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FSA turns guns on Lebanese village

NOW visits the scene of an unprecedented Syrian rebel strike on Lebanon that left one dead



The road from the northeastern Beqaa town of Hermel to the border village of al-Qasr doesn't feel like one leading to a bloody war zone. Lined on both sides with neatly cultivated olive groves, the green plains of the distant Homs basin gleaming under a pastel blue sky, the scene Tuesday morning was positively serene. Even the Bashar al-Assad posters and Hezbollah flags that tile the route from the central Beqaa to Hermel grew increasingly sparse as NOW neared the village.

Nor did al-Qasr itself feel like a place hit by lethal rocket fire just two days ago. Despite an army **statement** Sunday declaring its increased presence in the area, there wasn't so much as a routine checkpoint impeding our entrance. In the village center, all shops were open; adults and children alike going about their business as usual. It could have been anywhere in the Beqaa.

Except, of course, for the two crumbled walls near the main mosque, results of an unprecedented series of rockets fired Sunday by Syrian rebels that, for the first time, left one resident dead and up to nine injured (another was killed by the same attack in Hosh al-Sayyid Ali, a nearby village on the Syrian side of the border). The blood of 23-year-old Ali Hassan Qataya, light brown by now, still spans the width of the street where he died.

"He was just visiting," said a local resident who did not give his name. "He lived in Beirut, and came here to visit his fiancée."

Why, then, was Qataya killed? The Syrian National Coalition, the opposition body recognized by over a dozen countries as the representative government-in-exile, **said** Monday that "the Free Syrian Army was forced to respond to [the] repeated aggressions" of Hezbollah, whom it accused of carrying out "military operations on Syrian territory." Reports have long suggested fierce clashes between Hezbollah and the Free Syrian Army in the Homs province, with five Hezbollah fighters killed in Syria being **buried** just Monday. As a result, the Free Syrian Army has been threatening to attack Hezbollah positions inside Lebanon since **February**.

However, NOW saw no evidence of a Hezbollah military presence in al-Qasr itself, and indeed, the area where the rockets fell appeared entirely residential – a few modest breeze block homes surrounded by others under construction.

"They call this a military area? Show me the military area!" demanded another resident scornfully.

A clue also lies in the particular weapons used by the rebels. NOW sent a **video** purporting to show the rockets being launched to Eliot Higgins, the Syria analyst who gained international **renown** after uncovering, among other things, the use of cluster bombs by the Assad regime and a Croatian arms supply channel to the rebels (as first **reported** by NOW's Michael Weiss). Higgins told

NOW the weapons included 107mm and S-5 rockets (both launched from a homemade device), a 2S1 Gvozdika self-propelled howitzer, and a mortar. That the Lebanese army **confirmed** Qataya's death was the result of a 107mm rocket would seem to attest to the video's veracity (as does the rebel excitedly shouting, "To Qasr, to Qasr!" after one launch). Higgins further **unearthed** similarities in the equipment used in other videos by the "Omar Farouq Brigade," a possible relative of the Independent Farouq Division (IFD).

Significantly, Higgins described the weapons as "pretty indiscriminate" and "of questionable accuracy," suggesting that the rebels ran the risk of hitting civilians even if they were aiming at military targets. And there is in any case reason to doubt that they were, given what the IFD commander told AFP: "If we have to, we will target civilians just like [Hezbollah] do. Our civilians are not less valuable than theirs." Another rebel **vowed** to strike Lebanon again if the government did not "take practical steps to put a stop to [Hezbollah's] shelling."

Such a course of action could potentially take border clashes to levels yet unseen. The mayor of al-Qasr, Hassan Zeaiter, has publicly said essentially the same thing in reverse; namely, that if the government did not prevent rebels from attacking Lebanese villages, the villagers would "take matters into our [own] hands." In an attempt to calm the situation, the government has **declared** it will file a complaint about the strikes to the Arab League.

NOW met Zeaiter after leaving al-Qasr in his Hermel dentistry, where he complained of a government "absence" from the area.

"Look at all the kidnappings," he said. "Look at the pilgrims held in Aazaz. If we're going to wait for the state to help us, we'll be waiting forever."

A fast and charismatic talker, Zeaiter's photo of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah on his shelf proved a sound indicator of his political views.

"The people who fired these rockets are not from Qusayr. I lived in Qusayr, I know all the young guys there. These ones aren't even Syrians! I saw them on video, they're all Chechens, Afghans, Pakistanis. The people of al-Qasr and Qusayr are one; it's only the Jabhat al-Nusra foreigners who want to drive us apart."

Nevertheless, when NOW asked Zeaiter if he expected further rockets from Syria, his reply was optimistic.

“I don’t think they’ll do it again. The government sent a letter of protest to the Arab League, who are financing Jabhat al-Nusra. I think President [Michel] Suleiman is negotiating under the table with the Arab League so as to ensure there will be no more attacks like this.”

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