

Another Mess of Sykes-Picot
The Seven Villages: Origins and Implications
Nicholas Blanford¹

The long-standing demand for the return of the “Seven Villages” from Israel was renewed recently by a senior Hezbollah official, revitalizing what surely must be the most obscure and misunderstood of all Lebanon’s many outstanding grievances toward the Jewish state.

In a meeting with ambassadors in Beirut, Nawaf Mussawi, Hezbollah’s international relations chief, said “The terrorist Zionist organizations moved back the borderline [between Lebanon and Palestine] from the one drawn in the year 1920 to the line drawn in the year 1923, and consequently Lebanon lost seven villages and 20 farms.” He added “We cling to our rights in combating the Israeli breaches and we are responsible for combating these aggressions.”

The Seven Villages lie just south of the present Lebanon-Israel border and were originally populated by Shia who initially found themselves in the French mandate of Greater Lebanon after World War I before being transferred to Palestine in 1924 following the demarcation of the international border.

The return of the Seven Villages has never featured high on the list of Lebanese demands of Israel, partly because it is the most difficult to realize. In 1999, then Prime Minister, Salim Hoss, briefly entertained the idea of dropping the Seven Villages from a list of demands issued by the Lebanese government in preparation for possible peace talks with Israel.²

Hezbollah, too, no longer relies on specific demands – such as the return of occupied territory – to justify the continuation of the Resistance. Hezbollah argues its model of resistance is a vital component of Lebanon’s national defense and the only reliable means of confronting future Israeli aggression.

Mounting a specific resistance campaign to secure the return of the Seven Villages – similar to Hezbollah’s 2000-2006 military effort in the Shebaa Farms – is neither practical nor politically expedient. The occasional references to the Seven Villages by Hezbollah figures should therefore be regarded in the context of the ongoing psychological warfare between Hezbollah and Israel.

But does Lebanon actually have a justifiable claim to the Seven Villages in the first place?

The origins of the Seven Villages lie in the lengthy and complex process of delineating and demarcating a new frontier separating the French mandate of Greater Lebanon from the British mandate of Palestine following World War I.

The process began in 1916, midway through World War I, when two civil servants, Sir Mark Sykes of Britain and Francois-George Picot of France, drew up a secret plan for the future disposal of the Middle East territories occupied by the Ottoman Empire. Part of the Sykes-Picot plan envisaged a line separating Palestine from Syria (which then included the future state of Lebanon) running from a point between Tyre and Acre on the Mediterranean coast in a gentle southeast curve that sliced vertically through the Sea of Galilee. The territory south of the Sykes-Picot line would be governed by Britain and international powers while the area to the north would be administered by the French.

At the end of World War I, the international element was removed and Britain took full control of Palestine. The British and French established military-run Occupied Enemy Territorial Administrations (OETA) covering Syria and Palestine. The line separating the northern French OETA and the southern British OETA was an amended version of the Sykes-Picot proposal. The OETA line began on the Mediterranean midway between Tyre and Acre, at Ras Naqoura, but ran more or less horizontally eastward to the northern end of Lake Huleh in the Galilee panhandle, thus granting Britain a slice of territory previously allocated to France under the Sykes-Picot arrangement.

Deliberations then began on drawing up a permanent frontier between Syria and Palestine. There were numerous competing interests involved which greatly added to the complications. The French were mindful of the expansionist ambitions of their Christian nationalist allies who wished to enlarge the Ottoman-era Mutassarifate of Lebanon (based on Mount Lebanon) to include Tripoli, the Bekaa and the South.

Britain's local allies were the Zionists to whom in 1917 the British government had pledged a national homeland in Palestine. The Zionists gazed with envious eyes at the water-rich land to the north of Palestine and sought to secure access to the lower reaches of the Litani River and the

headwaters of the Hasbani river in Mount Hermon. At the Versailles peace conference in 1919, the Zionists presented a proposal for Palestine's borders, the northern section of which would run from just south of Saida to Mount Hermon in the east. They argued that access to the waters of the Litani and Hasbani was essential for the economic well-being of Palestine.

