

A life in the hills: The herders' harsh reality

Elements and militants typify the perils for Lebanon's nomadic pastoralists

Finbar Anderson
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Above the town of Faqra, which boasts some of the most expensive real estate in Lebanon, a road winds up the mountain that gave the country its name. After the Lebanese Army checkpoint at the top of the hill it levels out and the landscape is barren but remains home to a community whose way of life is dying.

Badr Halimi has a tanned, weather-beaten face under the red and white keffiyeh he habitually wears that speaks to a life lived under the sun. Badr has been a shepherd his whole life. Every year, from March to November, he and his family come up from the nearby Bekaa Valley to the plateau to graze their herd.

They pitch their tents for the summer, and the 300 sheep are the main source of the family's income. "We make cheese, we make labneh and we sell it," Badr told The Daily Star. "When the lambs are born, we sell the males and weaker females for meat and keep the rest of the females."

With his thick brown beard flecked with streaks of gray, he talked about his life in the hills with a warm smile over his nicotine-stained teeth and deeply etched crow's feet at the corners of his eyes.

His customers are from the nearby towns, or from the Bekaa. "There are people who come up here to buy the milk and the cheese, from Hrajel or Faraya. Sometimes we go down there to sell it ourselves, or we go to Zahle or Baalbek."

He describes a tough, seasonal existence. Badr spends his days, and often his nights, outside with the sheep. He leaves home at about half past two in the afternoon, taking the herd to graze. He then often sleeps under the stars, and returns to his tent in the morning. "It's a hard life," he said.

Most of the milk the herd produces in the spring, with much less by the end of the summer. "In the winter we sell nothing. The milk has to go to the newborn lambs." During that time the plateau is uninhabitable but becomes popular with skiers and winter sport enthusiasts. Because of the snow, Badr and his family normally descend the mountain road and head for the border town of Aarsal, where he says his sister lives and he owns a house near the Syrian border.

In spite of the hardship, Badr says that shepherds like him and his family have been coming here for generations. His mother Hajar has been living this way since she was born - currently she lives with Badr's brother in the neighboring tent.

Badr and his family are part of a wider community of that he estimates includes some "more than 250 families across Mount Lebanon." However, he said that the community is also shrinking.

Despite its isolation, geopolitical developments in Lebanon and the region have a direct impact on the community, which is one of the factors he says contributes to their decline. When violence in neighboring Syria spilled over into Aarsal, which was briefly overrun by Daesh (ISIS) and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham -



Badr says shepherds like him and his family have maintained their profession for generations.

then known as the Nusra Front - in 2014, it became much more difficult for him to go home. He said that he hasn't been there at all in the past year.

For a while he said he sent his children to live with his sister in the border town so that they could go to school regularly, while he stayed in Ras Baalbek. Speaking shortly before the conclusion of the Lebanese Army's "Fajr al-Joroud" operation to drive militants out of the border areas, he said that even this became impossible and it made it difficult for the children to get a regular education. He added that the family used to receive support

from the UNHCR as part of its assistance for host the poorest host communities, but this later stopped.

However, he said that similar challenges have been overcome in the past. He described how, due to its strategic significance, the plateau was hotly contested during the Civil War. "There were mines everywhere," Badr recalled, "You had Army battalions, Palestinians, the Syrian army ... In the 1970s we lived up in the Cedars [near Bsharri]. We weren't allowed up here."

Even after the end of the war, he said it continued to have ramifications for the shepherds. He said that

once a sheep got away from him and stepped on a mine, which exploded. However, he said, the shepherds have managed to adapt. "We've been here so long, we know where the land mines are," Badr said.

Perhaps one of the main reasons for the community's gradual decline are the more permanent global developments. The way of life is getting easier due to better technology and increased connectivity with other parts of the country.

"Now, if we want to go get water, we can drive. Before, we had to go by donkey," the weather-beaten shepherd joked.

This improved connectivity has opened up new possibilities for the community. Badr said his nieces and nephews received a good education and have successful jobs elsewhere in the country. His uncle left some years ago to pursue a career as a university mathematics professor in the United Kingdom.

