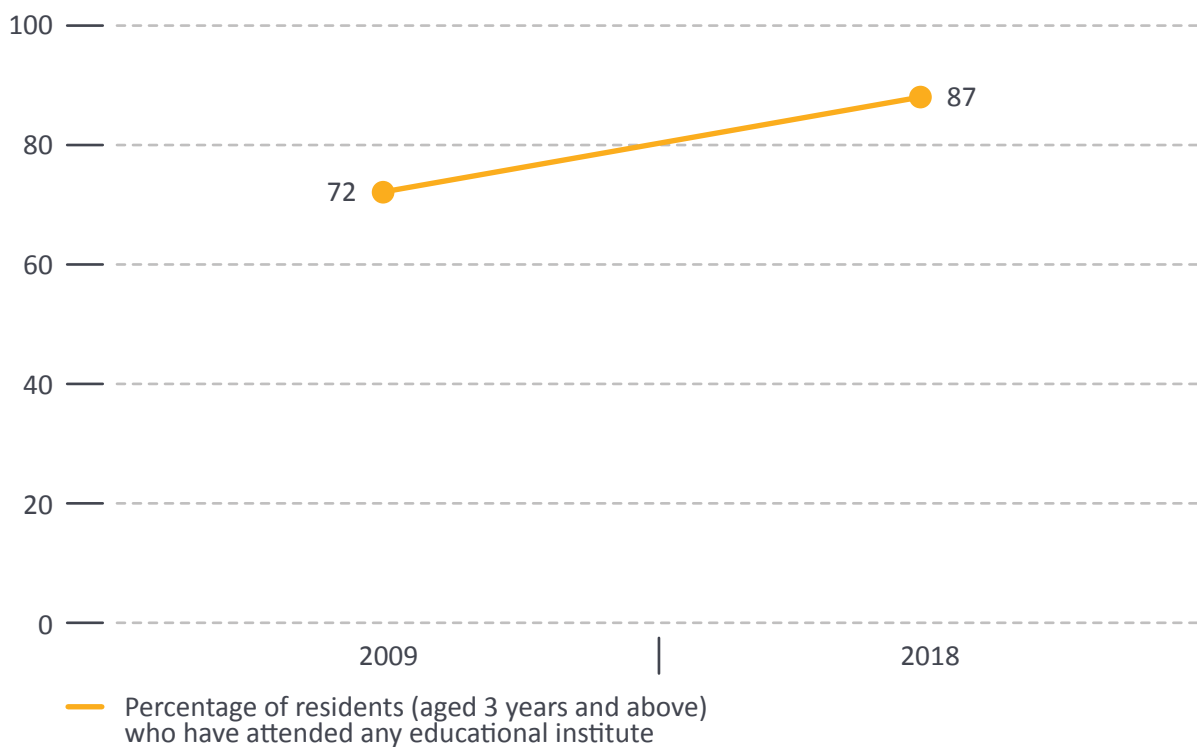
Despite the accentuation of the Lebanese economic crisis and the ever increasing toll and complexity of the Syrian war, there remains several factors that could help in mediating tensions, resolving conflicts and holding promising signs for the future.



Rising Level of Education

Local community members highlighted the positive effect that the rising level of education among the younger generations has had on the areas’ social and even political lives. In areas where clans have significant control, the younger, more “educated” class is becoming more vocal in its challenging of current corrupt practices and tribal political traditions, whether it’s in municipalities or in other local authority battlegrounds for hegemony. While this may be a source of future collision, the process seems to be taking place in a slow, gradual pace with regards to the increase of awareness among the areas’ communities and younger generations and the diminution of the clans’ powers.

Percentage of residents (aged 3 years and above) who have attended any educational Institute



Source: Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Central Administration of Statistics

Old Clan Traditions of “Protecting the Weak” and Resolving Conflicts

Although interviewees highlighted the negative role that the clans had in supporting corrupt individuals in municipalities and retaining old habits of pursuing vendettas and holding grudges, they nonetheless acknowledged the positive role that they play in mediating conflicts, easing tensions, and taking initiatives in this regard rather than relegating such roles directly to security forces. Younger generations of clan members often take pride and express feelings of accomplishment and validation when performing such roles. Another old habit that members of clans took pride in is the one of “protecting the weak”,

which translated in Sunni-majority areas such as Wadi Khaled with clan members offering protection and support to refugee communities. The sectarian and religious commonalities made it easier for the refugees to be integrated in the communities, in addition to the cultural similarities they share.

Connections and Collaborations Between Local Community Members and the Lebanese Army

Interviewees highlighted the connections and collaborations between local community members and the Lebanese Army as a major stabilizing factor. Needless to say, such collaborations take different shapes according to the contextual specificities of each village. A huge portion of the families within the border areas have a member or a relative in the army, which facilitates the coordination between local community members and the Lebanese Army. In clan-dominated areas such as Wadi Khaled, the coordination between the local communities and the army takes a different form, whereby such collaboration is often summarized as “clans handling conflicts”, with the army’s acknowledgement of their role in conflict resolution. Yet, such relationship can be ambiguous and potentially troubling at times when it comes to smuggling activities, as the army takes a more heedful approach. The Lebanese Army and Internal Security forces’ attempts to obstruct smuggling activities put them in direct confrontation with smugglers from the area, some of which have a wide array of connections to powerful individuals, including members of parliament.

Prevalence of Communication Channels

Interviewees also highlighted the positive impact that the numerous communication channels between villages and surrounding areas have had on mediating tensions and resolving conflict. NGOs operating in Akkar facilitated the prevalence of communication channels, especially in bringing persons from different sects and villages to a common working ground. Such initiatives were also supported via an increase in social media campaigns and digital initiatives promoting unity between the different villages and a sense of solidarity in the face of the upcoming social, economic and political difficulties.

5. Recommendations

Reducing tensions in the border areas of Akkar requires effort on both cultural and structural levels. Stability can only be achieved through systematic reforms and projects that directly support the most vulnerable communities on the ground. Alternatives to the current smuggling and drug trades are necessary in order to achieve sustainable livelihoods, to maintain solid infrastructure, and to create productive economic models for the area.