In late 1919 and early 1920, Arab marauders attacked Jewish settlements in the Galilee panhandle, including Metulla and Tel Hai (known today as Kiryat Shemona). Out of security considerations for the Jewish settlers, the British and French agreed to include the panhandle in Palestine, but the French resisted further Zionist pleas for access to the Litani River.

The Zionists could expect no assistance from the British whose view of Palestine's borders were guided by the precept of "Dan to Beersheba," the Biblical delimitation of Eretz Israel – the Land of Israel. Dan, however, lies in the Galilee panhandle, southeast of Metulla, short of the Litani and far to the south of Saida where the Zionists had hoped the border would begin. The early Zionists were nothing if not pragmatic. A history of the Lebanon-Palestine border noted that while "British Protestant statesmen were thumping tables in favor of 'Dan to Beersheba', the Zionists were writing thoughtful boundary proposals based on security and economic considerations for what they hoped would someday be a Jewish state."³

In September 1920, General Henri Gouraud, the first French high commissioner, announced the birth of the state of Greater Lebanon. Three months later, on December 23, the British and French signed an agreement that defined the borders of the areas under their supervision in the Middle East. In March 1921, a joint British-French border demarcation committee was established. The British delegate, Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Newcombe, was experienced in mapping frontiers in the Middle East through his work with British intelligence before World War I.

The section of the treaty relevant to Lebanon describes the line from Banias (in modern-day Syria) to Metulla, "which will remain in Palestinian territory."⁴

The treaty continued, "From Metulla the frontier will reach the watershed of the valley of the [River] Jordan and the basin of the Litani. Thence it will follow this watershed southwards." This section refers to the stretch of border that today runs from Kfar Kila to Addaisseh and due south passing Markaba, Houla, Meiss al-Jabal and Blida.

“Thereafter it will follow in principle the watershed between the wadis Farah-Houroun and Kerker, which will remain in the territory under the British mandate, and the Wadis El Doubleh, El Aioun and Es Zerka, which will remain in the territory under the French mandate. The frontier will reach the sea at the port of Ras-el-Nakura, which will remain in the territory under the French mandate.”

The British and French used a map drawn up in 1881 by the Palestine Exploration Fund to help delineate the border. It was the most detailed map of Palestine at the time and five of the six named wadis are marked upon it.

Wadi Zarqa is a wadi system of about 11 kilometers in length beginning near Yarine and ending on the coast just north of Naqoura. It lies between two and four kilometers north of the present border. There is a Wadi Ayoun lying five kilometers north east of the border between Rshaf, Dibil and Beit Lif. However, it is an inconsequential valley, a small tributary of the larger Wadi Nafkha-Beit Lif system, and it is not clear why the British and French selected it as a reference point for the boundary line.

The third wadi on the Lebanese side of the line, Wadi El Doubleh, probably refers to Wadi Debbeh which begins north east of Aittaroun and feeds into the Wadi Salouqi-Hojeir system. On the PEF map, the wadi is identified as “Ed Dubbeh” suggesting that the treaty mis-spelt the correct name.

On the Palestine side of the boundary, Wadi Fara flows east toward the now dried up Lake Huleh in the Galilee panhandle and lies between two and five kilometers south of the border. Wadi Houroun does not feature on the PEF map but judging from local place names in Palestine, it could be the small valley beginning near the modern Israeli settlement of Shetula, opposite Aitta Shaab, which feeds into Wadi Kerker, the third of the named valleys in the treaty. Wadi Kerker flows westward meeting the sea two kilometers south of Ras Naqoura.

The rugged terrain made locating the watershed between wadi systems, which were separated by as much as 10 kilometers of meandering valleys, steep rocky hills and dense undergrowth, extremely difficult. Indeed, the commission was unable to locate Wadi Houroun and Wadi Ayoun.⁵ However, the process was mitigated by the December 1920 treaty granting the commission some latitude in defining the actual path of the boundary.

Newcombe undertook an initial reconnaissance of the border area in early June 1921, before the arrival of his French counterpart, Lieutenant Colonel N. Paulet. In a telegram to the British Colonial Office in London, Newcombe suggested that the boundary should respect local property ownership as much as possible.

