

Age-old border smuggling takes on new role

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DBABIEH, Lebanon: As the Syrian uprising increases in length and bloodiness, the Lebanese-Syrian border has become a center of attention on both sides of the geographical divide.

The Syrian army has set up barricades to prevent smuggling, and regularly patrols there. But the boundary is hardly impermeable, and smugglers – bearing weapons, people and medicine – have simply had to find new methods and routes to transport their goods in both directions.

Since the borders themselves were established, the north has been known for its smuggling routes. Of late, it has become an especially fertile environment for this type of activity in part because those who live in the north, up until the edge of the Bekaa, are largely sympathetic to the Syrian uprising.

The transport is also helped by geography. The boundary that connects Jabal Akroum and the Kabir River is relatively flat, and so the villages in this part of Wadi Khaled – Kenayseh, Qarha, Hnayder, Haweik and Jabal Akroum – have historically been centers of illegal transfer and Syrian opposition groups who rely on smugglers say that this line is vital to their work.

Residents of the area also say that despite Syrian security measures, smuggling is very active on this part of the border.

However, the measures have pushed some smuggling to the crooked Kabir River, which marks the northernmost border between Lebanon and Syria. The villages near the river banks are further from each other than those in Wadi Khaled, and the river itself poses a challenge, although not insurmountable, to the smugglers.

According to smugglers who work on the Lebanese side of the border, there are at least two cross-river routes that are currently in use: the stretch between Adline in Syria to Lebanon's Noura al-Tahta, and that from Oyoun in Syria to Dbabieh in Lebanon.

The legal crossing of Abboudieh is also an option, but not convenient for illegal goods.

To bring goods across the river, the smugglers explain that they wrap weapons around and inside tires, and tie the stones to tires in the middle of the river. As they report nearly daily skirmishes and chases near the borders, they wait for relative calm to bring the tire and its booty to the other side of the river, be that in Lebanon or Syria.

Even the activity at these difficult river crossings has slowed down as the Syrian regime has strengthened its surveillance, but residents of Dbabieh, near the Kabir, still occasionally hear bullets from the Syrian army, attempting to thwart riverbank crossings.

When goods are smuggled into Lebanon, pickup trucks carry them from the river deeper into Akkar, where they sometimes cross the border again. According to one activist, there are more than 15 illegal crossings in Akkar, and most have been active since the borders were drawn.

One smuggler explains some details of his job, although he is loathe to reveal what he considers inventive trade secrets.

He says that the majority of illegal shuttling is of weapons and medical supplies, whereas in the past he trafficked largely in foodstuffs, various consumer products and household appliances. Work has picked up since the eruption of battles in Tripoli last month, he says, adding that on the Lebanese side smuggling operations have two stages, and two separate teams to carry them out.

The first team secures a place to store weapons and transports them to Lebanese border villages. The second takes them into Syria.

He is of the first category, and explains that the cost of moving an RPG launcher from the Akkar town of Halba to the river bank is now around \$50. Because he does not run guns across the river, he doesn't know how much this costs, but he does know that weapons are shifted from home to home, placed inside the river, and smugglers often take advantage of weaknesses in Syrian security apparatuses.

As long as those running guns have experience, the smuggler explains, the weapons are not difficult to move. The biggest challenge is medical supplies, which can't be left in the river.

Smuggling people, he adds, is as common as running guns. The price of bringing an important person into Syria, such as a fighter or a member of an extremist Salafist group, costs from \$130 to \$400.

But smuggling people into Lebanon is free, he says, for "humanitarian and moral purposes." He believes that this is "governed by religion – since most of the refugees are Sunnis."

The mukhtar of Kawishara in Akkar, Khodr Khodr, says that he knows of no smuggling routes between Lebanon and Syria.

He then backtracks a bit. "We hear of communication between the Free Syrian Army and its Lebanese supporters along the northern borders."

He says that villagers in Kawishara are caring for refugees, but have no connections with militant activities.

But "almost every night we hear the sounds of gunfire and RPGs," Khodr says. "We feel that there is movement on the roads but we can't confirm whether smuggling, of people or arms, is happening."