

“Shaping Lebanon’s Borderlands: Armed Resistance and International Interventions in South Lebanon” looks at how different actors are shaping the Southern Lebanese territory and how they are shaped by the borderland in return. Daniel Meier holds a PhD in Development Studies from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva. He is a research fellow at CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) in Grenoble and teaches at the University of Geneva. For several years, he has been researching issues such as marriage between Lebanese and Palestinians, as well as identity-building in Lebanon.

Rezension

Meier, Daniel (2016): Shaping Lebanon’s Borderlands:

Armed Resistance and International
Interventions in South Lebanon. London,
New York: I.B. Tauris (304 p.).

This book is a culmination of his extensive field research on Lebanon and embraces a holistic and multi-angle approach in analyzing this complex Lebanese region.

Meier studies South Lebanon both as a geographical area and as the source of an identity. He applies four different viewpoints: the Lebanese state, the Palestinian resistance, Hizbullah and United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). He adopts a dualistic approach, studying both the effect that the South Lebanese border has on the involved actors, but also how these stakeholders themselves influence and perceive the border. He dubs this “the shaping of the borderland” (p. 2). The book is divided into two parts. In the first section, Meier offers insights into the different historical perspectives of the border region in South Lebanon. In the first chapter, he follows the development of the public figure of the Palestinian resistance fighters (*fida’iyyin*) and analyzes how they themselves

and their image shaped the borderland. He links these definitions to their geographical context and describes how the border is used in the creation of the idealistic vision of the freedom fighter, which could spread transnationally and also influenced Lebanese activists in the civil war (p. 37). In the second chapter, Meier discusses the ascent of Israel's proxy militia group in South Lebanon, formed of local Christians. This non-state force rose to power during the civil war, receiving active support, training and equipment from Israel, in order to fight Palestinian resistance within the Lebanese territory. By taking advantage of the power vacuum, the de facto absence of the Lebanese state at its territorial margins pitted two non-state forces against each other. Chapter three details Hizbullah – the Shi'ite armed militia turned political party – rising to be the self-proclaimed and legitimized force of resistance against Israel and imperialism (p. 102). He eloquently encapsulates how the Islamic movement's ideology is entangled with South Lebanon as its vantage point. All in all, the book's first part offers an interesting insight into how the South became a quasi-anarchic space and offers room for competing narratives by non-state and external actors.

These narratives are expanded in the second part of the book. Each chapter in the latter part looks at the way the four aforementioned actors interact with the Southern borderland. Chapter four considers how Hizbullah uses “socio-political and cultural investments” (p. 123) to further their cause in the South and to legitimize their role as the armed resistance force. Meier analyzes the cultural and political significance of the museum ‘Mleeta’, and how it relates to its geographical surroundings. He embeds his analysis in the wider, historical development of Hizbullah and its tactical shift following the 2006 Israeli invasion, when local attitudes towards the Islamic movement began to change from positive to negative. The fifth chapter returns to the Palestinian population in Lebanon, and how they manage to circumvent the seemingly tight border to reach their homeland (p. 149). He distinguishes between those visiting Israeli territory during the ‘good fence policy’ era (p. 154) and those going to the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) through Jordan to meet up with family. He focuses on individual testimonies and the symbolic meaning that can be derived from them. Meier argues that Palestinians that were

able to cross the border experienced three types of effects: the reality of the difficulty to cross the border in Jordan and the impossibility of doing so directly; the symbolic reinforcement of the Palestinian identity by occasional crossings into the homeland; and the image of Palestine as the “unfinished dream, a perpetual quest” (p. 173). In chapter six, Meier first elaborates on how UNIFIL came to be and how its mission changed over the years, before focusing on the mediating role the organization plays between Israel and Lebanon today. He highlights the positive contribution UNIFIL made to the bordering process in recent years, mostly through setting up a mediation mechanism to solve everyday but potentially explosive issues (p. 190). The final chapter sheds light on unresolved issues stemming from a lack of national sovereignty, namely around maritime and aerial borders. As Lebanese maritime territory is expected to contain vast amounts of natural gas, interest in determining Lebanon’s borders has risen substantially. The last chapter also emphasizes that borders are not set in stone and that the meaning of borderland identity and narratives are subject to constant renegotiation between all actors involved.

Meier succeeds in fitting a complex region with many different competing narratives and dimensions into a 300-page book with a rich theoretical backing. He skillfully intertwines the concept of space and identity with the help of comprehensive historical and sociological analysis. By including the perspectives of non-state (Palestinian resistance / refugees and Hizbullah), state (Lebanon and Israel) and international (UNIFIL) actors, he paints a holistic picture of how South Lebanon is contested between many different forces. He manages to incorporate broader historical developments at the national and international level and gives a detailed account of Lebanese history, projected on a local scene. Assessing a geographical region with the help of competing narratives offers an alternative way of writing history. This is especially relevant for a country such as Lebanon, where a narrow elite seemingly determines history, leaving little room for other sources.

Nevertheless, the local Lebanese population remains marginalized and understudied in this tale of competing narratives. A more individualistic look at the local population is only applied in the chapter on Palestinian refugees. Such analysis could

have added another interesting dimension to analysis on the experiences of the local South Lebanese population, beyond their sectarian affiliation. Often, when analyzing Lebanon as a case study, researchers fall into the pattern of using sectarianism as the main theme, and thus end up neglecting other possible characteristics such as class or gender, consequently oversimplifying the local constituency. A similar analysis as the one applied to the Palestinian border crossers could be an interesting addition to the book, as South Lebanon should not be studied without taking into account the narratives of the local population. Also, the overwhelmingly positive account of UNIFIL in the relevant chapter fails to highlight the issue of lacking sovereignty and foreign patronage, and generally neglects the effects of foreign intrusion. This is particularly important to keep in mind in the Lebanese case, where sovereignty is fragile and a lack of trust in the state by the Lebanese population is further harmed by international intervention.

Meier analyzes South Lebanon as the battleground of four different actors, vying for dominance regarding territory and prevailing narratives. He positions South Lebanon as a place of war (between two states – Lebanon and Israel), as a place of refuge (for Palestinians), as a place of resistance (for Palestinians and Hizbullah), and as a place of intervention (for UNIFIL). His approach allows him to highlight how actors and space affect each other and jointly fabricate a spatial identity, which varies from actor to actor. The book constitutes a rich source of information for researchers of South Lebanon and of the actors involved. It is a must-read for anyone interested in recent and contemporary Lebanese and regional history.

Anja Grob