“Bedouin tribes or native village lands should not be divided up. Hence the

Frontier will lie along the edges of villages or tribal lands and not always along the line described in the convention.”⁶

He added that from “Ras el Nakura to Baniyas [which includes all of Lebanon’s southern border with Palestine] there should be no difficulties in compensating either side by divergencies from the described line.”⁷

Paulet, however, had received instructions from Gouraud in Beirut to try and retain the Shia populated villages in the area inside Lebanon on the grounds that they were a natural part of the new country.⁸ If it was impossible to include them all, then several should be left in Palestine to prevent the isolation of one or two Shia villages inside British mandated territory. Gouraud’s reasoning appears to have less to do with the notion that Shia were intrinsically “Lebanese” (there being no Lebanon to which the Shia belonged before 1920) but more a recognition that the geographical division between Shia- and Sunni-populated areas corresponded closely to the delineation of the border.

Gouraud additionally recommended to Paulet that the boundary between Ras Naqoura and Metulla should run along the edges of village properties and as close as possible to the mountain crests indicated on the PEF map.⁹ The villages he referred to were Alma Shaab, Ramiyeh, Aitta Shaab, Rmeish, Sammoukha (a farm), Qatmoun (a farm), Yaroun, Aittaroun, Addaisseh all of which should remain in Lebanon; while Bassa, Yourdeth, Idmith, Terbikha, Fassouta, Sasa, Kafr Birim Salah, Malkiyeh, Kades, Pelideh and Hunin remain in Palestine. Terbikha, Malkiyeh, Kades and Hunin are four of what would later become the Seven Villages. Pelideh appears to refer to Blida, a village that remained in Lebanon, despite Gouraud’s recommendation, presumably because the bulk of its property was on the Lebanese side of the line.

While Newcombe does not appear to have been unduly troubled by the potential difficulties of demarcating the western half of the Lebanon-

Palestine border, he did recommend a significant alteration to the eastern section. He proposed handing back the Huleh Valley in the Galilee panhandle, which included the Jewish settlement of Metulla, to French administered Lebanon. His reasoning, which was shared by the British War Office, was that the panhandle suffered from a topographical disadvantage to neighboring territories and thus would be difficult to defend. The valley was overlooked from the east by the Golan Heights, from the north by the foothills of Mount Hermon and to the west by a towering escarpment.

Newcombe additionally noted that the Jewish presence in the panhandle was small (“Jewish interests which are present limited to Metulla consist of forty houses and two other farms”¹⁰) and that most of the territory in the valley was owned by Syrians and Lebanese who would resent the loss of their properties to another country.

“On the west [of the panhandle], live the Metwali [Shia], under their feudal chief Kenal [sic] Bey Assad; they are a very unruly lot and have no particular interest in being well disposed to Palestine in the Huleh. The north has more friendly and civilised beings in the large villages of Jdeidah [Marjayoun] (Christian) Khiam (Moslem) Hasbaya, where live many of the proprietors of lands in the Huleh.”¹¹

Gideon Biger, an Israeli demographer, interpreted Newcombe’s advocacy for his proposed amendment as a display of anti-Zionist sentiment.¹² However, from a military point of view, Newcombe’s objections to the Galilee panhandle are not without foundation. Israel has never been happy with the path of the border precisely because for much of its route Lebanon has the topographical advantage. That is why in the 1980s, during Israel’s occupation of South Lebanon, the Israeli military pushed the border fence deeper into Lebanon in several locations, creating annexed pockets of land that granted the Israelis the high ground overlooking the terrain to the north and west.

Nonetheless, to Newcombe’s frustration, the Colonial Office rejected his recommendation and insisted the boundary follow the path dictated by the December 1920 treaty. The Zionist movement had been aghast at the thought of losing the Galilee panhandle, along with Metulla, having already failed to win access to the cherished waters of the Litani. They were planning to drain Lake Huleh and the marshes to the north of it in preparation for the settlement of 30,000 to 40,000 Jews and to set up a

hydro-electricity plant on the Hasbani River. Britain's decision to reject Newcombe's proposals appears to have been based on its support for the Zionist project in Palestine which superseded any doubts about the panhandle's vulnerability.

