Atop a hill in Lebanon’s Iqlim al-Tuffah, a few miles north of the town of Nabatiyah, lies the Tourist Landmark of the Resistance, a Hizbullah-organized open-air museum that commemorates the Islamic resistance to Israel’s occupation. Visitors are shown a variety of exhibits, including a large pit called “The Abyss” containing remnants of Israeli tanks and weapons, and an underground cave hollowed out by the fighters for use as a bunker and command and control center. When this reviewer visited in late May 2014, a tour guide was on hand to provide commentary and answer questions. When asked why Hizbullah still retained its arms after Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, he insisted that Israel had not yet completely withdrawn; it remained in the Shebaa Farms and seven other Lebanese villages. Once they do withdraw, he continued, the “Resistance” would have no reason to keep its arms. A tour guide is hardly an organization spokesperson, but these comments underscore the continuing relevance of border disputes in the Lebanese-Israeli-Syrian imbroglio—the arena that between 1973 and 2006 arguably saw the heaviest fighting in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

To understand the background of such claims, readers are advised to consult Asher Kaufman’s new book about the history of what he refers to as the “tri-border region,” approximately 100 km² of rugged terrain at the intersections of contemporary Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. This region, a comparative backwater until the middle of the twentieth century, is largely mountainous, containing the Levant’s second highest peak, Mt. Hermon, as well as sources of the Hasbani and Jordan Rivers, and the rich farmland of the Huleh Valley. Previous works such as Frederic C. Hof’s Galilee Divided (1985) have examined the Lebanese-Israeli border dispute, and this book does not detract from their value; still, no other author has done more to look at the tri-border region itself. Indeed, part of the book’s content has been published in three journal articles in the Middle East Journal and one in the International Journal of Middle East Studies.[1] This work brings these insights and more into one volume.

The main contribution of this work is its rich empirical quality. To shed light on the struggle over borders, the author has consulted American, British, French, Israeli, and United Nations (UN) documents, along with some Arabic material. The book is theoretically informed, drawing on the academic literature of subjects such as border conflicts, sovereignty, borderlands, and state formation without necessarily seeking to contribute substantially to the development of theories. Indeed, Kaufman sees this area as different from most other cases of border conflict, due to its trilateral nature and the fluctuation of cross-border relations from cooperation to conflict. Other scholars will likely dispute this conclusion, but they will no doubt draw evidence from Kaufman’s archival work and analysis.

The book is divided into three parts. The first explores the history of the cartography of the region. Kaufman writes that producing maps of the area was never “a benign technical procedure,” but rather was used to expand the claims of the colonial powers and successor states to territory (p. 22). The first modern map of the region was an 1862 French map, which in 1920 became the basis for France’s Edict 318, which first declared the existence of Grand Liban. Yet, in an indication of just how much of the history of this dispute was marked by
sloppiness, the copy of the map in the French archives contained a mistake, identifying the tri-border meeting place between the British mandate of Palestine and the French mandates of Syria and Lebanon as the village of Ghajar, whereas the actual point was some three kilometers to the south at the Jisr al-Ghajar, or Ghajar bridge, dating from Roman times. The following year, the Paulet-Newcombe demarcation commission was formed to demarcate the border between the French and British Mandates. However, despite some efforts in the 1930s, France left Syria and Lebanon after World War II without completing a demarcation of borders between its two former mandates. Thus, while the location of the northern border of Palestine was relatively clear, the border between Lebanon and Syria remained problematic.

