Orsal: The End of Lebanon’s Disassociation Policy?

How a few remote villages could mean trouble for Lebanon’s official stance on Syria...

On Friday, February 1, 2013, two Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) soldiers were killed—savagely according to some reports—and many others wounded under mysterious circumstances in the northeastern Bekaa village of Orsal. Official army reports explained that LAF elements were pursuing Orsal resident Khaled Humayyed in connection with his alleged role in the 2011 kidnapping of seven Estonians. Unfortunately, that hunt cost the lives of (Christian) Captain Pierre Bashalani and (Sunni) Sergeant Ibrahim Zahraman. Predictably, a number of other reports contradicted the official announcement.

According to eyewitness accounts (given primarily by women who were home at the time) Khaled Humayyed was about to leave home in his Toyota pickup when he was shot and killed by men wearing civilian clothes. Uniformed army personnel who arrived in official Humvees intervened after local residents attacked the individuals who actually killed Humayyed. Some Orsal residents believe Humayyed was slain in a raid orchestrated by Hezbollah. “All of us thought they were Hezbollah, because the two cars [they arrived in] were civilian and the people who shot him were wearing civilian clothes.” For its part, Hezbollah denied any involvement in the incident. Yet if the description given by the Orsal residents is true, then instead of pursuing Humayyed the LAF may have intervened on behalf of the assassins. Based on the numerous videos posted online, however, it is clear that when they were killed, Captain Bashalani and Sergeant Zahraman were in uniform, which conflicts with the witnesses’ observations. Importantly, none of the reports that have been made public give any indication of the fate of those who actually killed Humayyed.

Rather than clarifying the incident, however, the LAF and the Lebanese Army’s Directorate of Intelligence (DI) clouded it even further by providing contradictory statements. DI Director General Edmond Fadel claimed Humayyed was a member of the infamous Syrian jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusra, said to be associated with elements of al-Qaeda in Iraq operating in the Orsal area. Interestingly, except for Defense Minister Fayez Ghosn, that accusation was completely unsupported by other Lebanese officials. Similarly, in an al-Monitor article published the day after the incident, journalist Jean Aziz also claimed that Jabhat al-Nusra was in Orsal. Aziz also linked Humayyed with another incident that occurred in Orsal on November 22,
2011 between the LAF and Syrian rebel factions. Of course, it should be noted that Aziz is a regular columnist for Lebanon’s al-Akhbar newspaper, which like the English-language al-Monitor, is considered by local sources to be a Hezbollah medium rather than an independent and objective source of news.

In response to the soldiers’ deaths, the LAF implemented a series of measures including the deployment of several hundred special forces personnel in and around the village. Many Sunni and pro-Syrian revolution commentators speculated that the LAF’s reaction was both an attempt to save face and a means of collectively punishing Orsal’s residents. However, LAF Chief of Staff Jean Qahwaji denied reports that the army was besieging the town, characterizing the action instead as an effort to strengthen the army’s presence near the border with Syria. Owing to the Orsal incident, protests in support of the LAF were held simultaneously in several predominately Shia cities and villages in the south and the Bekaa.

In the weeks that followed, tensions continued to mount in Orsal before they eventually peaked on Friday, February 15 when nearly 100 demonstrators blocked a road with flaming tires to protest the presence of army reinforcements. In fact, Sunni leaders have differed on how they should respond to the incident, as many of the moderate principals are hesitant about providing too much support to potential Islamists. Though former Prime Minister Saad Hariri condemned the events, he also urged Orsal residents to cooperate with the military and stressed the importance of allowing “justice to take its course and [preserving] the image of the military institution.”

Prime Minister Najib Mikati, similarly reserved in his criticism of the incident, remarked that the Lebanese army enjoys political independence and stressed that the government, “completely back[s] the army and urge[s] the residents of Arsal to cooperate with it.”