- Local development projects and aid programs by international organizations should include stronger monitoring mechanisms on local authorities to ensure that the projects are reaching affected communities in a transparent and fair manner. With the current lack of stability in the



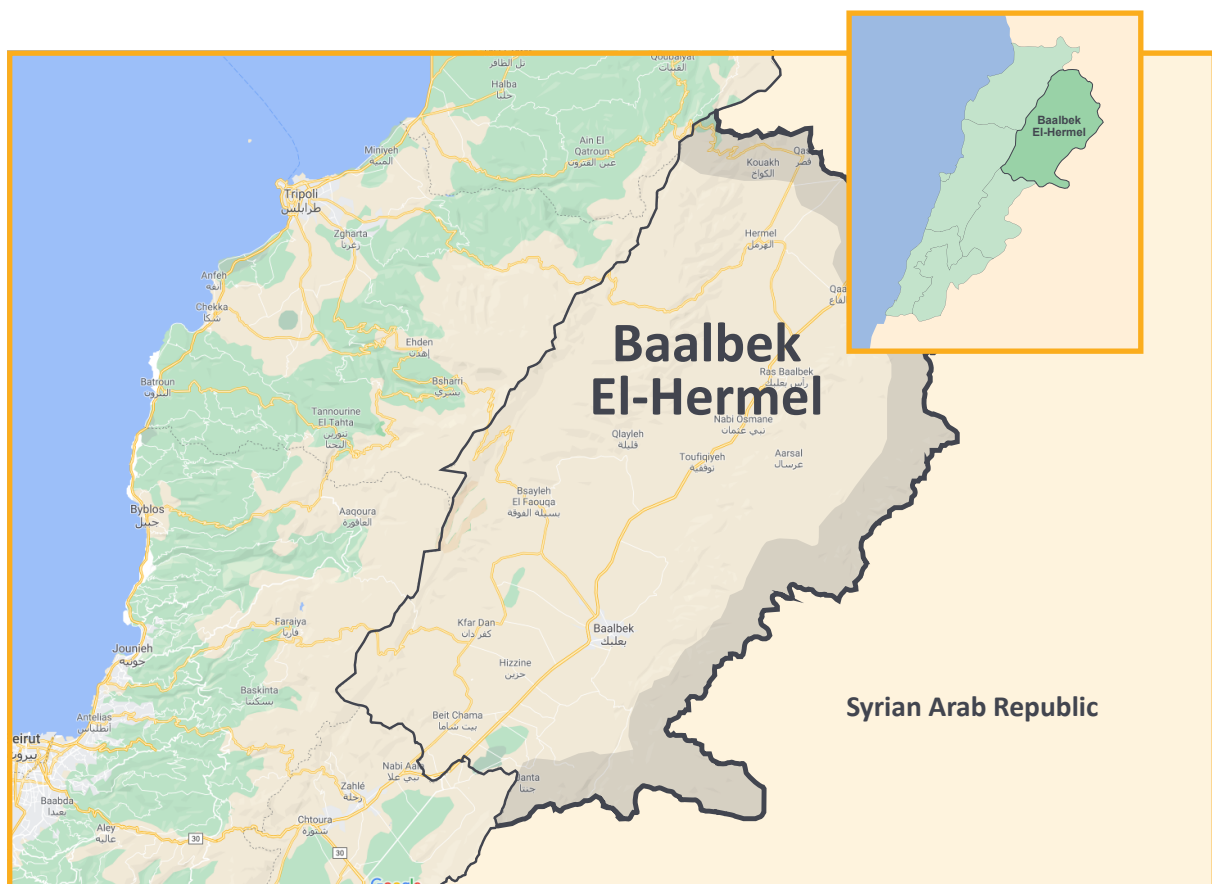
areas, aid programs are easily deviated from their intended targets, used for personal gain and enrichment, and allocated for clientelistic benefits by local authorities. This can include NGOs setting up networks and collaborating with security agencies for effective monitoring and accountability measures.

- Local development projects should include technical conflict resolution training programs: de-escalation of violence through awareness raising campaigns, conflict resolution trainings and informal education for community members. Integrating youth throughout project planning and implementation is also necessary.
- Aid organizations should directly support school and college programs, including summer camps and overall educational activities, especially in the areas with a lack of proper education and a high level of intra-communal tension. The rising rate of education already helped establish a younger generation challenging corrupt and incompetent practices by local authorities. As such, awareness and supporting local capacities would help engender a vigorous and more inclusive political life. While this could potentially trigger tensions between conservatives and advocates for change, it would nonetheless instigate a local tendency for change and development and subsequently a more stable social atmosphere.
- Peacebuilding organizations and security agencies (through Civil-Military Cooperation units) should ease and facilitate the spread of communication channels between towns, villages, and the different areas to increase intercommunal coordination. A significant and direct effort by relevant authorities must be geared towards altering the mainstream media narratives in order to decrease the scapegoating of refugees and overall incitement and provocation.
- The Lebanese government and aid organizations should remain transparent in their aid and funding policies, as well as take into consideration the diversity of cultural, sectarian, and religious backgrounds and national identities involved.
- The Lebanese government should offer alternatives and build social safety nets to border areas dependent on smuggling operations. It needs to include border areas who have long been excluded from Lebanese social and political programs and make them feel part of the national vision. This includes systematic changes with regards to adopting more decentralized policies. The current division of administrative powers in the country is highly centralized in Beirut and a few other prioritized areas, which leaves border areas marginalized and in a constant identity crisis. These policies should be context sensitive. In agricultural areas such as Akkar, the focus of the government and local authorities should be directed towards water management and supply, including canal and sustainable water projects, and stricter environmental policies.
- ISF in coordination with NGOs can organize campaigns to raise awareness about the major challenge that illicit drugs represent to society as a whole, and especially to the young. The campaigns can mobilize support and inspire people to act against drug use.

THE STRUGGLE FOR BELONGINGNESS: CONFLICT ANALYSIS IN THE BORDER AREAS OF BAALBEK EL-HERMEL GOVERNORATE

Introduction

This report analyzes conflict dynamics in the Lebanese-Syrian border areas of the governorate of Baalbek El-Hermel. Based on background research and extensive fieldwork, the report identifies the triggers for tension, the mitigation factors, the main actors in the border areas and the overall dynamics of conflict. With the outbreak of the Syrian War, all Lebanese-Syrian border areas have witnessed



significant changes on the economic, social, and political level given their geographic proximity and historic intertwinement with Syria. It is notable that Hezbollah and clans have a strong presence in major parts of the Baalbek El-Hermel governorate. The conflict varies greatly from town to the other depending on the towns’ history, social fabric and current sociopolitical status. The opposite can be said about other areas of the governorate where control by clans, Hezbollah or local authorities is almost inexistent, and local community members feel marginalized or even neglected by local and national actors.