One British foreign office official noted "Colonel Newcombe is rather sore at the way in which certain of his suggestions have been over-ruled and that he is inclined to take the line ... that too much attention has been paid to the interests of the Zionists and too little to those of the British government... Newcombe has been doing all he can for the British interests, but he did not yet understand that at this point in time the British interests include the successful outcome of the Zionist project."¹³

On June 24, 1921, Newcombe joined Paulet at Ras Naqoura to begin the actual demarcation of the border on the ground. Paulet was accompanied by 30 Senegalese troops and several Lebanese policemen. Newcombe borrowed six policemen from the Palestinian government and the party embarked upon their task. By July 8, the demarcation had ended with 38 neat piles of stone marking the border pillars between Ras Naqoura and midway between Metulla and Banias in Syria.

The new boundary was recorded on two hand-drawn maps accompanied by a detailed written description.

"Thence it [the boundary] follows the thalweg in a generally northern direction to cairn 26, situated where the thalweg is cut by the path from Kades to Aitherun. Thence it follows a straight line to cairn 27, situated 700 metres west-north-west of the village of Kades, near the large tree of Khirbet Menafir."¹⁴

The archaic language and references to landmarks long since disappeared speak of a more measured age, of creaking leather, brass instruments and horse sweat, very different from the satellite photographs and Global Positioning System measurements the commission's modern counterparts would use 79 years later to replicate the border as the "Blue Line" for the United Nations.

Despite Newcombe's confidence over the demarcation of the western half of the border, the commission made at least one mistake. In August 1940, the British army in Palestine conducted a survey of Border Posts 19 to 40 and discovered that BP22 had been placed incorrectly.¹⁵ It was located 500 meters north west of Saliha police station in Palestine when it

should have been sited 400 meters south of the building. Amending the border at that late stage would have left inside Lebanon part of the frontier fence erected two years earlier, a section of the border road and even a corner of the police station. The French agreed to leave the border post where it was but asked that BP 33 on Sheikh Abbad hill near Houla be moved a little to the east so that a gravel road would remain in Lebanon.

Israeli historians have suggested that the commission also made a mistake at Ras Naqoura and that the border should have terminated on the Mediterranean at Naqoura village two kilometers north of the headland.¹⁶ However, that argument appears to be based on a flawed description of the border's delineation in the December 1920 treaty which muddled the headland of Ras Naqoura with the neighboring village of Naqoura. The treaty says: "The frontier will reach the sea at the port of Ras-el-Nakura [sic], which will remain in the territory under the French mandate."

There was no port on the Ras Naqoura headland, but there is a port at Naqoura village. It is reasonable to assume that the treaty had intended the border to conclude at Ras Naqoura, rather than Naqoura itself, because the headland was part of the watershed between wadis Kerker and Zarqa. Gouraud's instructions to Paulet add weight to this view as he referred to the border beginning at Ras Naqoura and suggested that Alma Shaab, which lies four kilometers southeast of Naqoura, remain inside Lebanon.

The Newcombe-Paulet commission's work completed, the final documents were submitted to the British and French governments in February 1922, but they would not be ratified for over a year.

Meanwhile, as the demarcation process slowly unfolded, the administrative boundary between Greater Lebanon and Palestine remained the OETA line from the coast to north of Lake Huleh.

In March 1922, a month after the boundary commission had submitted its report, the French mandatory authorities in Beirut authorized elections for a Representative Council, the forerunner of the future Lebanese parliament, following the completion of a census. The census, the accuracy of which was highly questionable, covered the area south to the OETA line, which included the Galilee panhandle and the Jewish settlements there. Those covered by the census received identity cards stating they were Lebanese citizens and that they were eligible to vote in the elections for the Representative Council in April 1922.

