

Ghajar Divided Again

Written by Massimiliano Fiore

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MASSIMILIANO FIORE, JUN 13 2011

On 17 November, the residents of Ghajar, a divided village straddling the border between Lebanon and Israel, took to the streets to protest against the Israeli Security Cabinet's approval of a plan to unilaterally withdraw the Israel Defence Force (IDF) from the northern half of the village.

This move is only the latest episode in the unfortunate history of Ghajar.

Located on the north-western edge of the Golan Heights, it was captured by Israel from Syria during the 1967 War. When on 14 December 1981 the Knesset voted to annex the Golan Heights, it also offered Israeli nationality to Syrian citizens who had remained in the area after the 1967 War. But, while the almost 20,000 Druze living in the Golan rejected the offer, the 2,200 Alawite Muslims living in Ghajar accepted Israeli citizenship.

Following Israel's takeover, the village continued to grow wealthier and expand northward into Lebanese territory. But, after Israel pulled out from Southern Lebanon in May 2000, the UN created a human tragedy by drawing the border right through the village, leaving the northern half under Lebanese control and the southern half under Israeli control. Israel, however, reoccupied the northern half during the 2006 Lebanon War and has since then built a security fence around it to prevent Hezbollah from entering.

By pulling out from the northern part of the village, Israel will be complying with UN Security Council Resolution 1701 of August 2006, which called for Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon; but why now?

Some analysts speculate that the pullout is only "a way to bring something positive to the forefront, a gesture to the US and the UN" at a time when the collapse of the peace talks and the building of new settlements has led the Israeli Government becoming increasingly ostracized. They argue that a responsible withdrawal would have meant resolving questions about future access to public services in the interests of the residents, rather than letting them suffer to score some PR points. Others believe that it is a way to force Lebanon to hold up its end of Resolution 1701, one important aspect of which is the disarmament of Hezbollah.

No matter what Israel's real motives are, both the US and the UN have applauded the move. Yet, they seem to completely ignore the complexity of the situation and the wishes of the local residents.

Although the villagers consider themselves Syrians, they had hoped to remain united under Israel's sovereignty. Now, despite the assurances of the Foreign Ministry Spokesman that there is "no intention physically to divide the village", they are fearful that without direct consultations the move will permanently divide their community. The southern part is in fact indissolubly linked to Israel's ongoing occupation of the Golan Heights and is likely to remain under Israeli control for the foreseeable future.

Consequently, upon hearing the news from the media, they took to the streets and marched to the village's main square to protest. Hussein Khatib, the Secretary for the Town Council, read a statement in which he declared that the division, which would leave 1,700 people on the Lebanese and 500 on the Israeli side, is like "separating the son from his father or the daughter from her mother".

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The mosque, the cemetery, the school and almost 3,000 acres of land are in the south. Until now, the residents have been able to travel freely to other parts of the occupied Golan and to Israel proper, but they are scared that the division of the village will both separate them from their land and render it increasingly difficult for them to visit their families across the border. "If the Israelis withdraw, the UN will come here and start building a wall after a week or two. We know that" Khatib said.

He also forcefully reminded everyone that the village had never belonged to Lebanon: "It was Syrian, its people are Syrian and its land is Syrian". Damascus, however, is deafeningly silent over the matter for its own political and strategic reasons. The IDF's presence in Ghajar in fact allowed Hezbollah to maintain a military posture on the ground that the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon had not been completed and Syria supported Hezbollah in this interpretation of land ownership because it needed an area from where pressure could be exerted on Israel.

The local residents, however, do not wish to become Lebanese. They refuse any plan for annexation by the Lebanese Government because they know they would not have access to the same quality of public services. They are well aware that Lebanon suffers from water shortages and that water is provided from private tankers, that electricity is rationed and that generators are used even in Beirut, that gas is privately purchased in camping bottles, and that – though the country has among the best hospitals and doctors in the Middle East – there are still big disparities between the public and the private sector.

Moreover, the residents of Ghajar want to continue to work in Israel because they could not enjoy full civil rights in Lebanon. And even if they could, they would be regarded with great suspicion by the rest of Southern Lebanon's Shiite population, who are loyal supporters of Hezbollah, for being foreigners (they hold Syrian and Israeli passports) who collaborated for decades with the enemy.

In spite of all this, several members of the Lebanese Government continue to invite them to "put pressures on Israel to withdraw from the village" and to assure them that since they are "first and foremost Arab citizens" they will receive the same protection and treatment enjoyed by all the Lebanese people. Yet, this is precisely what the residents of Ghajar fear the most, something that nobody seems to care about very much.

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This piece was originally published on The Heptagon Post, a dynamic blog for news and analysis, covering politics, security, economics, life and culture.

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