1. Context

The governorate of Baalbek El-Hermel was established in 2003 under the Lebanese law 522, having previously been part of the Bekaa governorate to which it is still linked for several administrative reasons. It is divided into the districts of Baalbek and Hermel, both of which have towns and villages bordering Syria. The governorate is considered one of the poorest regions in the country, with the latest studies indicating that 33.5% of its Lebanese population was living below the poverty line at the time (2019), even before the economic crisis accentuated (OCHA, Baalbek-El Hermel Governorate profile, 2019). The Syrian war further strained already dire socio-economic conditions in the governorate, as Baalbek El-Hermel border areas have been heavily involved in military and smuggling operations and hosted an increasing influx of Syrian refugees which in turn added pressure to the already weak infrastructures and exacerbated natural resources. The areas have witnessed violent and sporadic clashes between the Lebanese Army and extremist Islamist groups on one hand and Hezbollah and extremist Islamist groups on the other since the onset of the Syrian war. Groups such as ISIS and Al-Nusra previously infiltrated the area and used different nearby locations as training grounds until it was recently liberated. The areas studied span the North-Eastern Lebanese-Syrian border, from Qaser to Ham and Maaraboun. The majority of the governorate’s Lebanese population is Shiite Muslim, with Sunni Muslim and Catholic and Maronite Christian minorities, and a Sunni majority refugee population, a matter that played an important role in the day-to-day conflict dynamics in the areas.

2. Main actors

- **Clans**

Most of the control and dictation of conflicts in Baalbek El-Hermel is monopolized by the clans, especially in the Hermel district and the areas of Qaser and Hawsh el Sayyid Ali. According to interviewees, clan affiliations are stronger than affiliation to any other group or identity, especially since they come with a factor of security and protection. Clans maintain significant local power that deters the intervention of political parties, even those with advanced weaponry such as Hezbollah, in their decisions and activities. Similar to the relationship between clans and municipalities in Akkar, there is a general impression that clans sometimes support corrupt individuals in municipal councils, thereby jeopardizing the efficiency of local authorities. Interviewees also indicated that the tendency of clan members to become involved in politics has created additional contentions, as municipalities now partake in politics at the expense

of local development projects, increasing the spread of clientelism and favoritism with the aim of acquiring higher positions, and consequently disregarding services.

- **Hezbollah**

Hezbollah is a main actor and the most powerful political party in the governorate of Baalbek El-Hermel (including both hard and soft power, as shown by its military superiority and its cultural dominance respectively). With its involvement in the Syrian war, the control of key strategic locations and the economic activity of border areas has become a pivotal part of Hezbollah’s strategies to gain dominance and win its military battles in Syria. There is a general acquiescence by various actors in the governorate regarding the presence of Hezbollah across the region; and some also coordinate with the party in the face of external threats such as extremist militias like ISIS and Al-Nusra. Flags, symbols, and quotations pertaining to Hezbollah figures and martyrs hegemonize the highways and buildings of several areas in Baalbek El-Hermel. During the October 17 uprising, many Lebanese inhabitants revolted against ruling political parties and corrupt practices across the country, yet vocal opposition against Hezbollah remained significantly lower than vocal opposition against other political parties, especially in Baalbek El-Hermel. While a part of this may be due to the fear of being subject to violent retaliation from the party’s forces and partisans, it is important to acknowledge that Hezbollah have succeeded in building a loyal base of supporters over the years. More recently, the party is believed to be paying its members’ salaries in US Dollars, which is becoming a more appealing option as the Lebanese pound’s value keeps diminishing.

- **Other Political Parties**

Although subordinate to the hegemony of Hezbollah, other political parties play an important role in Baalbek El-Hermel border areas’ daily lives and conflicts. These include the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), the Lebanese Forces and the Future movement. There are no major incidents of rivalries between political parties leading to instability in the region, rather some minor incidents may occur at times and remain within their local context.

- **The Lebanese Army**

The influence of the Lebanese Army remains shy in Baalbek El-Hermel in comparison to other areas in the country amid the strong presence of powerful armed parties like Hezbollah and clans. Interviewees indicated that the army played an important role, often in collaboration with Hezbollah and other parties, in resisting attacks by extremist militias such as ISIS and Al-Nusra. However, people perceive their interference as rather heedful when it comes to controlling smuggling and local drug operations, especially those conducted by clan members, as any intervention could easily ignite violent armed clashes as per the local communities. While the Army may not have the sole responsibility of controlling such operations, given that some require decisions from the central government or may even be part of the role of other agencies, this reveals that people have high expectations of the army when it comes to handling troubling issues.



Local communities generally maintain a good and untroubled relationship with the army given that relatively large sections of the population have family members within army ranks and in public employment overall.

- **Aid and Development Agencies**

Local community members from various parties and groups expressed their satisfaction with the operations of local and international aid and development agencies. The agencies’ undertakings range from school rehabilitation and medical equipment provision to implementing and supporting projects in the field of agri-business. Some interviewees however criticized aid systems and explained that these systems encourage Syrian workers to register as refugees and called for a clear way to distinguish between both statuses.

3. A Crumbling Infrastructure and Day-to-Day Sources of Tension

In the border areas of Baalbek El-Hermel, the economic crisis Lebanon is facing has been compounded by a ramshackle infrastructure and severe water shortage issues. Most inhabitants in the governorate depend on the agricultural sector for their financial wellbeing. With the economic crisis swiftly accentuating, the prices of fertilizers, pesticides, and fuel have been exponentially increasing, taking a toll on farmers, workers, traders, and investors in the sector.

The poor material conditions of the areas are the sources of severe tension and disputes within the villages and beyond, as they sometimes lead to cross-border and inter-village conflicts and intense competition for job and moneymaking opportunities. With the country undergoing a systemic shock, all sectors are crumbling and for the border areas of Baalbek El-Hermel, the issue is even worse. Governmental institutions are far from present and are mostly substituted by extra-governmental entities such as clans, militias, and political parties de facto dominating outside the rule of law, and communities rely on self-security for the most part.

The following are the most common, daily sources of tensions in the border areas of Baalbek El-Hermel. The second section of the report highlights major and larger scale conflict dynamics and potential points of contention and conflict.