Similarly, the British administration in Palestine stopped in the north at the OETA line. Although the British and French had been awarded their Middle East mandates as part of the peace treaty between the allies and Turkey at San Remo in 1920, the treaty was not ratified by the Turkish government. The British and French, therefore, governed their territories as acting mandatory authorities – with the OETA line remaining the administrative boundary – until the League of Nations approved the mandate in February 1923. The following month the Newcombe-Paulet-demarcated border between Greater Lebanon/Syria and Palestine was formally ratified by Britain and came into effect three days later, replacing the OETA line.

The final act came in April 1924 when around 24 villages and farms that had found themselves north of the OETA line but south of the new border were formally transferred from the jurisdiction of Greater Lebanon to Palestine – a total land area of 2,729 hectares.¹⁷ Of these, 12 were Sunni, two were Maronite, one was Greek Catholic, two were Jewish, six were Shia and one was divided between Shia and Greek Catholics.¹⁸

The six Shia villages were Terbikha, Saliha, Malkiyeh, Nabi Yusha, Kades and Hunin. The mixed Shia-Greek Catholic village was Ibl Qamh. Collectively, these villages today form what is known as the Seven Villages. All residents lost their Lebanese nationality and were granted Palestinian citizenship instead. However, there remains a lingering question over the validity of the Lebanese citizenship bestowed by the French in March-April 1922 on the inhabitants of Greater Syria north of the OETA line with Palestine. The British appeared to believe that Ottoman status still applied to them.

“At the present moment, the inhabitants of the territory to be transferred are Ottoman subjects and they will remain such after the transfer of territory to the Palestine administration. The only different [sic] would be that they would change French for British protection. It would appear to have been in the mind of the [Newcombe-Paulet] commission that these inhabitants have now French or Syrian nationality; but, so far as is known, Syrian nationality does not exist at present as a legal status, and cannot until the treaty with Turkey is made.”¹⁹

The peace agreement with Turkey, the Treaty of Lausanne, was reached in September 1923, seven months before the transfer of the villages from

Lebanon to Palestine. But the treaty was not ratified by Britain until August 2, 1924 and by France on August 25, 1924, four months after the transfer. The issue of citizenship, however, was a remote abstraction at the time to many of the villagers. Interviewed 11 years ago and asked how he would have described himself as a youth, Nimr Aoun, then a sprightly 84-year-old former resident of Saliha, said: “An Arab from Saliha. What else?”

Certainly, the residents of the area seemed more interested in pursuing the newly introduced tobacco cultivation than brooding over the vicissitudes of identity and citizenship.

“Most of the villages newly transferred to Palestine on the plateau west of the Huleh plain are inhabited by Matwalls [sic]. They gave us a friendly welcome and seemed to be on the whole well-disposed (here again the possibility of profit on tobacco growing was evidently a primary motive for their satisfaction).”²⁰

For the residents, the imposition of a new border and exchange of nationalities initially had little impact upon their daily lives, even though in many cases property owned by the same person lay either side of the new border. Despite the best efforts of the Newcombe-Paulet commission it had been “impossible to trace the frontier so as strictly to accord with the natural features of the country or the boundaries of individual properties.”²¹ The British and French agreed on a liberal system of border controls which allowed residents to cross the frontier with a locally issued permit rather than a passport.

During the Arab-Israeli war of 1948, the Shia residents of the Seven Villages met the same fate as their Sunni neighbors in northern Palestine and were driven from their homes. In Saliha, some 70 people were rounded up in the center of the village and machine gunned by Israeli troops, their bodies dumped inside the mosque and the building demolished.²² Some of the Christian residents of the area remained in Palestine, other Christians who fled were able to regain Lebanese citizenship within a few years.

The Shia residents of the Seven Villages settled in southern Lebanon or the southern suburbs of Beirut, and only gained Lebanese nationality in 1994. Since Israel withdrew from South Lebanon in 2000, Lebanon’s outstanding territorial grievances with Israel have focused on the Shebaa Farms, another victim of the cartographic vagaries of the mandate period. The Shebaa Farms, however, has the potential to be resolved without

significant and politically difficult alterations to the borders of Lebanon, Syria and Israel.

