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Lebanon's Twilight Zone

By Andrew Tabler

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BEKAA VALLEY, Lebanon— "They must be asleep," I whispered as, on foot, we climbed the rocky trail toward a base of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine — General Command (PFLP-GC) near the Bekaa Valley village of Sultan Yacoub. It didn't look like any camp I had ever seen. Ahead was the base's "front gate", consisting of a metal turnpike and two flags — one of Lebanon, the other some variant of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). That was it.

Then on my right, two armed fighters appeared on a sharp stone ridge about 100 meters above us. Then four, and a few seconds later, six.

"We are journalists!" my colleague from Reuters blurted out, hands cupped around her mouth to project her voice. "We want to talk to you."

"*Mamnouh!* [Forbidden]", one fighter exclaimed as he ran long the ridge. "Get out of here!"

We quickly turned around and darted back toward our vehicle, a four-wheel drive Nissan. The day before, a Lebanese contractor had been shot dead two hills over, near a camp of another Palestinian group, Fatah Intifada. We weren't taking any chances.

"What's that?" asked another colleague, this one from the *Times* of London, pointing to some black wire running along the ground toward a hole with something grey and pointed sticking out of a pile of rocks.

"My God, it's an IED [Improvised Explosive Device]!" the *Times* correspondent exclaimed precisely as I said the same thing to myself. I pulled up my camera and took a snapshot. How did we not see this on the way up? I thought.

"Don't take photos!" the correspondent exclaimed. "We don't know how trigger-happy they are now."

We piled back into the Nissan and nervously reversed down the road.

About an hour later, I looked upon this same camp. This time, however, from about a mile away from the front green of the Kefraya Wine Chateau while sipping glasses of "Le Nouveau" and tucking into a Filet Mignon.

This is the Bekaa Valley — once the breadbasket of the Roman Empire and now considered by Washington as a hornets' nest of "terrorists" bent on destroying Israel and rolling back American influence in the Levant, if not the world.

A visit to the Bekaa seems to confirm this reputation. The area is home to the Shiite "resistance" group-cum-political party Hizbollah and the Palestinian militant groups Fatah Intifadah and the PFLP-GC. The Bekaa produces some of the world's choice cannabis and increasingly fine wines, is a regional centre of counterfeiting and is home to smugglers that would have given Pierre and Jean Lafitte a run for their money.

Bizarrely, the same visit can give an entirely different picture. Following a



A hurried snapshot of an Improvised Explosive Device, freshly planted outside the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine — General Command (PFLP-GC) camp in Sultan Yacoub, after the Lebanese Army surrounded Palestinian militias in the Bekaa in October.

tumultuous period during the Lebanese Civil War, which saw bloody battles between Syrian and Israeli forces that made the Bekaa internationally famous, the valley seemed to revert back to its old self — a sort of paradise of vineyards, wine chateaux, Roman ruins and stunning views that could easily double as the Garden of Eden.



A vineyard adjacent one of Lebanon's premier wine chateaux. While many might not know it, the Bekaa Valley is the heart of Lebanon's wine industry.

Today, no matter what way you look at it, this largely ignored part of Lebanon is bearing the brunt of change in the wake of Syria's forced withdrawal of troops and security personnel following the February assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri. As if last summer's Syrian trade blockade (see AJT-5) were not enough to send the Bekaa into economic depression, the international community is now pressuring the government of current Prime Minister Fouad Siniora to implement Security Council Resolution 1559, which demands the disarming of all militias in Lebanon. The Lebanese Army, which during Syria's occupation of Lebanon was virtually absent from the Bekaa, has surrounded the Palestinian militia camps in the valley to force compliance.

While a crisis seems to have been avoided for the time being, these are tough times in the Bekaa and its people are noticeably tightlipped, making the valley yet another unknown factor in the changing power equations between Lebanon and Syria that bears closer attention in the months, if not years, ahead. To make the valley less unknown, I've made several trips there in the past few months with a variety of companions to see just what attitudes and motives lie behind the tight-lippedness, and how the post-assassination atmosphere has affected life and business there.

Geography, demographics and politics

Getting one's head around the Valley and the issues it faces starts with a look at a contoured map. Some 177 kilometers long and ranging from 10-16 kilometers wide, the "Bekaa" (plural of the Arabic word "*bukaah*", which means a place of stagnant water or swamp) is bordered by the Lebanon Mountain range to the West and the Anti-Lebanon Mountains to the East. It does not have a "top" and "bottom" *per se*, since it is part of the Great Rift Valley that extends from Mozambique to southern Turkey. But its northern border can largely be considered the Lebanese-Syrian frontier, and in the south the Bekaa more or less ends a few kilometers south of Lake Qaraoun.

The largest of Lebanon's six governorates (administrative zones), the Bekaa can be roughly portioned into three parts. The first includes the governorate's capital, Zahle, the Damascus Road and Chtaura, which collectively serve as the commercial centre of the Valley. All points north of this cluster can be considered the "Upper Bekaa", while all points south are considered the lower or "West Bekaa."

