

Southern Lebanon – scorched land

by Karin Leukefeld,* 31 July 2024



Karin Leukefeld
(Photo ma)

Travelling to the south of Lebanon requires some preparation. Lebanon and Israel have been at war for decades and there is no official border. The dividing line between the territory that Israel claims for itself – which Lebanon does not recognise – is marked with blue barrels placed there by the UN.

They mark the “Blue Line”, a ceasefire line controlled by UNIFIL, a UN Interim Force for Lebanon.¹

The report is based on the author’s research in southern Lebanon on 18 July 2024

Since 7 October 2023, shooting has been taking place along the “Blue Line”. The Lebanese Hezbollah has been bombing military targets and surveillance facilities of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), which bombard with drones, fighter jets and artillery far into Lebanon. The war began with the war against Gaza. According to Hezbollah, the attacks will stop as soon as there is a ceasefire in Gaza.

In the period from 7 October 2023 to 21 June 2024, at least 7,400 attacks *took place along the “Blue Line”*.² This is the result of documentation by the *Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED)*, which published corresponding map material. Of these attacks 83 per cent were carried out by Israel, a total of 6,142, killing at least 543 people in Lebanon. According to the report, Hezbollah and other armed groups were re-



Night rescue services in southern Lebanon after an Israeli bombardment. (Picture Hussein Malla/AP)

sponsible for 1258 attacks. At least 21 Israelis were killed.

According to the *Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO)*, at least 340,000 animals were killed on the Lebanese side, 47,000 olive trees and 790 hectares of agricultural land were destroyed “during the harvest season”. As a result, Lebanese farmers have lost more than 70 per cent of their harvest (2023/24) and the supply of food for the population has decreased, according to the FAO report. The Israeli armed forces are firing white phosphorus at Lebanese forests and agricultural land on a large scale. Crops, soil and groundwater are contaminated, and the poison threatens people and livestock alike. Interlocutors in Lebanon are certain that Israel is deliberately destroying the livelihoods of the population. No one should ever return to the fertile, water-rich area that Israel has wanted to possess since its foundation in 1948. Thousands of families have lost their livelihoods.

The prehistory

The people of the region have never been interested in wars or borders that would restrict them and their freedom of movement. The fact that their land was taken from them, that today they can no longer simply travel from Beirut to Haifa for a day trip, or from Beirut to Cairo or from Bethlehem to Damascus or Baghdad, was ensured by Great Britain and France at the beginning of the 20th century.

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Meiss al Jabal. (Picture © Green Southerners)

In 1916, the two European colonial powers drew a line – on a map – from Akka (Acre) to Mosul along today’s “Blue Line” between Lebanon and what is now Israel, as well as other lines that divided up the area. These lines went down in the history of the region as “lines in the sand”,³ although much of it was not sand at all, but land that had been cultivated for generations. The aim was to control the entire area between the eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf.

Mark Sykes, a British diplomat, and George Picot, a French diplomat, had agreed in 1916 – while the First World War was still raging – in the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement to divide up the Arab provinces of the collapsing Ottoman Empire; not to give these provinces state independence, as they were falsely promised, but to control them and thus “secure” their own imperial interests.

In 1917, Great Britain concretised its foreign policy plans in the region with the Balfour Declaration. Arthur James Balfour, then British Foreign Secretary, conveyed the “support of the Crown” to the Zionist national movement for the “establishment of a Jewish home in Palestine”. To realise its plans, the Zionist national movement spread the lie of Palestine as a “land without a people for a people without a land” – in its own and in the British interest.

To safeguard these interests, the state of Israel was created in 1948 – against the will of all those who could give themselves a voice in the region. The associated expulsion of the Palestinians, the Nakba, was repeated with every war, every house demolition, every new settlement construction. The role of Great Britain, the former colonial power between the eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf was transferred to the USA at the end of the Second World War (1939-1945).

The role of Israel, which to this day offers itself as the guardian of imperial interests in one of the

world’s most important geostrategic regions and is supplied with money and weapons accordingly, was given more weight by the USA. For the region, this meant more crises and wars. Israel’s push northwards into the fertile areas of Lebanon and eastwards to the fertile Syrian Golan Heights has not stopped.

If you want to understand the conflicts and wars in the region with Israel,⁴ it is helpful to know the prehistory described here in brief. It has been passed on to the people of the region by their ancestors and their ancestors’ ancestors. Whether in Gaza, the West Bank, the Golan Heights or Lebanon, people are still fighting for their land and for their right to shape their own lives and future.