Relative to the significance of Orsal, the town’s outskirts are known as the Jurd or ‘hinterland’, and boa the longest stretch of the Lebanese-Syrian border—approximately 50 Km—compared to any other location in Lebanon. Given Orsal’s extremely close proximity to (and enduring relationship with) the border, a number of conflicts related to the Syrian crisis have occurred there between the army and local residents. These prevailing tensions stem in part from the fact that the town hosts rebel factions and openly supports the Syrian revolution. As a result, residents generally view the LAF as a tool wielded by Hezbollah and by extension, as a State organization sympathetic to the Syrian regime—a position that runs counter to popular sentiments in Orsal. The town’s location leaves little doubt that events in Syria have indeed impacted the community. For instance, when Syrian troops fired on the town on May 29, 2012, at least one Lebanese citizen was killed. On September 22, 2012, elements of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) entered Orsal and allegedly attacked an army post.
Nearly a week after the incident, Orsal Municipality Head Ali al-Hujairi appeared on the television show Kalam al-Nass (“Voice of the People”). During the interview, he stated that the Syrian border has become so permeable that a person could go to Damascus for lunch and return without being bothered. Surprisingly, al-Hujairi’s description of the situation failed to attract much attention, an outcome that likely resulted from the media’s (vis-à-vis the public’s) predilection for focusing on the details of the incident.

For its part, the Lebanese media, from TV stations to online blogs, unleashed a veritable maelstrom of coverage that sought to tell “the truth” about the incident. Yet with Lebanon’s penchant for keeping the details of controversial events under wraps, we will probably never know what actually happened that day in Orsal. Since then, Lebanon’s political leaders appear to have been sweeping the incident toward the judiciary. But given the country’s silent rejection of the “rule of law,” such a result would all but bury any genuine investigation, as the judicial system (particularly the Military Court) is “rug” that hides contentious issues from the public. That function become more than apparent on February 11 when Military Prosecutor Judge Saqr Saqr charged 34 individuals for their involvement in the incident. Yet with Lebanon’s penchant for keeping the need not only for Lebanon’s government, but also for domestic and foreign observers to keep close watch on the border region. Although Orsal itself may be spared the ignominious and unfortunate “honor” of hosting pitched battles between the LAF and FSA, the latter continues to operate along other sections of the border that are under Hezbollah control—an avowed supporter of the Syrian regime. For instance, areas north of Orsal near the city of Hermel experienced significant clashes as recently as February 17, when at least three Hezbollah fighters were reportedly killed during border clashes with Syrian rebel factions. During the clashes in Lebanese villages virtually surrounded by twenty or so Syrian villages, Hezbollah fighters had occupied Lebanese Shia homes abandoned during previous conflicts. Surprisingly, a Hezbollah official admitted to Agence France-Presse that “two Lebanese Shiites living in Syria were killed and 14 others wounded in clashes with rebels.” The official obfuscated the remark, however, by saying that the Shia were killed in self-defense. Further, the FSA warned on February 20 that should Hezbollah maintain its presence in Syrian territory, the FSA would hit targets in Lebanon. “If Hezbollah does not stop shelling Syrian territories, villages, and unarmed civilians from inside Lebanese territory within 48 hours, we will respond with our arms to the sources of its fire and silence them inside Lebanese territory.” Clearly, rather than instigate any act that could cause a closing of the border, the FSA—at least at this point—is content to highlight Hezbollah’s enduring participation in the Syrian crisis.
The fact remains, however, that the Lebanese-Syrian border is a war zone. The stretch of border that extends from al-Qaa to Orsal is experiencing a “cold war” based on the will of the players involved and its geographic location. In contrast, the Hezbollah-controlled portion of the border north of the al-Qaa-Orsal line is enduring particularly “heated” combat. There, armed clashes occur frequently despite Hezbollah’s continued claim that it is not involved in the Syrian crisis. Even Ali Abdel-Karim Ali, Syria’s ambassador to Lebanon has denied any involvement by Hezbollah and characterized any claim to the contrary as “refutable.”

Clearly, the foregoing should reiterate the applicability of certain clauses in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, which helped restore calm to South Lebanon by ending hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel in 2006. Importantly, that resolution foresaw the importance of securing Lebanon’s border areas.

Kelly Stedem contributed to this article.

4 Ibid.
14 “Mikati: We completely back the army and urge residents of Arsal to cooperate with it.” Kataeb.org. 03 February 2013. http://www.kataeb.org/en/news/details/399952/Mikati%3A%20We%20completely%20back%20the%20army%20and%20urge%20residents%20of%20Arsal%20to%20cooperate%20with%20it