It might come as a surprise that the Bekaa is one of Lebanon's most diverse areas, with villages of Shiites and Sunni Muslims, Druze, Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Armenian and "minority" Christians spotting what is arguably one of the most beautiful areas in the Arab World. A drive through any part of the Bekaa gives testament to this fact. Not only could a Shiite village be located only a stone's throw away from a Sunni or Christian one — something that is common throughout Lebanon — but inside the villages themselves it is common to find Muslim women fully veiled walking alongside nuns dressed in bright blue habits and white caps. The capital, Zahle, is overwhelmingly Christian, while the valley as a whole has a Muslim majority.

During Ottoman times, the Bekaa was considered as part of "*Bilad as-Sham*" [The Lands of Damascus], and was administered from what is today the Syrian capital. Following the First World War, the French-Mandate authorities who controlled Syria decided to attach the Bekaa to what was formerly the Mutassarifate of Mount Lebanon (a privileged administrative region of the Ottoman Empire set aside for Christians and Druze) to form a new entity — "Greater Lebanon" — in 1920. Syria and Leba-

non have been struggling for control of the Bekaa ever since. While Beirut has nominal political control of the valley, Syria's economic and cultural influence is everywhere. Today, Chtaura still dominates Syrian finance and trade, and many of the people of the Bekaa speak something closer to Syrian-dialect Arabic than Lebanese.

During the 1970s the Bekaa was suddenly thrust into a political storm that virtually detached it from Beirut and the coast. Following the PLO's defeat by King Hussein of Jordan in 1970 during what is called "Black September", where Yasser Arafat tried to overthrow Hussein with Syrian assistance, the organization's various militant wings established camps in Lebanon to continue the fight against Israel. When the Palestinians began to flex their muscle throughout Lebanon, including setting up checkpoints and other activities that virtually created "a state within a state", Lebanon's Christians began to strike back. Civil war quickly ensued, and lasted for 15 bloody years without a clear victor.

In 1976, Lebanese President Sulieman Franjieh, a Maronite Christian, invited the Syrian army into Lebanon to help end the hostilities. In the past, Lebanon's Christians looked to Sunni-Muslim-dominated Syria as something that should be contained or avoided at all costs. But in November 1970, Syrian Defense Minister Hafez el-Assad carried out a *coup d'état*, ousting his rival, Salah Jadid. Now Syria was ruled by an Alawite Muslim, a minority on the fringe of Shiite Islam, who therefore could be trusted to serve as a counterweight to the Palestinians.

For the next 30 years, Syria essentially annexed the

Bekaa Valley. Its army established its headquarters at Riyaq, a former French military base, and its intelligence services set up shop in the Armenian-Christian-dominated Bekaa town of Anjar. When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, the sleepy Bekaa suddenly became the focus of world attention, as bloody battles ensued between Syrian and Israeli forces. In July 1982, Syria lost 87 MIG aircraft to Israel's three aircraft, with the latter destroying all of Syria's 19 Surface-to-Air (SAM) missile batteries in the valley. The Syrian army was able to repel the Israeli advance on the ground, however.

After the civil war's end in 1990, as Syria occupied Mount Lebanon, the Shuf Mountains and all points south to Sidon, Anjar became the seat of Syria's occupation of its western neighbor. While the war ended, Damascus' struggle with Israel did not. Israel held on to a 15-kilometer-wide occupation zone along its border with Lebanon that touched the very tip of the West Bekaa. To ensure resistance in the south, Damascus sponsored Hizbollah as a proxy militia to drive the Israelis out of Lebanon. Palestinian militant groups were allowed to set up bases in the eastern part of the West and Central Bekaa — which theoretically guarded the historical invasion route from the south into Damascus.

Despite the fact that Israel pulled out of Lebanon in May 2000, Syria permitted groups continuing "resistance" to keep their arms. A border dispute over the Sheba Farms — a 12-square mile area that Israel insists is Syrian territory (and therefore still occupies) and that Syria and Lebanon insist is Lebanese territory — kept the resistance groups based in the Bekaa in business.



This situation completely changed following the assassination of Rafik al Hariri last Valentine's Day. International pressure forced Syria to withdraw its forces at the end of April, creating a power vacuum that has yet to be filled. "Resistance" as a concept is not in question, but those carrying out resistance activities are. Hizbollah, for example, is a full partner in Lebanon Prime Minister Siniora's government, and for the first time holds a ministerial position. Its activities have not been touched. Palestinian groups are another matter, however. Their camps are far away from the Sheba Farms region, and the fact that the PFLP-GC's chief, Ahmed Jabril, is based in Damascus has suddenly placed the group's activities in Lebanon in question.

The international community is also fanning the coals of confrontation. In his semi-annual report to the UN Security Council on October 28, UN Special Representative Terje Roed-Larsen praised Lebanon for carrying out free elections (see AJT-4) and Syria for withdrawing its forces from Lebanon, but slammed the Siniora government for not doing enough

to “disband militias” (read: Hizbollah and the Palestinians) and “extend the government’s authority over the entire country” (read: The Bekaa Valley and Southern Lebanon). In a key part of the report, Larsen highlighted intelligence reports outlining the influx of “weaponry and personnel from Syria to some of these groups.”