To see the consequences of the war along the “Blue Line” requires some preparation. Due to the state of war between Lebanon and Israel, the south of Lebanon is a military zone where special rules apply to journalists. To travel there, film, take photographs or conduct interviews, authorisation from the Lebanese armed forces is required. If this is granted, you will receive an email from the army press office:

“We inform you that you have been authorised to travel to the south (of Lebanon). Your name is on list ‘B’, serial number is ‘59’. The permit is valid until 31 July 2024. You must report to the Southern Region Secret Service before you start your work (original: before you start filming). If you have any further questions, please call [...]”

“Where do you want to go, who do you want to meet?” asks the Southern Region official in Saida. “I want to talk to the people,” she says. “It’s about the consequences of the Israeli attacks on the rural areas with white phosphorus and the consequences for the population. Surely the civil defence staff can provide information about this?” Would it be possible to travel to Naqura? There are many reports of such attacks in the



Blida, South Lebanon in July 2024. (Picture © Green Southerners)

area. The officer thinks for a moment and then says that Naqura is not safe. Israel had bombed the neighbourhood again just that morning. "Drive in the direction of Marjayoun. In Ibil al Saqi you will find the Hotel Dana, where many journalists are staying. You will find contacts there."

Review

The last time the author was *on the 'Blue Line' was in mid-October 2023*.⁵ At that time, the journey went from Kfar Kila via Odayssa along the wall and surveillance facilities built by Israel to the coastal town of Naqura. At Aalma ech Chaab, just ten kilometres from Naqura, a group of journalists – clearly marked as "press" – had taken up position on a hill. They exchanged views and then moved on. The next day (13 October 2023), at least one Israeli tank *fired at journalists*,⁶ who were observing the situation from the same hill. *Issam Abdallah* from the Reuters news agency was killed. *Christina Assi*, a Lebanese photographer working for the AFP news agency, was seriously injured. One of her legs had to be partially amputated. Other journalists from the group were also injured. In November, the two journalists *Farah Omar* and *Rabih al Mamaarih* from the news channel *Al Mayadeen* were also deliberately killed by the Israeli army near Tayr Harfa.

The "Blue Line" is on fire

Today it is impossible to drive along the "Blue Line". The road is a restricted military area and a combat zone. Odayssa, Meiss al Jebel, Blida, Bint Jbeil, Aalma ech Chaab and Naqura are burning. Thousands of families had to flee. There is a civil defence base in Marjayoun, so this time we head south-east via Nabatieh. After Nabatieh, the road becomes narrow and eventually winds its way through the Litani Valley, which opens up to the east. Small pine forests stretch along the hills, the narrow course of the Litani river is hidden under dense bushes. To the west, towards the sea, a steep rock face gradually rises, on the heights of which lies the crusader castle of Beaufort. It looks as if it was built into the rock. Israeli troops, who occupied large parts of Lebanon (1982–2000), were last entrenched there.

There are only a few vehicles on the road and the area is largely uninhabited. Conservationists such as the "Green Southerners" want to preserve the Litani Valley and the surrounding forests as a "cultural heritage" for Lebanon and are campaigning against development. How-



Labonah – Naqura South Lebanon.
(Picture © Green Southerners)

ever, the war and the economic crisis (since 2019) are currently ensuring that construction measures are out of the question. For months, Lebanese conservationists have been documenting the devastation of forests, farmland, orchards and olive groves caused by incendiary bombs and white phosphorus bombardment from the Israeli armed forces.

Below the Beaufort castle, the road crosses the Litani River via the Khardali Bridge. The Lebanese army maintains a checkpoint here and controls vehicles travelling in and out. Our car is marked with a "press" sign and is waved to the side. The officer in charge checks the papers and finds the name of the foreign journalists on the B list. The checkpoint is informed of their arrival and the car can pass. Stopping is not advisable.

The road winds its way back up between rock cliffs towards Marjayoun. In various places, the land is burnt all the way down into the gorge. We pass a spring where two men were killed just a few weeks ago. They had stopped to get some water when an Israeli drone targeted and killed them. This is why all vehicles crossing the Khardali Bridge are instructed not to stop until Bourj al-Mouluk (Mulukkenturm), a village on the heights.

