

BEIRUT TRAIN

Trains ran from Beirut over the mountains to Damascus for the best part of a century. The line was completed in 1895 and it was the first railway built anywhere in this region. Services came to an end during the period of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) and never recovered afterwards.



The Beirut-Damascus line emerges from the Barada gorge near Souk Wadi Barada, close to Damascus. Image probably 1960s.

Brian Walling

September 2020

DEDICATION

This photo-essay is dedicated to the people of Beirut, in the aftermath of the catastrophe which devastated the lives and livelihood of so many of them on 4 August 2020.

I was extremely fortunate to have spent some time in Lebanon during the era that many remember as the “golden age of Beirut”. That was early in my career and was a relatively short time, but it nevertheless left me with deep and unforgettable memories of the country and its people, as well as its culture and history. I have followed the news from Lebanon ever since then.

The catastrophe of 4 August 2020 prompted me to search out and renew contact with my Lebanese partners of half a century ago. It also revived many of these old memories. Among these memories was the Beirut-Damascus railway, which I frequently saw in action when I travelled the highway from Beirut over the mountains to the Bekaa Valley. This has prompted me to retrieve a number of old notes and materials on the railway from my archives and to edit and update them into a brief photo-essay on this remarkable piece of Lebanese history. It is hoped that this will contribute to the many memories of the railway held by several generations of Lebanese and visitors to Lebanon.

During my time in Beirut, I worked from an office at the top end of Rue Foch, in the old commercial heart of Beirut, near the old souks and close to the Port (only 1,000m in fact from the site of the 4 Aug 2020 explosion). I thus became familiar with the old city centre. I stayed initially in Minet El Hosn close to the Phoenicia and old St Georges hotels, not far from the Rue Foch office. I later moved to the Hamra area (at that time the very fashionable, western-oriented area of cafés, cinemas and entertainment) and lived in a building facing the old Commodore hotel.

My interest in railways in fact dates from my secondary school days in England in the mid-1900s, when I attended a boarding school that boasted its own railway station on one of the main lines from London to the south coast and where steam trains of an earlier era could still be seen passing the school every day.

Brian Walling, September 2020

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BEIRUT TRAIN

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The Beirut-Damascus line emerges from the Barada gorge near Souk Wadi Barada, close to Damascus. Image probably 1960s.

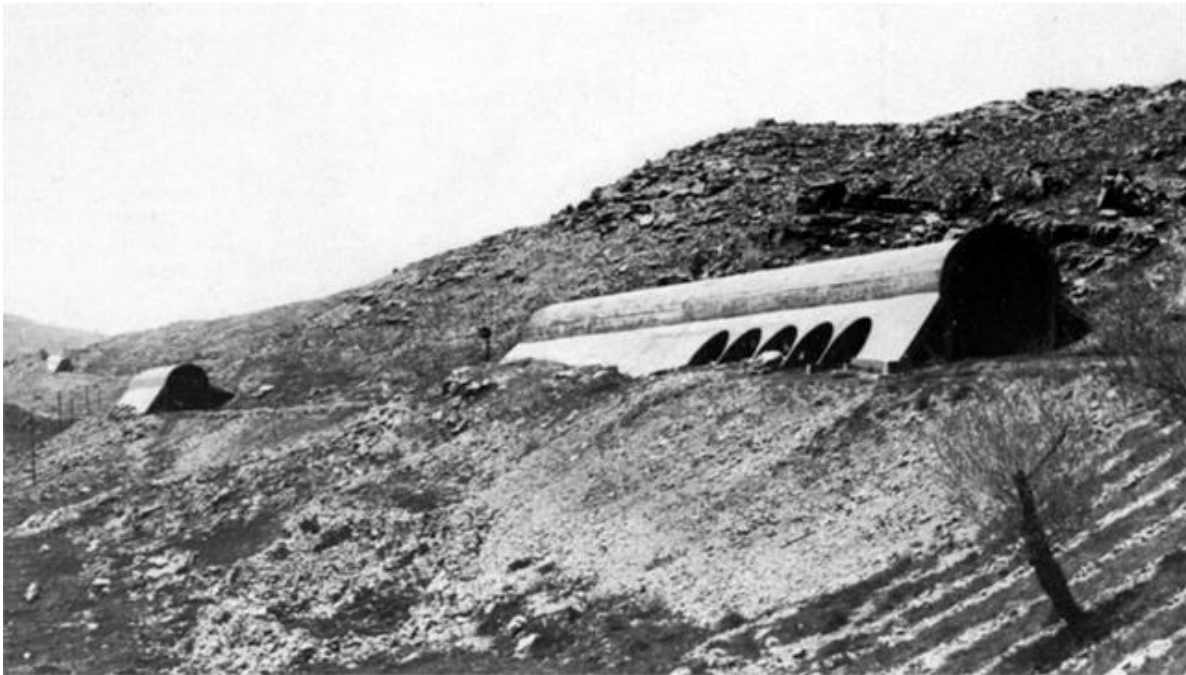
Many visitors to Beirut in pre-Civil War (1975-90) days had the chance to see the trains in action on those parts of the track that ran close to the Beirut-Damascus highway at the Beirut end of the route.