Naturally, he and others said they want the same for their children, which is why he says some are leaving. "I hope they do something else," Badr said of his kids. He has no such ambitions for himself, however. "I love the animals," he said. "There's no other life for me."

AGENDA

Public sector strikes

Across Lebanon
All day
The Union Coordination Committee, Labor Union and National Federation of Trade Unions will hold a general strike in public administrations, schools and municipalities to demand public employees be paid in line with the new salary scale.

The role of cultural heritage conference

Riviera Hotel, Manara
Sept. 25, 10 a.m.
A workshop entitled "The role of Material and Intangible Cultural Heritage in Promoting Intercultural Dialogue and Sustainable Development" will be held, organized by the Lebanese National Commission for UNESCO in cooperation with the Danish Committee for UNESCO and the Danish Associated Schools Network and under the patronage of Culture Minister Ghattas Khoury.

Parliamentary committees meet

Parliament, Nijmeh square
Sept. 25, starting at 11 a.m.
The subcommittee of a joint parliamentary committee, headed by Atef Majdalani, will meet to discuss amending the Social Security Law and the establishment of a pension and social protection system. At noon, the National Defense, Interior and Municipalities committee will hold a session chaired by MP Samir Jisr to study a proposal that some municipalities should be exempt from some obligations.

Sorting waste workshop

Khreibeh, Akkar
Sept. 25, noon
A workshop on sorting waste will take place in the municipality of Khreibeh, organized by the French NGO ACTED.

Hasbani holds news conference

Health Ministry, Bir Hasan
Sept. 25, 12:30 p.m.
Deputy Prime Minister and Health Minister Ghassan Hasbani will hold a news conference to launch the 3rd International Conference of Medical Bioengineering in the Arab States, hosted for the first time in Lebanon.

Seminar on Lebanese land

Order of Engineers and Architects Office, Cola
Sept. 25, 4:45 p.m.
A seminar on the division of Lebanese lands will be held at the invitation of the Order of Engineers and Architects under the patronage of Public Works and Transport Minister Youssef Fenianos.

Protesters demand action on kidnapped journalist

By Timour Azhari
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Dozens of demonstrators gathered Sunday in Downtown Beirut to demand government action to rescue missing photojournalist Samir Kassab.

"We are here to press the government to resume speaking about Samir Kassab so that his case doesn't lose priority against other [issues]. There are a lot of things that are being given more importance, and we ask them to take [his] case seriously," Kassab's mother Maggie Kassab told The Daily Star.

Protesters included family, friends, the head of Lebanon's Press Syndicate and others who held signs calling for Kassab's swift return and the government's intervention on his behalf while lamenting the four year wait for news on his case.

"President Michel Aoun promised us that he would work on Samir's

case, and we are saying that we have faith in him," Kassab's mother said.

The protest was held at Samir Kassir square, named after the outspoken Lebanese journalist who was assassinated on June 5, 2005. According to demonstrators, the location of the protest was chosen to intentionally highlight the significance of Kassab's case.

"We are here in this place, where we shouldn't be, for two reasons, the first is that Samir Kassab and Samir Kassir hold the same name, the second is that both are martyrs," said Boukhos Assaf, the former mayor of Kassab's ancestral village of Hardin.

Assaf added that Kassab should have been, and had the right to be, included "in the negotiations between the Lebanese government and kidnapers of the [Lebanese Army servicemen]," referring to the recent cease-fire deal with militants at the end of the "Fajr al-Joroud" Army offensive against Daesh (ISIS)

that included the return of bodies of slain soldiers. "We ask the Lebanese government ... where is Samir Kassab?" he said.

The former mayor criticized what he said was the Lebanese government's inaction on the topic, saying that it was "undermining the worth of citizens, and doesn't acknowledge a mother's tears, or the broken heart of a father, or the mercy of God."

Kassab's brother, George, also spoke, saying that those who kidnapped his brother should talk to him, his family or General Security head Maj. Gen. Abbas Ibrahim.