The inhabitants of the region say that the Hezbollah fighters, who used to fight the Israeli



Labonah – Naqura South Lebanon.
(Picture © Green Southerners)

occupying forces in the Litani Valley and the surrounding hills for years, used to stop at the spring and drink. The people say that the water gave them the strength to finally chase off the Israeli enemies. That is why the water is so popular with passers-by.

Shortly before Marjayoun, on a hill, there are press vehicles. Two tripods for cameras have been set up in a field and a few men have settled down on camping chairs in the shade of a tree. "Here you can see journalists from *Al Alam* and *Al Jazeera* sitting peacefully together", says one of the men, who works for the Iranian broadcaster *Al Alam*. "And here comes our good friend and colleague who works for all the major international media", he then greets an older man wearing a safari hat. He has folded up the brim on both sides. We ask one another where we are coming from and where we are going, a colleague describes the route to the civil defence base. The hill offers a broad view from east to west. In the valley below is the Israeli settlement of Matulla, which is surrounded by the Israeli wall that stretches westwards along the "Blue Line" as far as Naqura. The villages on the Lebanese side are closed to journalists, it is a combat zone.

The village of Kham lies on a hill to the east. The Israeli occupying forces had built a prison there for political prisoners. The place has become a museum but is being bombed by Israel again today. Behind the hill flows the Hasbani River, which waters the fields, orchards and olive groves that Israeli settlers now call their own. The families in southern Lebanon, from the Syrian Golan and from Palestine have never accepted the foreign partition of their land: neither by Great Britain and France (1916, 1917) nor the further partition plans (1937, British Peel Commission) or by the UN (1947) nor the violent seizure of land in 1948 by the Zionist militias.

Marjayoun is a quiet place; during the Israeli occupation, the *South Lebanese Army* (SLA), which collaborated with Israel, was stationed here. At the liberation in 2000, these friends of Israel left with the Israeli troops overnight across the "Blue Line" to Israel, where they were assigned new tasks or emigrated to other parts of the world.

Hopefully the war will be over soon

The neighbourhood of the civil defence forces is located off the main road. It can be recognised by the large fire engine parked in the yard. Three



Hill Marjayoun. (Image © Green Southerners)

young people and two older men are sitting under a protective canopy at a low table drinking coffee. They quickly get up as the strangers approach. "She's a journalist from Germany and wants to talk to the Civil Defence about the destruction of agricultural land," explains H., who is accompanying the author in Lebanon. One of the men points to a neighbouring room where the head of the station has his office, and we need to speak to him. "Do you have an authorisation from our headquarters?" is the first question the station manager asks. The authorisation from the army and secret service is not enough. H. asks the man to phone the headquarters and get authorisation. But unfortunately, nothing can be done, says the man after a while on the phone. Journalists would have to obtain authorisation in Beirut at least a week in advance.

However, the three young people are prepared to answer some of the journalist's questions. *George* (20) and *Elias* (18) are studying, *David* (17) will not be graduating from high school until next year. The three are not from Marjayoun, but from Kleya, a town nearby, they say. They spend their holidays as volunteer firefighters with the civil defence, as the situation demands. Yes, there are also girls in their volunteer group, but



Three volunteers for the Marjayoun Civil Defence. Left to right Elias, George, David. (Picture K. Leukefeld)

they are accommodated in a different house. "But we all work together in the field." Many boys and girls in the area sign up for civil defence at an early age – alongside their school lessons, the three report. There are regular drills and longer training seminars. "We have our uniform, boots, helmets – everything we need for an assignment", says David, the youngest of the three. Just the day before, they were called out to an operation on the Litani River. "A big fire", says George, adding that they were able to put it out.

For all three of them, this is the first war they have experienced. But their parents have already told them about previous wars. All three hope that the war will be over soon. "We don't understand the political reasons", says George. But maybe he just doesn't want to talk about it. "All we know is that we can't do what we want, that we can't go wherever we want, that many of our friends are no longer here but in other parts of the country where it's safer." They list the restrictions. They must stay at home when they are not deployed, and nobody knows what the future holds. Elias says that he only returned to Lebanon with his parents six years ago. He was twelve at the time, before that the family had lived in Sweden. For young people in Europe, life is of course much more pleasant, "there's everything", says Elias. Life in Lebanon is very difficult, and perhaps one day he will go abroad again to work. Elias is studying business management, George is studying mechanics (physics), and he too can imagine going abroad one day. David says he doesn't know what he wants to study yet. He still has a year in school and time. But he does know one thing, he adds mischievously: "I definitely want to stay here, in Lebanon."