ROUTE AND TERRAIN

The route was difficult. Only 80km (50 miles) separate Beirut from Damascus in a straight line. However, Beirut at sea level and Damascus at 700m (2,300 ft) are separated by two major mountain barriers which rise to 2,000 -2,500m (6,500 – 8,000ft). The final track length between the two cities, taking maximum advantage of the terrain to avoid unnecessary climbing, was around 147km (91 miles), almost double the direct distance.

From Beirut, the first stage of the route was a fairly brutal direct assault on the first mountain range, the Lebanon Range, there being no convenient diversions around or through this range. The track, starting almost at sea level by Beirut's port, wound its way laboriously up through the mountain villages of Aley, Bhamdoun and Sofar, never deviating far from the main highway heading the same way, to the pass at Dar Al Baidar. This, only 37km from the start, is at 1,520m, just short of 5,000 ft.

The station at the Dar Al Baidar summit was, during its lifetime, the highest railway station in the Middle East at 1,520m or 4,987ft. The tortuous track up to Dar Al Baidar included two reversing spurs at Chouit-Araiya and Aley, 16 and 19 km respectively from the start, where the trains reversed direction and gained altitude in a zigzag manoeuvre.



Snowsheds, protecting the track from snowdrifts, near the summit at Dar Al Baidar.



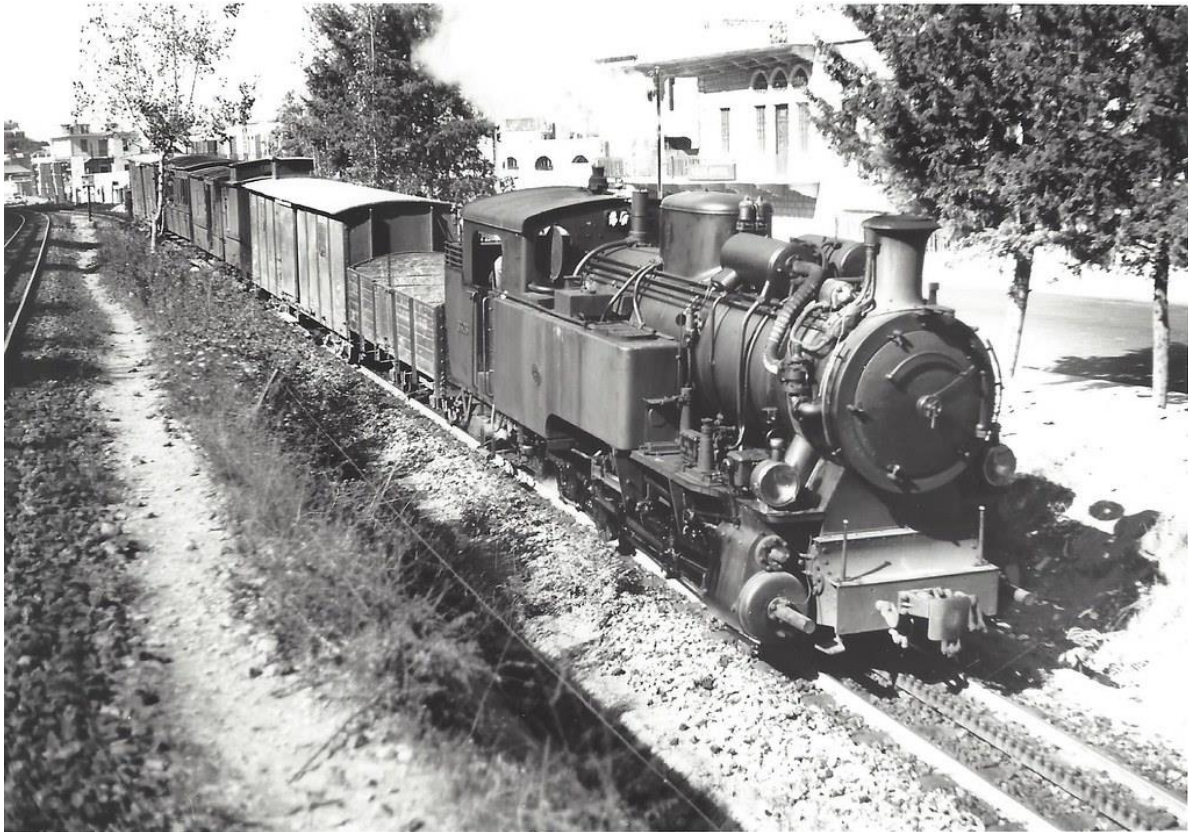
The station just below the summit at Dar Al Baidar, seen in 1960, looking east towards the summit and the Bekaa Valley and showing a mixed passenger and goods train.

