**Will the “Green Peace” in the Middle East be cultivated in the Shebaa Farms ?**
Matthieu Cimino – PhD Candidate – SciencesPo. Paris
matthieu.cimino@sciences-po.org
Syria Comment, May 1, 2010

 On July 13th, 2009, Fred Hoff, an American diplomat, developed an original ecological approach to the peace in the Middle East. The United States closely interested in the negotiations between Israel and Syria suggested, as a first step, the common administration of water and natural parks. Still, since 1967 no understanding has been reached between the two litigant parties and many Israeli-Syrian affairs remain sensitive issues – as the Shebaa Farms case, located on major hydraulic resources yet in the hub of a political imbroglio.

 In the eighteenth century under Ottoman domination, the farmers of Shebaa would have had no clue that one day their land would become the subject of a very thorny challenging question in the history of the Middle East and maybe one of the major issues to be solved for the normalization of relations between Israel, Lebanon and Syria.

 The farms of Chebaa are located on a small piece of land (16 sq.m) on the western slopes of the Hermon Mountains, at the extreme northeast of the Golan heights. To find those farms on contemporary maps, search for the ski resort of “Mount Hermon” which is 2814 meters at its highest point. You will also find many mechanical ski trails bear the David Star.

 On May 21st, 2000, a few days after the withdrawal of the Israeli forces from south Lebanon, Hezbollah continued its resistance to liberate the farms, considered as Lebanese territories by Lebanon, Hezbollah and Syria. Syria used these farms as direct leverage on Israel by its proxy in Lebanon, Hezbollah, and toward the Lebanese front. As a matter of fact, since 1967, Syria has not spared its efforts to recover the Golan heights.

 Israel strictly refuses to return the farms due to their strategic location on the basin of the Jordan River. The “eye of the nation”, as this land is called in Israel, constitutes a focal point and is a major driver of the Israeli economy. In July 2006, after a six-year period of violent skirmishes (while Hezbollah fired rockets on the Israeli territories, Israel reposted by air intrusions of the Lebanese airspace), the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah erupted. Meanwhile, the “33-days War” did not change the status quo.

**Roots of the Conflict.**

 The conflict resulted from a geographical error of history where on a single land many protagonists interfered including France, Lebanon, Syria, Israel (formerly Palestine), PLO of Yasser Arafat, Hezbollah and others during the 20th century. In 1920, France and the UK divided the ruins of the Ottoman Empire and created material frontiers between Lebanon, Palestine and Syria.

 Between 1920 and 1923, the two mandatory powers erased the imaginary frontiers separating their sphere of influence in order to ensure major strategic interests and benefits for major point; ex. France which was benefitting from water of the litany river. During this period, the eyes of France were riveted towards the south and ignored the east : the French-British frontier standing between Lebanon and Palestine was precisely drawn whereas no particular attention was given to the one separating Lebanon and Syria. Thus, Syria was shocked by the creation of the state of Lebanon and did not recognize it. Syria was still considering Lebanon as one of its provinces.

 The 14 farms of chebaa should be treated distinctively from the village of Chebaa located in Lebanon, northeastern of “Djebel ech-Cheikh” (Hermon Mountains), where an artisanal frontier was drawn. But, the problem is that the farms were located south of this summit attributing them to the Syrian territories. During the Ottoman Empire - administratively divided but not physically - the farmers used to pass by the summit, and during autumn regained their farms in order to cultivate apples and bread for their flocks for a period of four months. Artificially, a river (Wadi el-'Assal) separated the eastern part - which became later a Syrian territory - and the western one. Still, the frontier is demarked all over the summit by a geographical clear separation that was not taking into account the farmers who had to reach their farms on the opposite side of this natural delimitation line.

 Between 1920 and 1948, those farms were not a real problem despite some conflicts (sometimes violent) on the frontier between Syria and Lebanon. Joint commissions were established from both sides but were unsuccessful. Syria and Lebanon seemed not to be interested in this matter and each side accused the other ; meanwhile the French diplomacy tried to raise awareness on the importance of this issue.

 In 1935, the Commander in Chief of the special forces in South Lebanon, Captain de Bernonville foresaw the future by saying: “should any tension generates between Syria and Lebanon, this abnormal situation shall create a wide range of difficulties”1.

**1948: the beginning of the end for the farmers**

 In fact, the real conflict erupted in 1948, after the first Israeli-Arab war. Syria decided to take advantage of the situation and manifested an interest in the Shebaa Farms. The farms were a strategic asset and highly located so Syria decided to take progressive control over the zone. Officially considered as Syrian, the area was full of Lebanese farmers who considered that this parcel of land was de facto attached to Lebanon. Many Syrian teams performed topographical studies in the farms yet “unwittingly” moved the frontier markers and, in 1950, installed an advanced military observation post condemning the access for Lebanese soldiers.