Water Shortage and the Lack of Proper Sewage Networks

The most common and omnipresent source of daily tension in the border areas of Baalbek El-Hermel is the lack of proper water management and supply. Most of the border areas depend heavily on agriculture for their livelihoods. As such, the efficient supply of water canals and networks is imperative for the wellbeing of the areas’ socioeconomic conditions and the provision of their basic material needs.

However, almost all interviewees interviewed highlighted severe water shortage issues throughout the border areas of the governorate. In the village of Al Qaa, the main water canals are outdated and remain in dilapidated conditions, which increases the quantity of water wasted, and according to the local community, deprives the area of almost 50% of its water resources. In addition, the lack of sewage networks in the village and the inhabitants’ reliance on septic tanks are causing major environmental problems and incurring heavy damages on the agricultural sector. Some community members see a dire need to have an independent entity whose role is to strictly manage water supply and infrastructure. The municipality constructed an artificial lake to help farmers overcome water shortage issues and plans on constructing another one, yet some inhabitants still rely mostly on private wells. According to them, this matter is a source of tension between the municipality and local community members, and between local community members themselves as they fight for increasingly scarce water resources. These tensions were aggravated with the fuel crisis and the recurrent electricity cuts.

The distribution of water resources is often based on agreements between various villages. The share of Al Qaa from the Labwe spring is around 52%, the rest of which is shared between other areas. As a result, water-related tensions also arise between neighboring villages, especially since the weather in most of the governorate is desertic with low precipitation, making water an even more scarce and valuable natural resource.

Notably, despite the historic displacement of the governorate’s population towards urban areas, the current economic crisis is pushing people to return to their villages due to the relatively low cost of living. This has in turn put pressure on inefficient and at time dysfunctional water distribution networks thereby exacerbating water shortage related issues.

A Crumbling Infrastructure and the Lack of Medical Facilities

The dire infrastructural conditions are a main source of tension and displacement away from Baalbek El-Hermel border areas. The lack of proper road maintenance is noticeable, as most roads aren’t asphalted and lack adequate lighting. The deteriorated condition of the roads is a main concern for local communities, especially with the increasing rate of kidnapping and robberies as the economic crisis reaches more acute stages.

Transportation around the villages is made even more difficult with the high number of army checkpoints and inaccessible roads, making even the simplest of trips a hassle. While monitoring criminal activity is necessary for safety and security reasons amid troubled socio-political circumstances, local community members have complained that these checkpoints don’t deter smugglers from operating, but rather target and cause problems to farmers and workers with no connections to powerful individuals.

Communities in the governorate, especially in the towns of Maaraboun and Ham, suffer from a severe lack in medical facilities and services. In extreme cases, interviewees mentioned that injured people might often die on their way to the nearest medical centers due to the absence of easily accessible medical facilities and services.



Land and Property Border Tensions

Disputes over land are rampant throughout Baalbek El-Hermel border areas. A special case worth emphasizing is the town of Maaraboun, which borders the Syrian village of Sargaya. Around 6,000 square meters are disputed in a conflict of land that has lasted for around 35 years. According to local officials, the town of Maaraboun possesses sufficient proof of its ownership of this land (maps and legal documents), but explained that Syrian officials have been pulling away from a solution to the problem. After a new border drawing in 2005 with the Syrian army exiting Lebanon after a 29-year presence in the country, a new checkpoint was installed by the Syrian army that is 6 kilometers deep into Lebanese territory, yet this violation is going by without being challenged accordingly by local officials.

Local community members still have a lingering fear of the Syrian regime violating more land, especially given the trajectory that the Syrian war has taken with the Syrian regime and its allies gaining effective control on significant sections of Syrian territories and the demographic changes that accompanied their control on Syria’s border areas with Lebanon.

Another case worth analyzing is that of Macharii El Qaa. During the Lebanese civil war, constituencies from surrounding areas, mostly from the town of Arsal, started settling in Al Qaa in what interviewees described as a violation of the land. At a later time, some of the land was actually bought from its original owners and some remained under the control of those who migrated. According to a local official, around 80 million out of 180 million square meters of land were taken away and are now home to more than 20,000 Syrian refugees (mostly Sunni). Local community members in Al Qaa expressed that there is a dire need for an urgent resolution of this demographic change.

Another example is the village of Al Qaser, where around 16,000 individuals out of a population of 25,000 live within Syrian territories, even though they are registered in the village and even participate in its elections.

Land-related Disputes Between Local Community Members

Land-related disputes are also common between local community members themselves. The absence of official entities to investigate and conduct appropriate demarcations of landed properties transforms ownership assertions into baseless claims to land without proper official evidence.

A Struggling Education Sector

There is a serious concern over the increasing rate of school dropouts. Even before the accentuation of the crisis, a 2019 UNHCR study on Education in Lebanon found the lowest ratios of enrolment in primary and secondary schools and formal education to be in Baalbek-Hermel (57% and 7% respectively), with the most common reasons for dropout being the cost of educational materials and transportation to schools, having to work early on, and marriage. To begin with, the number of schools across Baalbek

El-Hermel is already alarmingly low. International agencies like UNDP have renovated some of the schools. Initiatives from official local institutions has little to no role in the maintenance and the development of the education sector in the governorate. All this further fuels tension between official authorities and local communities and enhances the latter’s feeling of resentment towards state actors and institutions. Challenges in education increased with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the enactment of online education, as the governorate suffers from network and internet problems necessary to its residents’ access to education.

4. Conflict Dynamics

4.1 Main Conflict and Tension Points

Conflicts in the border areas of Baalbek El-Hermel often have longstanding histories related to the power struggle and battle for dominance between clans and powerful families. These conflicts have taken new shapes with the expansion of the smuggling economy, the emergence of a new “class” of powerful smugglers, and the increased involvement of clan members in politics.

In addition, the outbreak of the Syrian war has skyrocketed tensions within border areas of Baalbek El-Hermel, with local constituencies fearing a spillover and an expansion of the fighting taking place in Syrian territories into their own towns and villages. Most border areas have witnessed cross-border military operations and even short-term invasions from the Syrian side during the last ten years.

The sections below touch upon the most important and common triggers for tension and major armed conflicts in the border areas of the governorate of Baalbek El-Hermel.