Breaking the sound barrier in Ebel as Saqi

To get back to the main road, H. must find a way through the labyrinth of narrow alleyways that wind their way down the slope past low, simple houses. The buildings are surrounded by flowers and trees, with gardens between the houses. Everything looks deserted, there is no one to be seen.

On the main road, two UN vehicles drive in front of us at the prescribed speed, and at some point, they turn off into the hills. "There's a Spanish UNIFIL base here," says H., who knows southern Lebanon like the back of his hand. ⁴⁹ *UN-States*⁷ have deployed 10,031 soldiers for the UNIFIL mission. The largest contingent is



Markaba forest south Lebanon.
(Picture © Green Southerners)

currently Italy, which is leading the mission with more than 1,000 troops. Spain has 677 troops in Lebanon, *their base is north of Marjayoun*.⁸

We turn off in the direction of Ebel al-Saqi. The small village is remote and inhabited by Druze and Christians. It is surprising to find a hotel in the middle of the war zone in southern Lebanon. Even more surprising, however, is the large swimming pool located directly behind the hotel. Music plays softly as a family with children enjoys the entire complex to themselves. "Normally it's so full here in the summer that you can't find any space," says senior manager *Riad Zeineddine*. "Now we're at war and the guests are staying away." When the author introduces herself as a journalist, Mr Zeineddine begins to quote the prices: "Single room 65 US dollars, tax and breakfast included. Double room 80 US dollars, tax and breakfast included. If you are a vegetarian, we will prepare something for you. Lebanese cuisine is varied, as you know. Just think of the starters." The hotel has 36 rooms, ten of which are reserved for UNIFIL. Many media have rented rooms, says the manager and proudly lists: "Jazeera, sky news, Al Arabiya, Al Mayadeen, BBC, CNN, Jadeed", to name but a few.

The DANA hotel was built around 1990, he reports when asked further. At that time, there was a Norwegian UNIFIL base in the area. They had sponsored the construction of the hotel so that family members could visit them. At that time, the hotel only consisted of the lobby and the swimming pool. There was a kitchen, which also catered for the UNIFIL base. There were only a few rooms for the kitchen staff. "The actual DANA hotel, as you see it now, opened in 2020", the manager continues. "The contract expires at the end of 2024. We don't know what will happen then."

Riad Zeineddin comes from Hasbaya, which is just under ten kilometres to the north-east. Hasbaya is a centre of the Lebanese Druze. The



Blida-Muhibibi South Lebanon.
(Picture © Green Southerners)

Caza Hasbaya, the Hasbaya house, lies at the foot of Mount Hermon, which the Arabs call Jbeil Sheikh, the Sheikh's Mountain. Here lies Khalawat Al Bayyada, an important theological institution of the Lebanese Druze.

While we are chatting, a loud bang suddenly interrupts the conversation. The windows rattle and shake in their frames, a shock wave shakes the entire building. "Nothing", smiles Mr Zeineddin kindly. "It's nothing, you don't need to be afraid. The Israelis have broken through the sound barrier with their fighter jets. They always do that to scare us."

Mr Zeineddin apologises because his mobile phone is ringing. The mobile phone of H., my companion, also rings. It's his daughter, H. signals, before answering the call. "She was worried because they had broken the sound barrier", H. explains later. His family lives south of Saïda, around 80 kilometres from Ebel as Saqi.

We say goodbye and Mr Zeineddin gives each of us a bottle of iced fruit juice. "Come back again," he says kindly. "Everything is quiet from here to Hasbaya, you don't need to worry."

Just a few kilometres away, along the cease-fire line, is scorched land. The author is not al-

lowed to go there, it is a restricted military area. Photos of the "green people from the south", the Green Southerners, document the devastation.

When will we be able to return to our villages?

The journey takes us back to the coast to Tyre, where 27,000 people from the southern villages are housed in schools. The internally displaced people are being cared for by the local administration with the help of the Tyre *Municipal Workers' Union*. Support is being provided by the UN Development Organisation (UNDP), and local and international non-governmental organisations have taken on various tasks.