 Since 1923, the Shebaa Farms have been deemed as Syrian land on military2 maps despite the fact that no Syrian inhabitant lives there. From both sides of the frontiers, the villagers considered the Wadi el-'Assal as the de facto frontier. The demarcation lines were not accurate and sometimes wrongly positioned3. In addition, Syria performed topographical studies by interspersing into these territories, even if they belonged to them de jure. In the fifties, the Syrians were de facto conscious that the Shebaa farms were Lebanese. In fact, Syria discovered the existence of such farms in 1948, when it needed to have a strategic location and not an agricultural one. Hence, Lebanese farmers used to pay taxes in the province of Marj'youn which proves - for the Lebanese authorities - that this land is a part of the Lebanese territories.

 The Syrian army took position in the Shebaa Farms officially in order to eradicate the traffic of sunnit farmers with Palestinians insurgents with whom Lebanese farmers had good trade relations before 1936 (Arab insurrection in Palestine). Many Lebanese traded equally with Jews in Palestine, and the Lebanese community in Haifa has thousands of descendants in Lebanon.

**Will Lebanon “be the second”?**

 The real problem of the Shebaa farms goes back to a more recent year, 1967. Israel was convinced that Lebanon “will be the second”4 party to sign a peace agreement with the Hebrew state (once Egypt or Syria take this initiative), thereupon it did not invade Lebanon but penetrated the Syrian territories (namely the Golan Heights) using Lebanese, Syrian and Israeli military maps. Still, Tsahal did not invade the official Lebanese territories, but broke into the Shebaa Farms officially deemed as Syrian lands. Israelis were persuaded that they had not set foot on the Lebanese territories but that they had only invaded Syria.

 This situation led to diplomatic imbroglios: in 1974, while planning the vote on the Resolution 347, the Lebanese delegation in the UN warned the United States that the Israeli army occupied a part of Lebanon near the Hermon Mountains. Lebanon claimed this land in an official document calling for the withdrawal of the Israeli forces from their land. Tsahal invaded the farms by referring upon Lebanese and Syrian ordnance survey maps – all of them pointed out the Shebaa Farms as part of Syria. Then consulted, the Israeli ambassador claimed that his country did not send any soldiers into these farms. This affirmation displeased Kissinger who asked: “what did they (the Lebanese) do ? They moved the frontier markers ?”5.

 From 1965, Palestinian commando groups – later expelled from Jordan – settled in the Hermon Mountains (it is said that Yasser Arafat himself used to sleep in one farm) and created the FatahLand, a state within the state which indirectly lead to the civil war of 1975 – 1990.

 Then, the Israelis imitated their Syrian neighbors and transformed the farms into a protecting buffer in 1978 (operation “Litani” and invasion of Lebanon). The Hebrew state invaded the farms progressively and gave them an Israeli cachet by installing road signs in Hebrew and transforming the zone into a military one. In 1981, the Knesset voted the nationalization of the Golan Heights. The Israeli army distributed ID's that were refused by the majority of the farmers, except 300 druze in lieu of the Syrian IDs’ distributed in 1950. In less than three decades some Lebanese had three different nationalities.

 In May 2000, the Israeli forces withdrew from Lebanon after 18 years of military occupation. A few days later Hezbollah, sustained by Syria, justified the continuance of “The Resistance” to liberate all Lebanese territories, namely those still occupied by Tsahal i.e. the Shebaa Farms. Hezbollah took advantage of the conflict around the Shebaa Farms and requested the withdrawal of the Israeli troops while the UN was striving for many years to find a solution between the parties.

 Between 1948 and 1956, Syria imposed a military presence in the hamlets and tried to make the farms Syrian lands. In May 2000, the challenges were no longer the same and even if Syria declared that the farms were part of its territory, the Israeli withdrawal still depended on the resolutions 242 and 338 - withdrawal of all occupied territories since 1967 - but not of the resolution 425 - withdrawal of south Lebanon. In the specific case of the Shebaa farms, if the withdrawal depends on UNSCR 242 & 338, then Lebanon cannot intervene as an independent actor; accordingly the claim of Hezbollah regarding the liberation of the farms will not be found on solid grounds. Symbolically, the chi'it movement would not have a justification to maintain its arms6 anymore. Thereafter, the whole Syrian pressure system in Lebanon on Israel would collapse.

 For Syria, it is absolutely essential that the Shebaa Farms be considered Lebanese to justify the claims of Hezbollah relevant to this strategic location. Without this small piece of land, the military legitimacy of “The resistance” shall be questioned – and this is partly why the conflict of Chebaa burst in May 2000.

**2010: A comprehensive and ecological solution.**

 At present, the contemporary situation can be summarized as follows: Hezbollah refuses to surrender as long as the farms are not returned to Lebanon. Lebanon also took this stand and is upheld by Syria which calls Israel to return the Golan Heights where these farms are located. Still, Syria alleges that it possesses documents showing that the farms are Lebanese territories, but does not produce those to the UN which is calling Syria and Lebanon to delimit their frontiers once and for all.

 According to Walid el-Mowallem, Syrian Minister of Foreign affairs, “Syria cannot delineate the border of the Shebaa Farms area because it is occupied. How could Syria carry out the task? By sending people in by parachute to do it?”.