As in many other parts of the world, decolonization meant that the successor states inherited border issues that the colonial powers were unable to resolve. The new states of Syria, Lebanon, and Israel each had its own map-making authorities, but the line between Syria and Lebanon remained unclear. Tourist maps of Lebanon during the 1950s and 60s fudged the question of the location of the border, with one simply superimposing an image of the beach town of Batroun over the area. Syria and Lebanon discussed their common border many times throughout the 1960s, in part during negotiations on the diversion of the water of the nearby Wazzani Springs. One Lebanese map actually showed the village of Ghajar as divided, with a southern part labelled “Ghajar” in Syria and a northern part called “El Ouazzani” (previously not considered a separate village) in Lebanon. But there was never any agreement between the two countries on a border. After the 1967 war and the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, Israel produced new maps, now portraying Ghajar in Israel and “Wazzani” in Lebanon, thereby basing their claims to Syrian territory on the Lebanese map. In the 1970s, the UN tried to mediate an agreement between Israel and Lebanon over the exact location of the armistice line between the two, but the tri-border region between Metullah and Jisr al-Ghajar stretch remained unresolved, leading the UN to propose a “civilian line” that the two sides could agree on as a temporary measure. During the Lebanese civil war, which began in the mid-1970s, Israel became the “de facto sovereign of South Lebanon,” thus rendering the debate over borders unimportant until the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanese territory in 2000, when it would surface once again (p. 61). Though some vignettes, such as the story of the Syrian-Lebanese border negotiations during the 1960s, beg for further exploration, this section on the whole seems to provide a complete overview of the negotiations.

In part 2, Kaufman moves beyond the debate over the exact locations of borders to examine the history of this region from the 1924 until the Israeli military intervention in 1982. During the mandate period, which ended in 1948, the region had a large degree of cohesion, though conflicts often took place between neighboring villages and settlements, in many cases along religious lines. There were relatively good relations between Zionist settlements and nearby Shi’i villages. However, during the 1948-49 war, Zionist forces “cleared” much of the area of the Huleh Valley and the Galilee Panhandle of “any Arab presence” (p. 90). From 1949 until 1967, the border was officially closed, but in practice, it was porous. The UN Treaty Supervision Organization (UNTSO), created to monitor the ceasefire along the borders, spent much of its time dealing with errant livestock, who (perhaps to their credit) paid no attention to supposed location of international boundaries. The border was also a site for the smuggling of goods and weapons, including to both supporters of President Camille Chamoun and the Lebanese rebels during the 1958 civil war. During the 1967 war, Israel seized the Golan Heights and part of the territory of the tri-border region, establishing an observation post on Mt. Hermon in the days after the war ended. Prior to and during the conflict, most of the Arab residents of this area fled, and Israel moved quickly to establish settlements in the tri-border region at Kibbutz Snir and what would become Neveh Ativ, the latter on the ruins of an Arab village. Other repercussions of the war included an increase in Arab support for Palestinian fedayeen, who (though already present prior to 1967), began to grow in numbers in this region. Israeli incursions during the early 1970s resulted in the construction of a new “fence system,” as well as paved access roads into South Lebanon to facilitate future reprisal attacks. Despite the fighting, the Israeli and Lebanese militaries maintained a dialogue regarding border security through UN channels. All of this increased tensions in Lebanon that culminated in the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975.

While this section provides many insights into the history of the region, it is somewhat episodic at times. We are provided with detailed information about the appeal of Mt. Hermon for Zionist hikers who would often illicitly cross the border, occasionally facing detention, but little on whether the Arab residents had any attachment to their home villages—presumably they did. Also notably absent is a detailed examination of the impact of the South Lebanon Army (SLA), the Israeli-sponsored Christian militia that occupied the Lebanese portion of
the tri-border area from the late 1970s until 2000. The al-Khaim prison, where thousands of individuals were detained, tortured, and sometimes “disappeared” by the SLA, is just a few kilometers to the north of Ghajar. Did the SLA exercise military control or play a role in governing this area? Did it have a view on where the future border should be? Granted, it is impossible for one volume to cover every issue, but this group arguably deserves more than a few fleeting references.