In response, Beirut has said it will deal with Hizbollah through “national dialogue”, including various schemes to include the militia in the Lebanese Army, or as a related contingent of some type. For the Palestinians, it is a different story. Beirut has sent the Lebanese Army into the Bekaa in force to surround the camps, investigate the arms issue, and “encourage” the Palestinians to return to their refugee camps. According to local residents and security analysts, the Palestinians have dug tunnels into the hillsides and created bunkers that house hundreds of fighters and large weapons caches. Given the camps’ close proximity to Syria, they can be easily supplied from Damascus.

Caught in the Middle

Today the people of the Bekaa are caught in the middle of three political crises that are likely to continue for the foreseeable future: Beirut’s efforts to extend its security control over the Valley, Syria’s blockade of Lebanon earlier this year and now-stringent border inspections between the Bekaa and Syria proper. They can also expect the fallout from possible sanctions on Syria as a result of the UN inquiry into the death of Rafik al Hariri by investigator Devlet Mehliis (see AJT-6). So far, the results have been far from positive. Bekaa farmers lost millions of dollars per day as their produce sat rotting on the Syrian border last summer (see AJT-5). Trade and commerce with Syria from shops and banks in Chatura has been decimated. Tourism to Lebanon, including visits to the famous Roman ruins at Baalbek, is down by an official 13.6 percent from last year — figures that do not include Syrians or Palestinians. Last but not least, revenue-producing smuggling from the northern Bekaa into Syria has reportedly been interrupted by overzealous Syrian security agents.

All these things can be discovered by means of a thorough Google search, but as said, nothing beats a personal look-see. I traveled with an assortment of companions for several reasons. First, basic security concerns in this environment make the “buddy system” a part of life. Second, I wanted to select colleagues who were either Lebanese (and could somehow subtract attention from a lone American just poking around in the Bekaa), or who specialized in certain movements active in the Bekaa — most notably Hizbollah and the Palestinians.

What I found was not earth-shattering, and confirmed many media reports. But I also learned how the lives of simple people can be affected by high politics, and how they hunker down and say very little as they

ride out storms. Just how Washington plans to get a good handle on these folks’ deeper concerns, or what they actually intend to do to make ends meet, is anyone’s guess.

The Damascus Road

Adventures always start with something familiar, and branch off into the unknown. Years of covering both Damascus and Beirut for the Oxford Business Group and the Economist Intelligence Unit meant that I am intimately acquainted with the Damascus Road, including its shops, drivers, moneychangers and beggars. So I set off on one expedition at wine-grape harvest time with a Lebanese companion, a venturesome sociology student at the Lebanese University. She and I were to follow our noses into the “Wild East” of Lebanon.

Descending into Chtaura from Dar al Baydar, the high point on the Beirut-Damascus Road, we decided to stop off for a ham-and-cheese pizza at Chtaurama — one of Chtaura’s best-known rest stops that doubles as a supermarket that supplies Syrian customers in its basement. As a very general rule Christian villages, in the Bekaa are more often than not small hamlets hanging from hillsides. The same rule can be applied to the environs of Chtaura and Zahle as well. Chtaurama market is Christian-owned, but often staffed by members of other religious sects.

As I stepped up to the counter, the cashier, who knew me well from my usual weekend stop-offs between Beirut and Damascus with my Syrian driver, looked a bit surprised to see me in the middle of the week.

“Ahleen! [Welcome!] You are here early,” she said.

“Yep. Just going for a drive ‘round. It’s beautiful here during the harvest.”

I noticed my usual driver, along with a few others, sitting at a nearby table.

“Ahleen! How’s work?” I asked.

“Very slow,” said one driver. “I used to go back and forth to Lebanon every day from Damascus. Now I am lucky to go three times a week.”

“What’s the problem? Are Lebanese afraid to go to Syria?”

“No, the other way around!” said Ali, my regular driver. “Syrians are afraid of being attacked. Plus, many goods are now available in Syria, and people are buying from home instead of from here. It’s not like the good old days.”

Ali’s statement confirmed that Syrian trade reforms are beginning to have an impact. Over the last few months, the Syrian government has started lifting import

restrictions on thousands of goods formerly obtained, or smuggled, from Lebanon. The move has been attributed to post-assassination external pressure on Syria, as well as its still-pending Association Agreement with the EU.

I ordered a sandwich and a drink for my companion, took the receipt and walked up to the counter. Above it was a huge Dewar's whiskey sign, accented in red.

I gave the order to the cook through a sliding window. I was hungry, but noticed he was new at his job, and wondered where he came from. Five minutes later the sandwich could be seen, looking more like a pizza than a sandwich. But I was *prêt à manger*, and didn't care. The cook opened the window and put the dish on the rack below.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"America," I answered, taking the dish. "How's business these days?"

"Its depressed around here, has been for months," he answered. "It started with the assassination, it got a bit better, now it's way down again. Not very many riders."

"How long you been at it?" I asked.

"About six months," he said. "I live nearby. There is no work these days, and I am glad to have a job."