After Dar Al Baidar at 37km, the track descended diagonally and steeply down the escarpment for 8km into the Bekaa Valley and then a further 22km along the flat valley floor to Rayak.

Most of the track from Beirut up to Dar al Baidar (37km) and down onto the valley floor at Chtaura (another 8km) was equipped for rack & pinion traction (*traction à crémaillère*), due to the severe gradient. Locomotives serving the Beirut-Rayak section were thus equipped with rack and pinion capability.



The reversing spur at Chouit-Araiya, 16km from Beirut and 550m (1,830 ft) up, seen in the 1950s. The track climbs at top left after arriving from below just to the right of that.

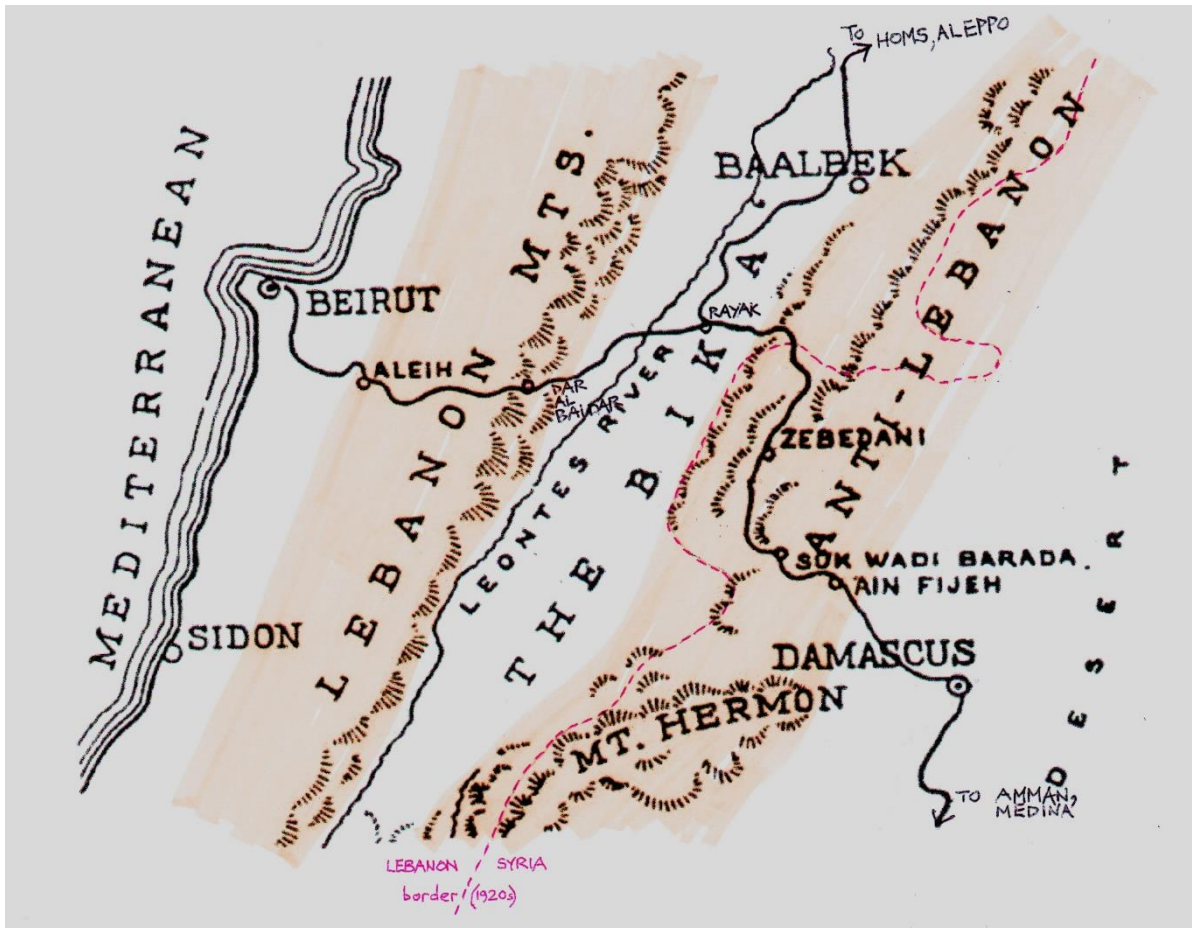


Rack and pinion track seen in 1955 at Aley station, 19km out and already 800m up from Beirut.