Smuggling

Smuggling is the primary source of conflict within the border areas. Its prevalence and applications vary however from one town to the other. In the areas of Qaser and Hawsh al-Sayyid Ali, clans control most smuggling operations. Kingpins and a new “class” of powerful smugglers are on the rise lately in what interviewees described as a “game of power” taking place in a “billion-dollar industry”. Intervention from the Lebanese Army is a source of contention, as armed conflicts often arise between smugglers and the army when the latter tries to monitor and restrict movements pertaining to smuggling operations. The Shiite sectarian composition of Qaser played an important role in the smuggling operations, as members with connections to Hezbollah often facilitate the processes with Syrian officials according to the interviewees.

In the Sunni majority village of Maaraboun and its Shiite neighboring village Ham, smuggling is also rampant. However, it is worth mentioning that community members feel that the big fish are still able to perform their operations without being halted, despite the fact that the army has erected several checkpoints and monitoring systems to combat this phenomenon. This leads to average citizens and farmers mostly incurring the consequences of extreme monitoring and securitization.

In the village of Al Qaa, smuggling is a relatively new practice, and it is largely considered as a shameful work by locals. Yet, when it happens, they prefer to name it “trade”, with participating members known as “traders” instead of smugglers.

The danger of the illegal act of smuggling is that some may consider it as a necessary practice for the well-being of many of the communities in Baalbek El-Hermel. Operations are not exclusive to drugs and weapons but include necessary everyday items and basic needs. Notably, one of the most hazardous aspects of the practice is the stocking of dangerous materials, such as fuel, inside and between houses, often in big quantities.

Clans’ Struggle for Power and the Pursuit of Vendettas

The history of rivalries and competition between clans, most notably in the district of Hermel, can be traced back to the early 1900s. Armed conflicts are rampant in the areas as part of the power dynamics and the struggle for power between clans and external actors that dare intervene, and news platforms broadcasting short-term battles between clans has become a normalized recurrency for Lebanese residents. The conflicts aren’t restricted to smuggling-related matters; small- and large-scale battles can be ignited by the simplest of disputes, often in the pursuit of longstanding vendettas. In one extreme case, an informant highlighted that even the existence of schools and common spaces for kids from different clans is worrying, since disputes between kids at schools could escalate into a conflict between their respective clans.

Similar to those in the governorate of Akkar, clan members in Baalbek El-Hermel, especially the youth, take pride in and try to emulate stereotypical gangster behaviors and traditions.

Nonetheless, local community members acknowledge that the clans do sometimes play a stabilizing role in the areas. As such, notable clan members often mediate conflicts and resolve issues through connections and interclan agreements without returning to security institutions and legal processes.

Demographic Change and Macharii Al Qaa

With the increasing influx of Syrian refugees in the border areas of Baalbek El-Hermel and specifically the abovementioned case of Macharii Al Qaa, there is a general fear among local community members of a long-term demographic change with refugees (mostly Sunni) settling in and changing the sectarian and social composition of the areas. Interviewees from Al Qaa compared the potential future trajectory of this demographic change to that of Palestinian camps in the country.

Additionally, with the deteriorating economic situation, the relationship between local community members and refugees can become more contentious with the latter receiving aid from international organizations while the host communities are losing their purchasing power by the day.

For instance, local community members are under the impression that an increasing number of Syrian workers are registering as refugees to benefit from NGO aid and support, putting the entire aid system installed by UN agencies under direct scrutiny by the local population.

For instance, many local community members in villages such as Al Qaa depended on the cheap labor of Syrian workers, and with the latter increasing their daily rates as a result of the devaluation of the local currency, the agricultural sector is witnessing a turn in its socioeconomic composition and labor relations.

Another concern that interviewees highlighted related to the increased presence of Syrian refugees was the potential intervention and violation of lands by Syrian armed forces, and the possibility of the latter attacking refugee-hosting areas under the pretext of combatting terrorism. It is worth noting that Al Qaa has been the target of several attacks, most recently by extremist groups during the Syrian war.

The Chase after Fresh Dollars

In light of the economic crisis, and the rapid deterioration of the local currency, access to “fresh dollars” has become yet another source of contention among local communities. “Fresh dollars” is a term that refers to readily accessible liquid dollars, as opposed to “lollars”, which refers to dollars only present in bank depositors’ accounts and inaccessible for withdrawal at full value. Notably, interviewees have highlighted the fact that several Hezbollah members receive their salaries in US Dollars, which has created a feeling of discontent amongst local community members. Interviewees described that this has diminished the role and general interest in public employment among the governorate’s population with the Lebanese pound on freefall and its loss of more than 80% of its value compared to the US Dollar to date.

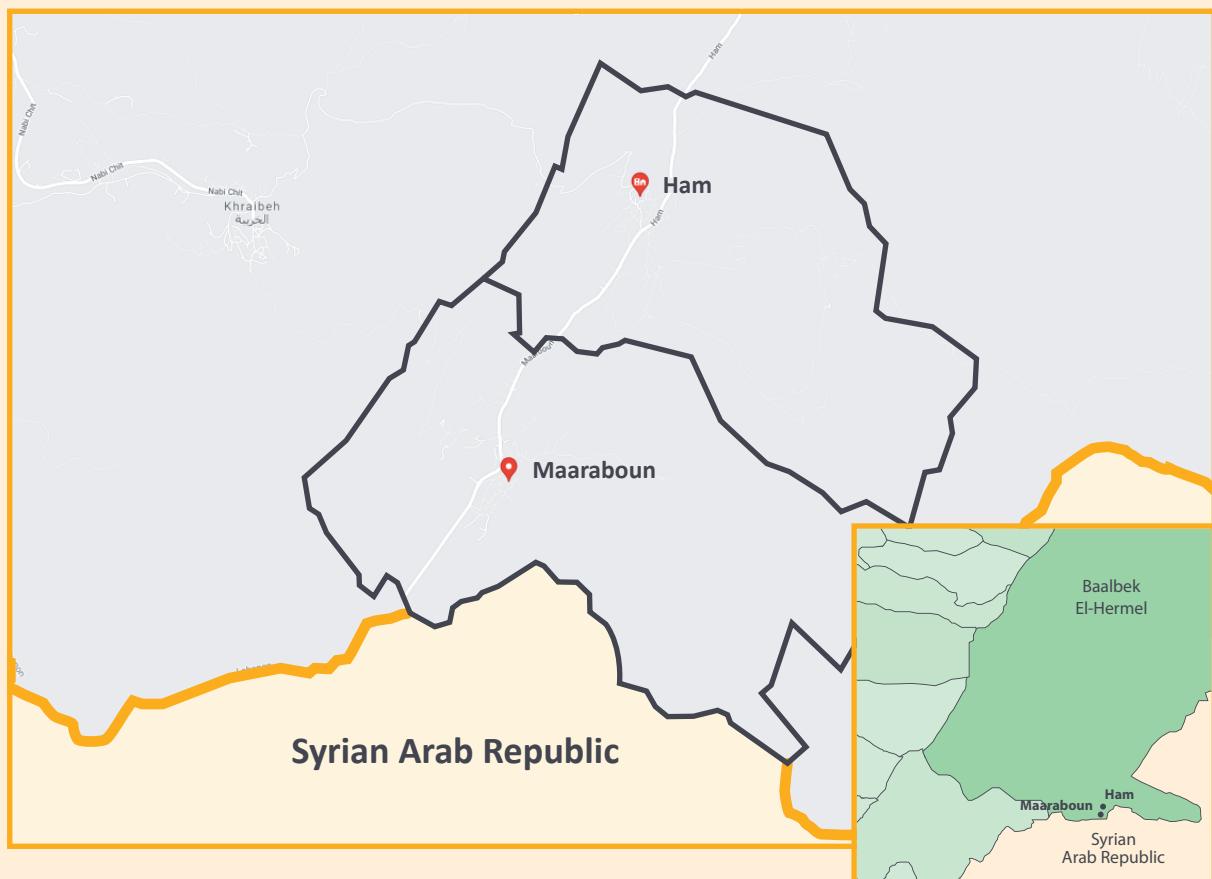
According to an interviewee, youth are now interested in jobs that secure for them fresh dollars to sustain their living. Additionally, given the seemingly absence of official authorities and their incapacity and reluctance in regulating smuggling, overall conflict, and day-to-day activities in the areas, local community members’ reliance on self-security and protection has become the norm.