I didn't know it then, but unemployment and lack of economic opportunities, would dominate the rest of the conversations I was going to have in the Bekaa. The area had always been considered something of a backwater, with many of its best and brightest migrating to Lebanese cities on the coast. But the Hariri assassination had dealt a heavy blow, for it is in this valley that the economies and families of Lebanon and Syria meet and where political instability resulting from the UN investigation implicating high-ranking Syrians (and perhaps high-ranking Lebanese) could arise.

"If America comes to Lebanon, will it bring [aid] programs?" the cook asked.

"I don't know," I answered. "It could. But it could be linked to disarming Hizbollah."

"Oh yes," he said, furrowing his brow. And with that, he popped his head back through the window.

What I thought he was referring to were recent media reports that Lebanon would receive considerable assistance in repaying its massive \$35 billion debt in return for fully complying with Security Council Resolution 1559. But I didn't know for sure.

I took a seat next to my companion and started to



Ali [on the left in the black cap and uniform], a cook at the Chtaurama market on the Damascus-Beirut road, would like US aid to help create jobs in the Bekaa, but shies away from talk of US demands to disarm Hizbollah in return.

chat. When we decided to move to another table to avoid sun beaming through the window, I suddenly noticed the cook standing behind us, leaning against the wall. As I caught sight of him, someone called the name "Ali", and in a blink of an eye, he was gone. Seemed someone had another sandwich order. Damn, I thought. Maybe he wanted to talk.

When Ali popped back out and started chatting with a customer in front of the lunch counter, I couldn't resist snapping a photo. For some reason, despite good lighting, the flash went off. Ali and the friend looked over at me with quizzical expressions. I pretended I was taking a photo of my companion for the day.

As we got up to leave, Ali looked over at me and gave me the hand signal for "what the hell was that all about?" The movement looks something like you are holding an imaginary softball in your hand and turning it outward and around with your wrist.

"*Ma fi shi*" [Nothing], I answered, smiling and walking out the door. I have to watch it, taking photos, I thought.

Next I wanted to go to Masnaa, the Lebanese border village next to the immigration gateway to Syria. I had seen reports that business was down as a result of the Hariri affair, and I thought it would be interesting to stop



The taxi station and markets at Masnaa, near the Syrian frontier. Business there has been decimated by political tensions between Damascus and Beirut.

off, looking for gifts, *en route* to Syria.

We first entered a store selling bed linen and blankets, most still in their shipping boxes. All were from the Far East. The bright red Chinese characters on the boxes gave the impression of a Chinese restaurant without, of course, the food and pagodas.

As an attendant came out to help us, I took a stroll through what was essentially a warehouse. After a few minutes of dialogue with my companion about what sheets would best suit a baby's room, the owner suddenly appeared, carrying his *masbaha* (prayer beads). He whispered something into the attendant's ear, who then turned and told my companion that this shop sold only in bulk, and was not for retail sales. As we walked out, I wondered why, if the shop was wholesale only, they had let us look around in the first place. I started to realize that this trip was going to be a bit harder than I thought.

In fact in all the stores at Masnaa, the only attendant who would talk shop at all was at a mobile-phone/computer shop, who openly admitted his business had been decimated.

"Syrian customs is very strict now," he said. "They don't allow in computers, or even mobile phone products in new boxes."

As I exited the shop, a man wearing a light grey derby and yellow shirt and holding a fistful of Syrian Pounds, U.S. Dollars and Euros approached me. "*Saraf?*" [exchange?], he asked.

"What's the rate?" I asked.

"Fifty-four point five," he said. I knew from the number he meant Syrian pounds per dollar.

"Wow!" I said. The Syrian pound was depreciat-

ing pretty quickly. "Where are the customers? I was here a few months ago, but this is bad."

"Yeah," he replied. Suddenly, a man with a two-day-shadow beard appeared and whispered in the moneychanger's ear. Then he turned to me.

"*Inta sahabi?*" [Are you a journalist?]

I said I was.

"*Shuf!*" [See!], he said to the moneychanger, who gave a quick smile and walked away. So much for that.

I then stopped at a number of Lebanese banks in Chtaura to talk with some of the managers who service Syria. Despite being pleasantly received in banks such as BLOM, BEMO and Société Générale, all three managers refused to talk about Syrian business. More silence.

Later, I phoned a banker friend who manages one of the new joint-venture Syrian banks with Lebanese involvement to get an idea of what was going on.

"Banks in Chtaura are suffering from banking and foreign exchange reforms in Syria," my friend told me. "People kept their deposits in the major banks, but have switched them over to private bank branches in Syria. This started before the political crises between the two countries, but since Hariri was killed, our business in Damascus is booming, but in Chtaura, it's the polar opposite."

Viticulture and Smuggling

I made a sharp right-hand turn on my way back to Chtaura to check out reports that Syrian laborers were being prevented from taking part in the annual grape harvest. Lebanon's ancient wine industry is booming, which has been a boon for Bekaa grape growers over the last ten years. Well-known Bekaa labels, such as Chateau Musar, Ksara and Kefraya, are now being challenged by some 11 new chateaux. Most of these new enterprises have set up shop in the central and West Bekaa.