Kassab was kidnapped four years ago along with his Mauritanian Sky News colleague Ishak Mocrat and a Syrian driver while working near Aleppo on assignment.

Protesters last demonstrated in front of the U.N.'s ESCWA building in downtown Beirut in February, asking U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to press for Kassab's release.



Protesters criticized the government for not including Kassab in negotiations during the "Fajr al-Joroud" offensive.

Sidon strives to be disease-free, hosts health awareness event

By Mohammed Zaatari
The Daily Star

SIDON, Lebanon: A plethora of health-related activities and awareness campaigns took place in Sidon's old souk Khan al-Franj Sunday.

South Lebanon's Sidon is one of the first municipalities to host a city-wide health campaign, as part of a new health project entitled "a city free of disease."

"Disease is not scary if you discover it early," Nour Arnaout, an organizer of Sunday's event, told The Daily Star.

The project was orchestrated by Amalouna, an NGO that works to promote cancer research and prevention, in cooperation with the Hariri Foundation for Sustainable Human Development, the Global Health Institute of the American University of Beirut, the charitable fund Champs Fund for Young Hearts and Athletes Health, as well as the Naef K. Basile Cancer Institute.

Health associations, private clinics and civil society organizations participated as well. The day raised awareness of diseases such as cancer, obesity, diabetes, the dangers of smoking and alcohol and the benefits of exercise and nutrition.

Sidon MP Bahja Hariri, who represented Prime Minister Saad Hariri at the event, said, "We are very proud of Sidon, and these activities will help it become a city with no disease. It's important to raise awareness with people of all ages."

Khan al-Franj was divided into "wings" similar to those typically found in hospitals, with every wing dedicated to a different activity. There was a wing for children, where they could learn about childhood development, as well as the benefits of exercise and healthy food through fun activities.

One wing was dedicated to the heart, where attendees could test their blood pressure, EKG, which checks for signs of heart disease.

Another wing focused on cancer, where doctors talked about the many types of the disease, their symptoms and early warning signs.

One wing aimed to highlight the dangers of smoking and debunked the myth that nargileh (water pipe) is not harmful. According to the doctors at the event, one nargileh is equivalent to 120 cigarettes. Nutrition had a wing of its own, with experts explaining what constitutes healthy food, and why people should avoid foods with lots of chemicals, sugar, salt or fat as large amounts can have negative impacts on one's health. The organizers teamed up with restaurants in Sidon who provided healthy snacks and drinks.

Eligible attendees could also donate blood on the spot with The Lebanese Red Cross. Arnaout said that society as a whole needs improved awareness of diseases, nutrition and healthy lifestyles. "We included kids, companies, schools, commercial businesses so our message can reach all of Sidon," she said.

IPT LAUNCHES Quantum

THE NEW ECONOMICAL AND ECO-FRIENDLY FUEL

As part of IPT strategy to enhance the quality of its products and services in Lebanon, develop them further and keep up with the highest Lebanese and International standards, IPT launches a new advanced Gasoline product exclusive to IPT stations: «Quantum».

«Quantum» transforms the regular gasoline into a superior fuel that meets the needs of the 21st century. The formula of «Quantum» is a mix between a high-quality gasoline and a cutting edge additive developed by Total, a specialized company in this field. This is what differentiates «Quantum» that contributes to:

- Fuel economy
- Power & responsiveness
- Engine protection
- Less pollution

«Quantum» also offers exceptional deposit clean up, better combustion, less noise, and an improved driving experience.

«Quantum» has the performance level of World Wide Fuel Charter's (WWFC) highest categories and has undergone a series of tests conducted by specialized European laboratories on different car brands.

This initiative affirms IPT's commitment to its clients' satisfaction and its relentless effort to exceed their expectations. This makes IPT stations distinguished by their modern look, and new products and services. IPT remains the first to embed sustainability into the core of its strategy by putting its customers first, and taking initiatives that reduce emissions and fuel consumption.

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