United in Marginalization – The Special Case of the Towns of Maaraboun and Ham

“Marginalization and poverty unite us” expressed one of the interviewees from the village of Ham when describing the good relationship between his village and Maaraboun. Both villages suffer from severe infrastructural problems, a high rate of poverty, class disparities, and an evident neglect from local authorities. Local community members expressed that no political party or group cares about the villages, not even for electoral gains.

The abandonment and neglect of the towns by local authorities and political parties have allowed Syrian armed groups such as the Free Syrian Army and later extremist parties such as Al-Nusra and ISIS to take refuge in the surrounding mountains during the early stages of the Syrian war, creating tensions within the villages and the neighboring areas. The village of Ham, for instance, has a history full of conflicts. During the 1975 civil war, parties used its territories as training camps, and historically, the village was a target of Israeli forces. An interviewee explained that the outbreak of the Syrian war did not push residents to leave the village because its people are used to this kind of unrest. These commonalities led to a bonding between the local communities of the villages of Maaraboun and Ham in the face of their shared experiences of being marginalized and targeted by local, national, and international actors.



4.2 Mitigating Factors

With the economic crisis in Lebanon reaching increasingly dangerous and complicated developments, long-term systemic solutions in the border areas of Baalbek El-Hermel seem far from attainment. The unpredictability of armed conflicts and the ease in which they can be sparked, the overall instability across the region and the escalation of regional wars are all ominous signs for the future. Nonetheless, interviewees were able to highlight several factors which have helped in mediating conflicts and reducing tensions, at least temporarily, regardless of whether these actors/factors are positive in and of themselves.

Setting Differences Aside for the Good of the Community – Example from Al Qaa

The solidarity between community members seems of higher importance than any political differences that exist in Al Qaa. In the village for instance, community members indicated that political party members are ready to use their affiliations and political advantages for the betterment of the village’s general conditions. This goes hand in hand with local initiatives such as “Al Qaa Day” festival that seeks to unify and bring together community members from various social and political backgrounds.

Interviewees also highlighted the important role that the church and religious figures play in mediating conflicts and reducing tensions. Al Qaa’s population is also on good terms with the surrounding Syrian villages, as evidenced by the high number of mixed marriages and close family ties.

Acknowledgement and Acceptance of Hezbollah’s Dominance

Interviewees highlighted the fact that most political parties and constituencies are well aware of Hezbollah’s political and military superiority and regarded this acknowledgement as a mitigating factor. Power dynamics are in disequilibrium in the favor of Hezbollah, which makes armed confrontation with the party very unlikely. Attempts to challenge its hegemony by rival political parties such as the Lebanese Forces have led to a few tensions, but nothing alarming was noted by interviewees. In the mixed town of Duris, Sunni Muslim and Christian communities are under the control of Hezbollah of their own volition. They prefer adopting neutral, safe minority stances without challenging the party’s power and in some cases choose living mostly outside the villages and only visiting them during holidays.

Interviewees, especially those affiliated with the party’s political allies such as the Free Patriotic Movement and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, have highlighted that Hezbollah has played an important role in mediating relations with Syrian officials. They regarded the party’s control of the area as a stabilizing factor, especially in areas where clans aren’t active.

Promising Agricultural Sector

Despite the water management and supply issues, and the increase in the prices of necessary agricultural products such as fertilizers and pesticides, the agricultural sector in Baalbek El-Hermel is still attracting many investors and development agencies. The areas witnessed a remarkable increase in the number of youths working in the field and learning its technical skills (while taking in consideration that the root cause of this factor may be the grim state of the education sector).

Additionally, a large portion of the population is returning to its villages from Beirut and central areas due to the relatively low cost of living in the governorate. Though their return adds further pressure on the infrastructures and limited services in the area, they also bring new investments to the agricultural sector. The sector has a huge potential for growth, especially with the availability of large fertile lands in the areas. With the country relying on a rentier, unproductive economic system for the last few decades, the investment in productive sectors such as agriculture is necessary for opening the way for sustainable economic regeneration and securing a benchmark of socioeconomic security for the population.

Aid and Development Projects by Non-Governmental Organizations

Local community members have praised the positive impact that aid and development projects have had on the areas’ day-to-day conditions. An example of this is the acknowledgment by the local population of the town of Qaser, who is generally opposed to the US foreign policy, of the value and benefits that projects funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have had on the municipality and the union.

Local development projects also play a major role in the support and maintenance of communication channels between local communities, bringing together constituencies from different social and political backgrounds to common grounds.

5. Recommendations

While longstanding conflicts between clans and regional proxy battles are unlikely to cease in the foreseeable future, structural and ad hoc rectifications and advancements in key fields can come a long way in reducing daily tensions in the border areas of Baalbek El-Hermel and improving the socioeconomic conditions of local communities.