Two chapters in this section address issues long associated with this region: water and the Trans-Arabian Pipeline (TAPLINE). The region has long been portrayed as having copious water resources, but as Kaufman convincingly argues, water cannot truly be said to be the source of the conflict. Rather, water has been “overused by governments as a tool to achieve unrelated political aims” (p. 129). Plans for water sharing among the riverain territories were created as a part of the 1937 Peel Commission report, while another was proposed by the United States in the 1952 Johnston Plan, but neither was accepted by the parties in the region. From 1963 (not 1964, as many scholars believe), Arab countries began to set in motion plans to affect the flow of water, drawing Israeli condemnation though relatively few military responses. Kaufman suspects that this was in part because although Israeli authorities treated these plans as an “existential threat” and “yet another chapter in a long history of persecution,” they knew that the Arab plans were unlikely to be realized for technical and financial reasons (p. 143).

The tri-border region (along with the Golan Heights) was the transit site for oil shipped to Europe from the Arabian Gulf countries via TAPLINE. Constructed from 1944-49, TAPLINE was a marvel of engineering, both technological and political, pumping crude oil over several mountain ranges to bypass British Palestine, perceived by Arab leaders as a threat even prior to the emergence of Israel. During the 1967 war, Israel occupied the territory through which TAPLINE passed. For a few years, the country allowed oil to be pumped across territory it controlled, even though Kaufman argues that this helped Arab countries to fund the military effort against Israel. But this was of little long-term importance. By the late 1970s, repeated attacks by Palestinian militants had crippled the pipeline, while new super tankers provided a cheaper and seemingly more reliable way to move petroleum. Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon may have been TAPLINE’s “kiss of death,” but it had already long been on life support (p. 163). Much of this story is well known, but Kaufman’s emphasis on the pipeline as an instance of tacit cooperation between Israel and the Arab countries is a new twist.

In the third part of the book, Kaufman focuses on the contemporary dispute over the Shebaa Farms and other border areas, attempting to elucidate the perspective of different actors involved. In 2000, Israel withdrew unilaterally from Lebanon, but involved the United Nations in its decision, resulting in the creation of the so-called Blue Line, behind which officials felt the Israel Defense Force would be secure. But this was soon followed by claims that surprised Israeli officials: the Lebanese government, supported by Syria and Hizbullah, claimed Lebanese sovereignty over the Shebaa Farms, south of the Blue Line. Kaufman suggests that the dispute is a “fabricated border quandary,” used by Syria, Hizbullah, and their allies in the Lebanese government to justify the maintenance of Hizbullah’s arms, which in turn provided Syria with a tool to pressure Israel regarding the Golan Heights (p. 168). While this claim may well have that effect, “fabricated” is perhaps too strong a word, especially considering that the author himself documents many claims by Lebanese citizens related to the Shebaa Farms, even prior to the Israeli withdrawal (pp. 170-175). Kaufman acknowledges that it is not just the Arab parties who manufacture claims. In his analysis, Israel held on to areas of the tri-border region not just for security purposes, but also to bolster its claims that it should not have to withdraw from other Arab land that it occupied in 1967. As for the United Nations, the author offers some praise for its work during the first decade of the 2000s, calling its proposal to administer the Shebaa Farms and Ghajar area temporarily “the best available option to alleviate some of the tension in the region” (p. 220).

This work’s painstaking attention to detail makes it extraordinarily valuable for scholars of Israel-Lebanese-Syrian relations and essential for those interested in border disputes between these countries. In some places, Kaufman may push his interpretation of certain facts too hard, such as in his repeated assertion that Lebanese “political elites in Beirut … never particularly cared about the periphery of the country or the extension of state sovereignty all the way to the borderline with Syria” (p. 35). Granted, the Lebanese government could have done more to demarcate the border, but with all of the obstacles that Kaufman cites—not the least of which was Syrian opposition—it is understandable why this did not occur. In addition, in a work that provides such extensive analysis, this reader hoped to find a clearer outline for a solution to the impasse. But with the chaos in Syria, an unchecked Israeli offensive in Gaza, and a
Looming dispute over exclusive economic zones in the Eastern Mediterranean, there is little call for resolution to the problems of a small area where few are dying at the moment. Yet as the tour guide’s words remind us, small problems, left unaddressed, can rapidly develop into large ones, making carefully prepared studies such as this one all the more important.

Note


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