I decided to visit one of Lebanon's new vineyards, Massaya. Working land on what's known as the Tanail Property just north of the Damascus Road (near some disbanded Palestinian Fatah Intifada bases), Massaya's owners, the Ghosn family, have become regional wine mavericks. Starting with Arak, a grape-based, anise-flavored drink that is the rough equivalent of Greek Uzo, the Ghosns now produce, arguably, some of Lebanon's best, and (through slick marketing) best-known wines. Some 70 percent of their bottles are now destined for export.

I stopped off on the recommendation of a photographer friend, Norbert Schiller, who with another friend and author Michael Karam, has just put together a coffee-table book "*Wines of Lebanon*" — the first book dedi-



Vats of grape mast are turned into wine at Chateau Massaya, one of Lebanon's newest wineries.

cated entirely to Lebanese wine. When I asked Norbert which vintner could cope with a quick, unscheduled visit, he sent me to Ramzi Ghosn.

In many ways, Ramzi is a typical Lebanese businessman — polyglot, stylish and a bit macho. But after a bit of conversation, and a glass of wine or two in his office, that impression quickly gave way to that of a man with a lot on his mind. It was harvest time, after all, and he was in his lab testing this year's grapejuice , on the first floor of the Massaya Chateau.

He agreed to see me, but as soon as he saw my business card and I began asking questions about Syrian migrant pickers, Ramzi quickly let it be known that he didn't want to talk politics.

"Our sales are not linked to the political situation," he said. "We have been affected by a slump in the local market, but since our exports are growing, we are focusing on the international and regional market. The only two countries in the region we don't sell in are Syria and Egypt."

"But I buy your wine in Damascus all the time," I said.

"Really?" he asked. "Right off the shelf?"

"Yes, and in restaurants, too. There are even

customs stamps on the bottles." I was a bit surprised that someone living so close to Syria had obviously not been over to Damascus in some time.

"What about the pickers?" I asked. "Has the political situation affected their availability for work?"

"Not that I can tell," he answered, looking at me seriously. "They move with the seasons throughout Turkey, Lebanon and Syria. What is affecting this harvest, more than anything else, is Ramadan. We have to change our schedule to accommodate their schedules."

It was something I had totally missed. The holy month of Ramadan follows the lunar calendar, and moves "backwards" in the Gregorian calendar by 11 days each year.

"Could I talk to some of them?" I asked.

"It would be difficult," he answered. "If you'll excuse me, I have to go and do something for about five minutes. Would you like to come and see some new areas we are planting in the North Bekaa, near Ras Baalbek?"

"Sure," I said. "We are going that way anyway."

After about a quarter of an hour, we left the chateau, following Ramzi's full-optional, gold-colored Dodge Ram pickup. As might be expected, Ramzi drove like a bat out of hell, a rate our small Peugeot 206 had problems keeping up with.

The hour-and-a-half drive to Ras Baalbek was a journey I had never made. In fact, I had not been north of Baalbek during all my time in Lebanon. Along the way, trucks packed with Syrian pickers, their *kuffayeh*



Migrant Syrian grape pickers can be seen herded into trucks throughout the Bekaa Valley every harvest season. To the left, a poster of Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah.

headscarves flapping in the wind, could be seen going this way and that. They were working after all.

When we arrived at the so-called “vineyard”, I was surprised to see a few hectares of land planted with vine cuttings only two years old. As Ramzi got out of his truck, he put on a hat and lit up a cigar. The hat reminded me of the moneychanger at Masnaa. As he walked through the small vines, I was struck by the breathtaking view around us. Hermel, a predominately Shiite-Muslim town, was nearly out of sight in the distance. Closer was Ras Baalbek, a predominately Greek-Catholic Christian town with Maronites and Shiite Muslims mixed in. Around us the countryside was a mixture of barren earth, hard as rock, mixed in with some tumbleweeds.

Ramzi began acting a scene straight out of *The Godfather* — without, of course, the violence.

“You know, I love coming up here, it’s my life,” he said, walking along, all hat and cigar. When I stopped to take a photo of him, I got the sense he’d wanted us to take photos all along. “These fields are experimental,” he said. “I don’t want anyone to know about them.”

Then why bring us here? I thought.

“If you look at maps from Roman times, this area was covered in vines,” he said. “But the climate has changed. Look at the earth now.” With that, he took a metal bar and got me to try and push it into the ground. It wouldn’t budge.

“So why plant here?” I asked. “Surely there are many other places in the Bekaa closer to your chateau.”

“Because to make a good wine, the vine has to suffer,” he answered. “Just like a woman in love.”

I wanted to roll my eyes heavenward, but didn’t. I



Ramzi Ghosn, partner in Massaya Wines, poses with hat and cigar in one of his “experimental” vineyards at an undisclosed location in the Upper Bekka.

knew Nietzsche’s saying, “What does not destroy me, makes me stronger.” My Lebanese colleague for the day blushed.

“You can plant vines anywhere. They grow, and you can make average wine,” he said. “But a vine that suffers is special; it takes in the land around it. And with that, you can make some really good wine.”

It sounded good, but not being much of an oenologist, I guessed the proof of the pudding, so to speak, would appear to me in a bottle sometime in the distant future.

As we said our goodbyes, I asked Ramzi what he knew about what people did for a living around these parts.