- Local and international aid and development agencies should support renewable energy projects like solar panel projects in Baalbek El-Hermel border areas. In addition to its environmental benefits, solar energy is an adequate and sustainable alternative especially with fuel and electricity shortage problems ramping up as the economic crisis accentuates.

- The Lebanese government, local institutions (most notably the Engineers and Architects’ Syndicate) and aid and development agencies should rehabilitate and finalize water canal projects that are incomplete or in dilapidated conditions in order to prevent the huge waste of water and establish proper irrigation channels. In addition, investigating the origins and completing projects such as Al-Assi river dam can be important milestones to the area’s water conservation matters.
- Aid and development agencies should place careful attention to the amelioration of the education sector in Baalbek El-Hermel border areas. The areas are suffering from an extreme lack of school facilities and educational institutions, not to mention an increasing dropout rate. In the governorate of Akkar, the rise of an educated younger generation has proven to be ready to challenge corruption and clan-related habits of instigating conflict and pursuing vendettas.
- Aid and development projects should be strictly monitored in order to ensure they reach target communities. As is the case in the governorate of Akkar, funds allocated for development projects are easily mismanaged by local authorities and are used to benefit personal interests and clientelist networks.
- State institutions should expand social services via public schools and local authorities. This should come with a general systematic reform to counter the centralized nature of administrative powers in the country, which marginalizes border areas.

Decentralized Policies

The Lebanese Government should adopt decentralized policymaking in order to ensure border communities are not marginalized. Previous assessments of the social and economic conditions of border communities and their material necessities through reliable studies by local and international organizations need be taken in consideration to ensure fair distribution of government material aid and social safety nets.

This includes analysing the needs of the different areas across the country and the costs of the necessary developmental projects and dividing them fairly and equally across all Lebanese regions, especially border areas who have been increasingly resorting to illegal means, especially smuggling, robberies, and overall crime.

These recommendations serve to alleviate and mitigate daily sources of tension, while providing sustainable and productive solutions in the context of a rapidly devaluing national currency and a country plunging into innumerable social, political, and economic crises. While they don’t tackle systemic causes of conflict and unrest, they provide local communities with an enhanced sense of self-sustainability and socioeconomic security.

Structures Supporting Implementation of Recommendations

Role of Civil Society

There is a clear need to promote and support measurable local and national level stability in Lebanon particularly in border areas. Civil society can play an important role in the design and implementation of effective responses to a variety of issues facing local communities. In many countries, civil society organizations play a 'watchdog' role, but also as a monitor of public satisfaction with all services provided by official authorities. CSOs may engage in a very wide range of activities including monitoring human rights, anti-corruption, contributing to policy, ensuring legal compliance and open access to information. Civil society can provide oversight at the local, regional, and national level to ensure compliance with the law, proper management of state and external funds and balanced development. In practical terms, civil society plays a critical role in building accountability through dialogue and building capacity through training and information provision.

Internationally, the creation and support of CSOs became a core policy of much peacebuilding in an effort to reconstruct or support a social contract between citizen and state. The international community, including several INGOs, regarded CSOs as an appropriate vehicle for working on peace and governance issues, particularly at the local level, and made the development of a healthy civil society a key objective of many international aid programs. In Lebanon, CSOs can play an important role in implementing development initiatives at times where the local and national authorities are being highly scrutinized by the public. However, it is important to avoid any pitfalls of having CSOs becoming vehicles for politicians or the families of politicians and amplify the voices of the political elite rather than being inclusive. Supporting civil society is a parallel strategy to state-building more broadly, ensuring that top-down approaches are matched by bottom-up ones. There is also recognition within state building that it is more a political than a technical process and the involvement of civil society is recognition that society plays a critical role in negotiating the social contract between state and citizen.

Security Agencies – Community Relations and Local Development

There is now wide international evidence and awareness of the close inter-relationships between local community security and development. As local people feel more secure, they become more willing to take development initiatives and investments, and if security actually improves, they are less likely to suffer setbacks due to robbery, violence, or intimidation. If the Lebanese Armed Forces, Internal Security Forces and General Security successfully improve community security and enhance relations with local communities, they will contribute to local development.

LAF, through the CIMIC Directorate directly assists local communities through supporting community development projects, and in this way enhance LAF-local community relations. Of course, it is neither desirable nor effective for LAF or any other national security agency to try to use CIMIC operations to engage in direct competition with clientelist strategies of resource distribution by well-known sectarian groups in areas of Lebanon. LAF is held in relatively high public esteem because it has successfully improved its reputation as a truly national and professional Lebanese security agency. Thus, any funds that LAF are able to raise for CIMIC projects are best directed towards transparent and inclusive community security and development mechanisms, to invest in wider relationship-building for collective local security efforts. Even if funds are not available for the implementation of projects, communities most need sustained and constructive engagement with LAF and other security agencies to enhance overall local security services, and thus development. Moreover, good quality engagement with local communities will enable LAF and other security agencies to better identify and take opportunities to adapt any logistical, infrastructure or other projects they undertake for security purposes to also help local development.

The Lebanese security agencies have an opportunity to provide a wider contribution, to pioneer and demonstrate approaches to successful community engagement, which might later be useful for wider improvement of public services in Lebanon. A key lesson from experience with engaging with stakeholders is that it is normally important for security and policing agencies that aim to improve community relations and services to go beyond informal and ad-hoc meetings and contacts, and establish relatively clear and regular mechanisms for information exchange, consultation and cooperation. Otherwise, opportunities are missed and relationships are not properly sustained.

Comparative Analysis - Smuggling in the Governorate of Akkar vs Smuggling in Baalbek El-Hermel: Different Systems, Similar Systemic Challenges

A comparison between smuggling operations and their associated social and security dynamics between the governorates of Baalbek El-Hermel and Akkar provides insight on the degree to which these operations are dictated by the contextual specificities they operate within. Geographic, social, sectarian, political, and military factors, not only dictate the efficiency of smuggling, but also the local community members’ perception of it as a means of sustenance or threat. Such comparison also highlights that any intervention by international actors should take into account the unintended harm and reputational risk any strict text-book approach to security and smuggling could entail.

The livelihoods of communities in both governorates depend heavily on smuggling operations, as their socioeconomic wellbeing and access to basic needs are positively related to connections with Syrian trade and smuggling partners, especially with local authorities being largely absent, inefficient, or neglectful of the areas.