Lebanon's demand over the Seven Villages is territorial and therefore the validity of the claim is not dependent on whether the inhabitants were legally Lebanese citizens before being transferred to Palestine in 1924. There is no question, after all, that, citizenship aside, the residents were included in the 1922 census, were eligible to participate in the elections for the Representative Council and paid their taxes to the administration of Greater Lebanon. If it was a question of nationality only, the issue would have been resolved in 1994 when the villagers and their descendents were granted Lebanese citizenship.

On the other hand, Lebanon's claim to the Seven Villages is undermined by past precedent. Previous Lebanese governments have recognized the legitimacy of the southern border with Israel on many occasions, without raising objections about the exclusion of the Seven Villages. In 1949, the Lebanese government demanded that the Armistice Demarcation Line follow the international border, the same boundary demarcated by the Newcombe-Paulet Commission 28 years earlier. Similarly, UN Security Council Resolution 425 of March 1978 called on Israel to withdraw its troops from all Lebanese territory "within [Lebanon's] internationally recognized boundaries."

There is nothing to stop Lebanon and Israel from reconfiguring their joint border if they so wish in the future. But demanding a border amendment that would return the Seven Villages to Lebanese sovereignty risks offering Israel an opportunity to press for its own preferred adjustments to a boundary with which it has never been satisfied.

Meanwhile, the aging residents of the Seven Villages still on occasion visit the border that Newcombe and Paulet demarcated more than 80 years ago to gaze into the former Palestine at their long lost homes. From the summit of Maroun er-Ras hill, the ruins of Saliha are still visible between the Israeli settlements of Yiron and Avivim. And from the lofty heights of Sheikh Abbad hill overlooking the Galilee panhandle to the east, all that can be seen of Hunin are a few broken stone walls smothered by undergrowth.

¹ Nicholas Blanford is a Beirut-based journalist and author of *Killing Mr Lebanon – The Assassination of*

Rafik Hariri and its Impact on the Middle East.

² The Daily Star, December 22, 1999

³ Frederic C. Hof, *Galilee Divided: The Israel-Lebanon Border, 1916-1984* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985).

⁴ Franco-British Convention on Certain Points Connected with the Mandates for Syria and the Lebanon, Palestine and Mesopotamia

⁵ Gideon Biger, *The Boundaries of Modern Palestine, 1840-1947* (London: Routledge, 2004)

⁶ Lt. Col. S F Newcombe, British Commissioner, Anglo-French Boundary Commission to the Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, 13 June 1921. Patricia Toye, ed., *Palestine Boundaries*, Vol. 3 (Archive Editions, 1989).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Gouraud to Paulet, no date, FO 371/6393. Toye, *Boundaries*.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Telegram from Sir H Samuel to Mr Churchill 14 July, 1921 (Herbert Samuel)HCPal to SecStteCol 14-7-

21 No. 272. Toye, *Palestine Boundaries*

¹¹ Newcombe Report on the Huleh undated. circa June 1921. Toye, *Palestine Boundaries*.

¹² Biger, *Boundaries*.

¹³ Minutes from Mr JE Shuckburgh, October 17, 1921. Toye, *Palestine Boundaries*.

¹⁴ The Final Report on the Demarcation of the Frontier between the Great Lebanon and Syria on the one side and Palestine on the other side, from the Mediterranean Sea to El Hamme (in the Lower Valley of the Yarmuk) in Pursuance of Articles 1 and 2 of the Convention of Paris of December 23, 1920

¹⁵ Biger, *Boundaries*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Biger *Boundaries*

¹⁸ Asher Kaufman, "Between Palestine and Lebanon: Seven Shi'i Villages as a Case Study of Boundaries, Identities, and Conflict." *Middle East Journal* 2006.

¹⁹ Schedule of Suggested Amendments to the Draft Bon-Voisage Agreement between Syria and Palestine. Undated. circa June-July 1923. Toye, *Palestine Boundaries*

²⁰ Report on the Northern Border Rectification. April 11, 1924.

²¹ Foreign Office telegram, June 27, 1922. Toye, *Palestine Boundaries*.

²² The Daily Star, May 14, 1998. See also Operation Hiram Revisited: A Correction. *Journal of Palestine Studies* XXVIII, no. 2 (Winter 1999)