“Orchards and smuggling,” he said. “They float goods down the Assi River into Syria. But I doubt anyone will talk about that.”

Driving away, I began to feel a bit frustrated. How could such a beautiful place, full of light and so rich in vistas, be so dark when it came to human endeavors?

Descending down-mountain from Ras Baalbek, we did some open-field running toward Hermel. After about 30 minutes, a strange monument appeared on the horizon atop a nearby hill. As we got closer, it looked like a pencil had been buried in the earth, its sharpened tip sticking up about 30 meters above ground.

This was the “Pyramid of Hermel”, an ancient monument of unknown origin for which Hermel is famous. Compared with Lebanon’s Roman ruins, it’s nothing. But what it lacks in size it makes up in character. It’s not Greco-Roman, but is believed to be a tomb of a Syrian lord, or perhaps some monument to hunting. On all four faces are jagged reliefs of cows being attacked by wolves, as well as what look like lions and bears. All are surrounded by spears and arrows. It is estimated to be over 2,000 years old, but no one seems to be sure. Whatever the case, its unknown origin and subject matter give one a bit of the creeps, but remind us of how wild this area has always been.

From the pyramid, it’s possible to get a good look at the Bekaa Valley’s northern open mouth, which runs past the Syrian frontier into the city of Homs. It’s only when you’re near the monument, or looking at a relief map of Lebanon, that it becomes easy to understand why this is a smuggling route. For with the exception of the pass at Maysalun in the Anti-Lebanon mountain range, which today features the Beirut-Damascus road, there are no other easy passages into Syria that are not patrolled by either government.

As we left the monument, my companion said she was thirsty. So was I. We spotted the Assi River below, and around it some waterside restaurants with umbrel-

las advertising Laziza Beer. We stopped.

“Two colas, please,” I asked the attendant. The restaurant was deserted.

When he came back with the drinks, and while my companion was in the washroom, I asked him what people did for a living in Hermel.

“Farming and trade,” he said.

“I hear there is a lot of smuggling up here,” I said.

“Just a bit,” he said, looking away. A second later, he walked off.

Yet again, I was getting the cold shoulder. A few days before, a Lebanese newspaper reported that in Rahbe, a village about 40 kilometers northwest of Hermel, the Syrian Islamist “extremist” group, Jund as-Sham (Soldiers of Damascus), had distributed leaflets saying that anyone cooperating with the United States in Lebanon would be “slaughtered.”

Hermel is a medium-sized, predominately Shiite Muslim town with a scattering of Sunnis and Maronite Christians. While it looks agricultural on the surface, according to legend in both Lebanon and Syria, it is through these areas that a television or washing machine purchased in Lebanon can be smuggled into Syria. The system works, and involves little risk. After you buy the product and contact the smugglers, they show up at your door. After looking at the invoice for the new product, the smuggler gives you exactly what you paid for it in cash. The product is then taken away. A few days later, it shows up at your door in Damascus, where you pay the smuggler back the cash he gave you in Lebanon, plus “freight charges.”

By the time we reached Hermel sundown was night and time was rapidly running out. I stopped to ask directions from a man alongside the road. Two Maronite nuns were walking down the road along the hillside.

“Ahleen,” he said.

“How do we get back to the main road?” I asked.

“Just keep going straight — not a left nor a right.”

“How’s work these days?” I asked.

“Slow,” he answered, and walked off.

I shouldn’t have even asked. No one was talking, especially to foreigners. Everywhere in Hermel people could be seen strolling along roads or sitting in front of shops. Not much



The “Pyramid of Hermel” — a somewhat eerie monument of unknown origin on a hilltop overlooking the top of the Bekaa Valley.

work getting done here, we could see. I made a mental note to come back, as well as a resolution to do another ICWA Letter on the Bekaa; it was just too much territory to cover in one go.

Baalbek, Hizbollah and Hashish

Here I should stop for a moment and talk a bit more about Baalbek, and Hizbollah. A majority Shiite town with Sunnis, as well as a few Maronite Christians and Greek Catholics, Baalbek is home to some of the most spectacular Roman ruins in the region. Until the mid-1990s, the place was off the tourist track, since it served as a major center for Hizbollah. It was here, according to intelligence reports that, many American hostages during the Lebanon Civil War were imprisoned in often-horrid conditions by the Iranian *Pasdaran* — external intelligence. While tensions have lessened considerably and tourists now flock to the site in droves, large posters of Ayatollah Khomeini still dot the landscape alongside murals of Hasan Nasrallah, Hizbollah’s charismatic chief.

Hizbollah sprang out of various Shiite groups supported by Iran during the Lebanese Civil War. Some of those groups carried out terrorism and kidnapping campaigns against Americans during the war. It is at this part that the history gets quite blurry. According to Hizbollah, those factions that carried out hijackings, kidnappings and other attacks on American targets were marginalized long ago. According to Washington, which argues that the party is the fruit of a poisoned tree, Hizbollah remains a terrorist organization.

What Washington can’t question is that Baalbek’s ruins are stupendous. The site gets its name from the Phoenician temple dedicated to the god “Baal”; it was later renamed “Heliopolis” by the Greeks and the Romans. Following Alexander the Great’s conquest of the area, it was frequented by Roman emperors Pompey and Julius Ceasar, the latter of whom founded a colony named “Julius”. It soon became the premier city of the Roman province of Syria.