The sectarian composition of the areas has played an immense role in accessing smuggling privileges. As such, Shiite majority areas of Baalbek El-Hermel benefit from Hezbollah’s close connections to Syrian officials to keep smuggling routes open and facilitate the transfer of all types of products as interviews revealed. On the other hand, most Akkar border areas’ constituencies are of Sunni majority, with many of them even supporting the Syrian opposition. This general support of the Syrian opposition and their sectarian affiliation have put them at a significant disadvantage as it has led to a damaging of the ties between local smugglers and Syrian parties. With many areas being involved in the war in Syria, their respective borders were completely closed off and several towns received threats from the Syrian regime and its allies. This has had a notable impact on the Alawite majority villages in specific, who were even more dependent on smuggled items from Syria.

It’s worth noting that the new roads of smuggling between both governorates, particularly those that cross Akkar highlands such as Fnaydek and Mechmech towards the district of Hermel, are initiated by Sunni personalities with direct and historical ties to Hezbollah.

The relationship with the Lebanese Army is another significant point of comparison. In Baalbek El-Hermel border areas, the army has very limited influence and role in overseeing or interfering in smuggling operations. Most smugglers in Baalbek El-Hermel are protected by powerful clans as well as Hezbollah and its affiliates. The situation is drastically different in Akkar, where many local communities collaborate directly with the army to spot smugglers. Thus, their relationship with the Lebanese Army is relatively well and made smoother by the fact that many families have members enrolled within army ranks.

Overall, the high rate of armed conflicts and tensions over smuggling is indicative of the areas’ dependency on it. This dependency itself is also indicative of another important and dangerous matter: both areas’ communities have no trust in local authorities to provide for them and solve their innumerable issues. Systematically, solving smuggling comes primarily from providing adequate, reliable and sustainable economic and social support to the border areas’ communities.

General questions must therefore be asked regarding the geopolitical division and centralization of administrative and socioeconomic powers in Lebanon, and the political culture hegemonizing over the country’s different systems and official institutions which marginalize areas on the periphery. For the communities of the border areas of Akkar and Baalbek El-Hermel, “Marginalization and poverty unite them.”



Annex

Research Methodology

The Assessment Team held meetings, both at HQs and in the field, with the main border management stakeholders in Lebanon and border communities.

The findings of this report relied on background and historical research and the information and narrations provided by 43 interviewees in the border areas studied. The interviewees interviewed for this project included heads of municipalities, mukhtars, clan leaders, retired security sector officers, religious figures, political activists, opinion leaders and local community members that play a key role in the day-to-day social and economic life of the areas.

The whole analysis was conducted between February and June 2021, with interviews in-person realized throughout the month of May.

The selection of the areas was based on background research on the recurrence of conflict, the sectarian composition, and the diversity of social backgrounds. Below are some of the main criteria used:

- Proximity to the borders
- The recurrence of conflicts in the town/village
- The history of conflicts in the specific location and how they affect the conflicts in the governorate today
- The pervasiveness of factors, such as poverty, lack of infrastructure, competition for jobs, a weak education sector, etc., that facilitate the escalation of tensions.
- The absence or the overwhelming presence of security forces in the town/village
- Religious/sectarian diversity
- The prevalence of relief and conflict mediation programs and actors in the towns/villages
- Demographic instability - (internal migration, refugees influx, etc.)

The list of areas studied in Akkar included:

- The town of Oweinat – It hosts around 2500 inhabitants, the majority of whom are Greek Orthodox Christians. Public employment is significantly high in the village, especially in the army, internal security forces and public schools.
- The village of Cheikhlar - Greek Orthodox majority with Sunni and Alawite minorities (around 15% and 5% respectively). Its population depends on public employment and agricultural activities for the most part.

- The Wadi Khaled area – A Sunni Muslim majority area bounded by Syria to the North-East. It hosts an estimated 50,000 Lebanese inhabitants in addition to 30,000 Syrian refugees. Wadi Khaled is historically known for the presence of two main clans: Al Ghannam and Al Atik.
- The village of Karha - the only Shiite majority village in Wadi Khaled and home to the locally famous Obeid clan, which was displaced from the Baalbek El-Hermel Governorate after a long history of conflicts with rival clans.
- The village of Akroum – this Sunni Muslim mountainous area hosts around 35,000 Lebanese and 4,000 Syrian inhabitants.
- The villages of Massoudiye (Alawite-dominated) and Aabboudiye (Mixed Alawite and Sunni community), both villages have had very strong connections to Syrian regime officials and trade partners. The economy of those areas was badly impacted by the closing of the borders after the outbreak of the Syrian war and the current economic crisis.

The list of areas studied in Baalbek El-Hermel included:

- The Village of Al-Qaa – It has Catholic Christian majority, and hosts around 14,000 Lebanese and between 25,000-30,000 Syrian inhabitants. The village is known as the “Army Village” due to the high number of enrollments in the Lebanese Army and public employment overall. The village has a long history of displacements; individuals and families often tend to leave their residences in the area in search for better job opportunities and higher education, or in fear of escalated conflict.
- The village of Qaser and the area of Hawsh al-Sayyid Ali – Both with Shiite majority, the areas have a portion of their territories within Lebanese borders and another within Syrian borders. There are active smuggling routes between Lebanon and Syria and between Akkar and Baalbek El-Hermel passing through these villages. Clans dominate most conflicts and govern a major part of the areas’ social life.
- The village of Maaraboun – It is composed of Sunni majority and is composed of approximately 4,000 inhabitants. Currently, around 30% of the original population is still living in Maaraboun, as the village lacks indispensable civilian infrastructures such as schools and medical centers, as well as the necessary human resources for their operation. For the most part, the village’s inhabitants have hitherto depended on agriculture, especially stone fruits, for their livelihoods.
- The village of Ham – The Shiite majority village is located directly East of Maaraboun and maintains good relationship with its community members. Ham’s population ranges between 600 and 800 residents. The estimates of its entire population however are far from accurate, as the village’s registry was destroyed during the 1958 uprising according to sources from the village.
- The village of Duris – It hosts a mixed population of Sunni Muslims, Shiite Muslims, and Maronite Christians. The town is mostly under the military and political control of Hezbollah and is separated from the Lebanese-Syrian border by a deserted land, generally not preferred and unfeasible for smuggling activities.

