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## On the border of war



On February 20, an unexploded rocket was found in Hermel's al-Qasr village, in the eastern Bekaa Valley on the border with Syria.

It had allegedly been fired from Syria by the Free Syrian Army rebels to counter an attack from Hezbollah fighters. Two days later, the Free Syrian Army accused Hezbollah of invading villages inside Syria and issued an ultimatum to the Party of God to cease its operations in their country or face attacks on its installations in the Hermel region of Lebanon.

The ultimatum did not end with a war between the FSA and Hezbollah. But the stand-off did shed light on a battle between the Syrian rebels and Hezbollah fighters that has been going on for months in Syrian villages in Qusayr area, next to the Lebanese border.

A few days after the FSA ultimatum, Hermel was quiet, but residents warned that “many journalists [have been] arrested and expelled from these parts.” A resident told NOW that “Hezbollah is keeping this area under very strict control.”

Despite these warnings, the vice-president of the Hermel municipality offered a hot tea in his office and explained the situation. “The clashes happen in the border area, which is 12 kilometers away from the town,” he said. “We only had one incident until now, when two rockets fell in an inhabited area [in Qasr],” he added. The local politician, also a Hezbollah member, says he doesn’t believe that a war will come to his town, but that he thinks the situation will keep the tourists away during the summer.

The farm region of Hermel is known to be a Hezbollah stronghold, but according to Hermel’s elected *moukhtar* Talal Iskandar “there is no obvious military presence.” “People don’t go around with guns on the streets to be targets,” he stressed. “Other than the two rockets that fell in Qasr before the ultimatum, there were no other problems in our region,” Iskandar insisted. He said that two people were killed in the Shiite town of Hosh Sayyed Ali during the last six months by Syrian rebels shelling. “One from the Abou Bakr family and another from Hek family,” he remembered.

Hezbollah does not officially admit that it has been involved militarily as an organization in Syria. The party’s Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah [mentioned](#) in his speech last week that Hezbollah did not send fighters to Syria to protect Lebanese Shiites, but people themselves who mobilized to defend their homes.

“The armed [Syrian] opposition has taken control of the villages inhabited by Lebanese Shiites in recent months, chased them out, and burned some houses,” he said. He also stressed that the displaced had fled to Hermel, while those remaining in the villages “have taken up arms to defend themselves and protect their properties, which is their right.”

However, [according to ShiaWatch](#), a newsletter edited by the Hayya Bina NGO in Beirut, the village of Hosh Sayyed Ali, which is located adjacent to the Lebanese village of Qasr and where the two men had been killed, has become a veritable parking lot for artillery and other weapons trained on the Syrian rebels last summer.

A Syrian anti-regime activist, who spoke to NOW on condition of anonymity for security reasons, said that several cars transporting wounded fighters from Qusayr region, who had entered Lebanon through the farmlands of el-Qaa and Aarsal, were stopped last year at Hezbollah checkpoints erected in the Hermel area. “We were always harassed and insulted while transporting the wounded to Wadi Khaled [a predominantly Sunni area in North Lebanon which shelters Syrian refugees],” the activist said.

The Lebanese eastern border with Syria is mainly controlled by Hezbollah, with the exception of the area between the farmlands of el-Qaa and Aarsal, which are Sunni enclaves, known for their opposition to the Assad regime, as well as for fostering refugees and helping the rebel fighters.

Iskandar said that Hermel also hosts hundreds of refugees from Syria, but, he says, not all of them are Syrian. According to the *moukhtar*, there are over 25,000 Lebanese citizens who inhabit several villages inside Syria, on the border with Lebanon. “Some of the people living there are Shiite, some of them are Christian, and many are also Sunnis,” Iskandar pointed out. “They are not refugees. They have Lebanese documents and the international organizations don’t consider them refugees. When fighting intensifies, they come to Hermel. Most of them stay for a day or two and then they go back home,” he said.

There are, however, some Lebanese citizens living in Syria who have moved to Hermel indefinitely. Mohammad, a lawyer from Qusayr, rented an apartment in a new building behind the municipality house. He said he had to leave his house in Qusayr on November 25, 2011 after negotiating for four hours with a group of men who wanted to kidnap him for being Shiite.

“My friends and neighbors made a deal with those thugs and they let me leave. My friends drove me to the border and told me to stay in Lebanon,” he explained. “I saw this happening to many people in my area. Many Shiite men were kidnapped and killed by thugs, people who I knew as criminals wanted by the police,” the lawyer explained, asking for his surname to not be made public. “They won this battle, they made us leave!” he said.

*Yara Chehayed contributed reporting and translating to this article.*