Today, Baalbek is best known for six massive columns that remain of the Temple of Jupiter — which stands on the original site of the Baal Temple. Adjacent to the temple to the West is the “Temple of Bacchus” — which is a bit of a misnomer, since archeologists have determined that the temple was actually dedicated to Venus / Astarte. Built in the second century AD, it is arguably one of the most beautiful Roman temples in the world. Lebanon’s viticulturalists claim it for Baachus (Dionysos to the Greeks), the Thracian god of wine who represents not only its intoxicating power, but also its social and beneficent influences. Supposedly a promoter of civilization and



Photo: focusmideast.com

The breathtaking Roman ruins of Baalbek — arguably the best in the Middle East.

peace, the cult of Baachus was in fact a fertility cult revolving around the idea of resurrection. According to the Baachus chapter of the book, “Wines of Lebanon”:

...resurrection, expressed initially through the agricultural cycle of sowing, growing, harvesting and feasting, came to idolize Bacchus introducing wine and possibly opiates into the ritual. Certainly poppy as well as grape carvings can be seen around the temple’s main doorway and certainly the Bacchic “rage” that the cults sought to emulate were a total (though not sexual, in spite of Bacchus’ apparent bisexuality) release, advocating the destruction of the social order and property as well as casting off inhibitions.

In any case, a visit to Baalbek is a wonderful example of just how quickly religious norms can fall in the face of hard currency. Today, some cafes even serve beer, and a few Westerners can be seen coming and going to the site. In fact, a stop at Baalbek is just like any other tourist destination in the Middle East, apart from the Hizbollah murals and charity boxes that adorn the site’s access roads. Shops selling tourist goods line the town’s streets, and residents are markedly friendly and easy-going. If only there were more opportunities like this in the Bekaa, perhaps the valley could shed its bad reputation.

I decided to take a stroll through Baalbek’s usually business tourist market. While the doors of every shop were open, you could count the number of tourists on one hand. Somewhat refreshingly, shop owners were not afraid to talk about their economic woes.

“Visitors are down, but we are surviving,” said one shop owner. “We used to have a lot of Syrian visitors here, but since Hariri’s death, and the blockade, we mostly rely on Western and Arab visitors now. The problem is, there are not as many Westerners around as there are Syrians!”

“I was going to expand my shop early this year,” said another shop owner. “Now all plans are on hold. It’s like this in Lebanon all the time. Just when you think that its

OK to plan something, something else happens and you have to wait it out.”

On another trip, this one with a journalist colleague from the *Times* of London, I journeyed to Yamouneh, one of Lebanon’s premier hashish growing regions. During the civil war, the Bekaa was full of hashish, as various factions raised, processed and smuggled the lucrative narcotic to fund their activities. Over the last decade, the Lebanese government has made considerable efforts to crack down on hashish farming, plowing under fields and building bonfires. The latest had occurred last summer.

Finding Yamouneh was easy, and the road was good. As we descended the hill into Yamouneh, I could see why these fields would be planted with hashish. The area is essentially a bowl cut into the hillside, not easily spotted by anyone. According to reports, the area’s climate is also ideal for growing the weed. It was long after harvest time by now, and the fields below lay bare, with the exception of a few gardens adjacent some houses.

At the entrance to Yamouneh, it became clear who was in charge. Hizbollah flags flew atop minarets, Hizbollah murals adorned walls.

Yamouneh is also famous for a grotto that, according to legend, extended through the hillside to Afqa, the Roman-pilgrimage site where Adonis was said to have been killed. In the spring, waters flowing from the grotto at Afqa run red, which is said to be his blood. On this side of the mountain, Roman ruins mark a temple, as well as what the locals call a large “tower.”

Not that anyone could tell that now. Over the last year, the Lebanese government has constructed an irrigation system that has more-or-less ruined the site. To the left of the temple is a large cement wall that diverts the water into channels that flow to the valley below. My journalist companion, who had been there years before, said it now looked like a different place altogether.

Hungry, we stopped at what appeared to be a restaurant below the wall, with a stream running through it. An old



The orchards and minarets in Yamouneh, interlaced with Hizbollah flags and hashish plants.



Roman ruins in Yamouneh recently destroyed by an irrigation project providing water to hashish field below.

woman and her daughter were working, one making white cheese, the other cleaning tubs of cut apples in the stream.

“Ahleen,” the old woman said. “Sit down.”

We took our seats in front of the old woman. She kept talking non-stop to us and her daughter. Some children appeared.

“Where are you from,” she asked in an accent I could barely make out.

“America and Britain,” I said, pointing to my friend last.

“Would you like something to eat?” the daughter asked.

“Definitely!” I answered.

Out came a huge plate of *makdus* (pickled eggplant stuffed with nuts), *lebneh* (a sort of sharp yogurt), bread, tea, and butter. A few minutes later, a plate of the white cheese the old woman was making showed up as well. Thus began a relaxed conversation that was a little like deciphering pig latin. The old woman’s accent was so strong, I had to think of words in classical Arabic that matched her parlance. We made small talk until a man appeared from their house. His hair was cut very short, and he sported an equally short beard.