 Therefore, Syria is using the Shebaa Farms by its Hezbollah proxy as a mean of pressure and action on the Lebanese-Israeli frontiers to retrieve the Golan Heights - including the Shebaa Farms, which is part of the Golan.

 Hezbollah and Syria are taking advantage of the historic error as a core matter to solve the conflict: should Israel return the Golan Heights to Damascus allowing Syria and Lebanon to draw their frontiers in the Shebaa Farms area. That would be the next Syrian-Lebanese step after the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in February 2009. The Golan Heights are still a focal point of the Israeli-Arab conflict. The return of the Golan to Syria is an ad vitam aeternam safeguard for the Syrian regime and a survival factor. Should the Israeli-Syrian talks governed by Turkey restart7 and reach a happy end, we can imagine the return of the Golan Heights to Syria under some conditions: for instance, in order to respond to the needs of Israeli colonists, the Golan heights may be leased to the state of Israel for many decades. Under Syrian sovereignty and in line with the peace process between Israel and Syria, the economic development of the Golan Heights will enable thousands of Israeli Jews to conserve their land and live commonly. This was the suggestion of Fred Hoff to Damascus at the time being: the Syrians will access the natural parks and other national Israeli reserves so that both countries would work to preserve the environment and water resources.

 This first-step trust is crucial to move forward8 and shall be followed by withdrawing weapons from the Golan Heights and ensuring a complete Israeli withdrawal.

 Then the Shebaa farms shall be temporarily placed under the UN administration before returning the same to Lebanon if Syria accepts to delimitate the frontiers with its neighbor Lebanon. Once a peace treaty is signed and the Golan returned, the Shebaa Farms will only be a detail. Then Syria will additionally benefit from a large financial aid from the US. The attention shall be shifted to Lebanon where we could fear a resurgence of tensions. Israel will claim for guarantees, first and above all dismantling the Hezbollah movement that will lose its logistic assistance, and the integration of it weapons shall be made smoothly with the help of huge American subventions to Lebanon in which society the Hezbollah is enrooted. It is a fact.

 Eastwards, Iran won't accept its major proxy – Hezbollah – to cut its benefits. In addition, Israel should reconsider the strategic value of the Shebaa Farms: 2,814 meters at its highest point - the farms host a pre-alert military base covering the Golan Heights, Tiberias, Tel-Aviv and even Damascus. At the time of Signal Intelligence9 (satellite observation), is a soldier equipped with goggles still a major element in the equation of war or peace even in height place? This strategic location did not prevent the war in July 2006, when the Israeli state took the initiative after its incapacity to prevent the abduction of two of its solders.

 Concerning the hydraulic reserves of the Hermon Mountains, (appr. 1 million cubic meter) the same are a strategic asset for Israel. Three tributaries of the Jordan River, Banyas, Dan, and Wazanni springs originate in the region. Another asset seems to be the quality of water provided in the Tiberias Lake cooling down the same and contributing to unsalt it. It is obvious that a regional peace treaty shall be governed by the same terms and conditions of the one signed with Jordan, i.e. water sharing - Lebanon has a profusion of hydraulic resources.

 In 1994, during wadi araba negotiations, water sharing was seriously discussed: Israel committed to provide 50 millions of cubic meters yearly to Jordan and to get 25% of the Yarmouk river, that was returned to Jordan. Applying such management of water resources between Lebanon (enjoying a profusion of water), Syria, and Israel (that lack crucially of this resource) would provide the world with an example that in ecology there can be a path to peace.

**Footnotes.**

1. Captain de Bernonville, Frontières libano-syrienne, Région de Banias, 1939, French Diplomatic archives of Nantes, Carton 449, Beirut, Political cabinet, 1st volume.

2. Many of these maps were hand-made by French intelligence officers. The first map was issued in 1862 and is available at the diplomatic archives of Nantes, special funds “Durrafourd”.

3. As almost all the Syrian-Lebanese border.

4. Sean Foley, “It would surely be the second: Lebanon, Israel and the arab Israeli war of 1967”, Middle East Review of International Affairs, Vol.9, Num. 2, 2005,

<http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2005/issue2/sean%20Foley%20pdf.pdf>.

5. Secretary staff conference, “Kissinger transcripts”, Digital National Security Archives, April 23rd, 1974, Secret Minutes, <http://acces-distant.sciences-po.fr/http/nsarchives.chadwyck.com/nsa/documents/KT/01114/all.pdf.p4>.

6. In theory, and practically, Hezbollah calls for the liberation of the “7 villages” and of the Lebanese-Israeli village of Ghajar. It also calls to support the Palestinian refugees cause and to liberate Jerusalem.

7. Barak Ravid, “Sarkozy’s advisers: Renewed talks between Israel and Syria unlikely”, Haaretz, April 3th, 2010, <http://joshualandis.com/blog/?p=6033>.

8. Marc Henry, “Washington for A Green Peace on The Golan Heights”, Le Figaro, July 13th, 2009.

9. SIGINT – Satellite Observation.

Many thanks to Nathalie B., Valérianne N., Anastacia Z., Sébastien J. and Marty S. for their precious help.