The head of the authority, Mortada Mhanna, introduces the author to Mr Ali. He comes from Naqura and used to work for the local police there. Now he is a kind of "right-hand man" for Mr Mhanna, monitoring the care of the families at *Tyre Technical School*. "It's the holidays and the families are housed on the ground floor", says Mr Ali. If they are still there when the school resumes in autumn, lessons will be moved to the two upper floors. Mr Ali saw white phosphorus when his village and the surrounding forests were attacked with it. "It doesn't stop burning", he says. "When people come into contact with it, their skin burns, and they can burn from the inside."

He then greets Mr Ahmed, who has been employed at the technical school for many years and also helps internally displaced people. The families housed in the technical school are simple people, explains Mr Ahmed. They are farmers and not all of them have had a good education. For them, everyday life in the accommodation is very difficult. As it was holiday time, the children had no school classes and were bored. "The people have no work; they have no



Tyre. A young farmer's wife from Blida. She does not want to be recognised in the photo. (Picture K. Leukefeld)



Tyre. Manal Issa (42) from Blida is not afraid to be photographed. (Picture K. Leukefeld)



Tyre. Women working in the fields. UNDP project for internally displaced persons. (Picture K. Leukefeld)

money. Once a day, they get a hot meal from an aid organisation, which doesn't do justice to their original eating habits." Many rejected the food, which mostly consisted of rice and a vegetable sauce, sometimes with meat. The hygienic conditions of a school are also not suitable for so many people, continues Mr Ahmed. Sometimes there is not enough water.

Then his face brightens, and he talks about a project that gives him great pleasure. It is aimed at women and is financed "from outside". "From the outside" means that the money comes from the UN organisation for women (*UN Women*), which is funding a women's project in cooperation with local non-governmental organisations. "Land has been cleared around the school so that the women can plant something there", explains Mr Ahmed. They work three to four hours in the morning and four hours in the afternoon and receive 16 US dollars a day for their labour. A local organisation provides childcare for the women's children during this time. "You're lucky, the afternoon shift starts at 5.00 pm, then you can talk to the women."

One by one, the women come out of the building and gather around Mr Ahmed to sign a participation list. They are all wearing long trousers and long blouses. To protect themselves from the sun, they have wrapped their heads with scarves and are wearing caps or sun hats. They protect their hands with gloves as they work. Hats, gloves as well as the necessary tools, fertiliser and seeds are provided by the UNDP. All but one of the women refuse to be photographed by the author. It's not appropriate, says one young woman. "What if my brother finds a photo of me on Facebook!"

Manal Issa is not so shy and allows herself to be photographed. The 42-year-old comes from

Blida, where she used to live with her husband and two children. Her 14-year-old daughter is disabled, she says, so she can't come to work with her. She and her husband worked with his brother growing vegetables and tobacco. After their house was badly damaged in an Israeli attack, the family moved in with her brother. However, the situation worsened and in November, one month after the war began, they were evacuated from the village. Twelve families from their village and from neighbouring villages around Blida are now housed here.

In Tyre, at the school, life is difficult, says Manal Issa quietly. "We miss our home, our work, a regular daily routine for the children." Her husband is disabled but was able to work in agriculture. That's not possible here, he has nothing to do. "We are waiting to be able to go home again."

The other women call out to Manal that work is starting. Laughing, they stand together and watch the conversation. Some join in and walk over to the field. "Have you come to tell us that we can go back home to our villages?" asks an older woman who has been talking to Mr Ahmed. "We all want to go home as soon as possible", she calls out to the other women. "Nowhere is nicer than in our village", one of them calls back. And Manal laughs: "My village is the most beautiful, it's number 1."

Source: <https://globalbridge.ch/suedlibanon-ein-verbranntes-land/>, 4 August 2024

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")

Also available as podcast in German:

<https://www.nachdenkseiten.de/upload/podcast/240730-Suedlibanon-Verbranntes-Land-NDS.mp3>

¹ <https://unifil.unmissions.org/unifil-mandate>

² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/27/mapping-7400-cross-border-attacks-between-israel-and-lebanon>

³ <https://balfourproject.org/a-line-in-the-sand/>

⁴ <https://academic.oup.com/tcbh/article-abstract/30/2/289/5106399>

⁵ <https://globalbridge.ch/in-zeiten-des-krieges-unterwegs-im-suedlichen-libanon/>

⁶ <https://cpj.org/2024/07/journalist-casualties-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/>

⁷ <https://unifil.unmissions.org/unifil-troop-contributing-countries>

⁸ <https://unifil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unifilmap122022.pdf>