“Ahleen,” he said. “Where are you from?”

The daughter chimed in, told him where we were from, and he gave us a friendly but reserved look. “What do you do?” he asked.

“Journalists,” my companion answered.

With that, things went a bit quiet. Determined not to

be frozen out once again, I pushed a little where I could.

“How’s work around here?” I asked.

“It’s OK. We have a lot of visitors in the summer-time,” he answered. “We raise trout over in that pool.” He pointed to a small cement house with a pool behind it.

I walked over, and to my surprise the pool was full of huge rainbow trout. As a boy in Pennsylvania, I spent hours fly-fishing, trying to nab fish half this size. I felt like getting a net. Their skins glistened, indeed like rainbows, in the autumn sun.

Coming back to our seats, I asked about the economy, and specifically about tourists.

“We get a lot, but they built this irrigation system here now,” the old woman said. “They ruined a lot, but we needed the water down below.”

Growing hashish takes a lot of water, and it seems that demand was coming from smokers more than from trout connoisseurs. Soon another man showed up. His hair was normal in length, his face tanned. It dawned on me that this guy looked like a farmer, while the owner of the place looked more like someone from Hizbollah. I didn’t dare ask.

Soon the old woman’s daughter brought out a baby dressed in a white, all-body suit made of terry cloth. He had big blue eyes that were set close together.

“*Aloush!*” the old woman exclaimed. I knew from my time with the Alawites in Syria that *Aloush* was a term of endearment for boys named Ali. The daughter sat the boy in a baby walker that allowed Ali to speed along, assisted by a harness and wheels.

The man with the short hair, Ali’s father, walked over to Ali and tied a black bandana around his head, reminiscent of those worn by Hizbollah fighters.

“*Al-Muqawamah!*” [The resistance!], my companion exclaimed. The father looked at us and grinned.

I waited for the other shoe to drop, and the father to ask us questions about what we were doing. But he didn’t say much of anything. In fact, he didn’t seem to do much of anything, other than watch his female relatives work. After a



Six-month-old Ali, complete with training wheels and a Hizbollah-like bandana — a mark of resistance to Israel.

few more minutes, he took a small rug off to the side in order to pray.

I asked the woman if everyone who lived in Yamouneh was Shiite.

“Yes,” she said. “We used to have some Christians here, but they moved over to Jounieh and Beirut, like twenty years ago. There is economic opportunity over there.”

That was during the Civil War, I thought.

It was all so low-key, and friendly. Here we were, in Hizbollah country, in the middle of Lebanon’s hashish-growing region, and no one seemed concerned at all. But just like the others, they were not saying much. We paid the bill, about 15,000 Lebanese Lira (\$10), and thanked everyone for the meal.

The father walked with us back to the car. “Come out again and stay longer, you can even sleep in the house,” he said.

“Next time,” I said with a smile, and drove off.

As we drove out of town and through the gardens, hashish plants could be seen growing everywhere — alongside roads with Hizbollah banners, in between corn rows, alongside electricity poles. The buds were huge. My companion looked at me and we laughed. A few years back, we might have stopped and cut a few for ourselves.

Looking ahead

Finding out what is going on in the Bekaa Valley might not seem like something that should be at the top of policymakers’ agendas in Washington. After all, the Wilsonian idea of the right of national self-determination means that local people have a better understanding of how to deal with local problems. Charles Crane believed that, and spent a considerable amount of time in the Arab World understanding how that might play out.

When Washington pressures a country like Lebanon, which is arguably still in an intermediate stage of nation-building, to enforce its “sovereignty” at the expense of historical commercial and trade patterns, and disarm “militias” that have ruled areas for longer than the national army, it would seem time and money would be well-spent to look at how the United States can better help regions in crisis. So far, the people of the Bekaa seem to be surviving. It seems obvious that Syria’s stringent border and customs procedures and efforts to combat smuggling are designed to strangle those parts of Lebanon most dependent on Syria in a bid to give the government in Beirut an economic headache that Damascus knows will eventually cause a political crisis.

If Washington’s plan is to clean up lawless places in the name of national security, it is going to have to do a lot more. Currently, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and other NGOs run programs in the Bekaa concerning crop yields and promoting exports. They probably see the export success of Lebanon’s wine industry as an example of how to orient an economy toward the West, and Western political goals. After all, US diplomats in Lebanon visit the same wine chateaux I do — although I am fortunate enough not to have to travel with an armed escort and file my schedule days in advance. U.S. diplomats in Syria are not allowed to visit Lebanon at all.

What can the United States realistically offer the people of the Bekaa in the long-term in the absence of that provided by Syria? Can hundreds of years of family, commercial and political ties be cut? Many in Lebanon and elsewhere believe possible UN economic sanctions on Syria would be a good way for Lebanon to finally “go it alone.” While it might be a window of opportunity, as long as political tensions reign supreme in areas where illicit activity is the norm, Washington needs to think more about the carrots and not solely about sticks. If they do not, something tells me the Bekaa and places like it will remain in the Twilight Zone. □

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