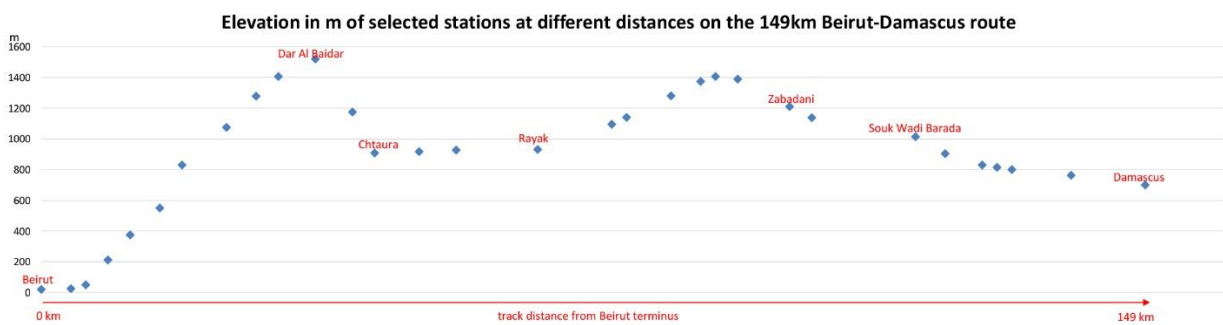
Locomotives were changed at the 67km point at Rayak in the Bekaa Valley. The onward 80 km stretch of the journey to Damascus was served by regular locomotive. This second half of the Beirut-Damascus route was nevertheless also challenging and followed a winding route through canyons and alongside rivers through the Anti-Lebanon mountain range on the other side of the Bekaa Valley.

Rayak on the floor of the Bekaa Valley is at 931 m (representing a 600m or 2,000ft drop from the valley escarpment at Dar Al Baidar). Damascus, on the other side of the second mountain range, the Anti-Lebanon Range, is at 700m. The passage through the Anti-Lebanon Range did require a gradual climb as high as 1,400m and then a gradual descent to Damascus, but it had nothing like the gradients of the first section with its severe climb out of Beirut. See the map below and the diagrammatic representation of the gradients that follows it.

A hard paved road from Beirut to Damascus was completed by the French in the 1860s, reducing the journey time to about one day. However, especially with the advent of motor vehicles, this soon became very congested – a fact that helped to generate interest in a rail connection between the two cities. The need to provide a convenient and reliable route for merchandise from Beirut's port to the interior of the Levant and beyond was the prime driver of interest in a rail connection at that time, rather than a need for a better passenger route. Potential competition from other nearby growing Mediterranean ports, such as Haifa and Jaffa in Palestine, was also a concern to the commercial interests who benefitted from the transit trade through Beirut Port. Thus for most of its operating life the Beirut-Damascus railway, as well as the other associated rail lines in the region, served a mix of freight and passenger needs. Trains often consisted of a mixture of passenger carriages and goods wagons.



Old sketch map of the Beirut-Damascus railway route (with additional annotations by the author)



Schematic view of the gradients over the 149km Beirut-Damascus line. Heights are in metres above sea level. Note (i) the steep direct climb out of Beirut over the Lebanon mountains, (ii) the drop to the Bekaa Valley floor at Chtaura, and (iii) the easier gradients on the route through the Anti-Lebanon mountains

HISTORICAL NOTES

The railways described in these pages were planned and built in the 1890s (Beirut-Damascus) and expanded in 1900-1912 (the branch lines Rayak-Homs-Aleppo and Homs-Tripoli).

At that time, the whole eastern Mediterranean region was – and had been for centuries – under control of the Ottoman Empire based in Constantinople (Istanbul). This lasted until the empire collapsed after defeat in the 1st World War (1914-18). See map below for historic and final extent of this empire.



The countries that we now know as Lebanon and Syria plus others nearby did not finally become independent nation-states until after the 2nd World War (1939-1945) – although the separate territories of Lebanon, Syria and Palestine started to become identified as such immediately after the 1st World War, which had seen the defeat and final disintegration of the old Ottoman empire. At that point “mandates” were granted by the new League of Nations to France (for Lebanon and Syria) and Britain (for Palestine, Transjordan and Mesopotamia) to oversee those countries’ progress to full, independent nationhood. France and Britain had colluded and manoeuvred extensively to secure these mandates for their own colonial/political interests. See mandates map below. On the map below, Mesopotamia is labelled Iraq, the name of the independent state that eventually emerged.



Mandates granted by the new League of Nations to France and Britain in 1920, to assist the previously Turkish-controlled territories to establish themselves as independent countries.

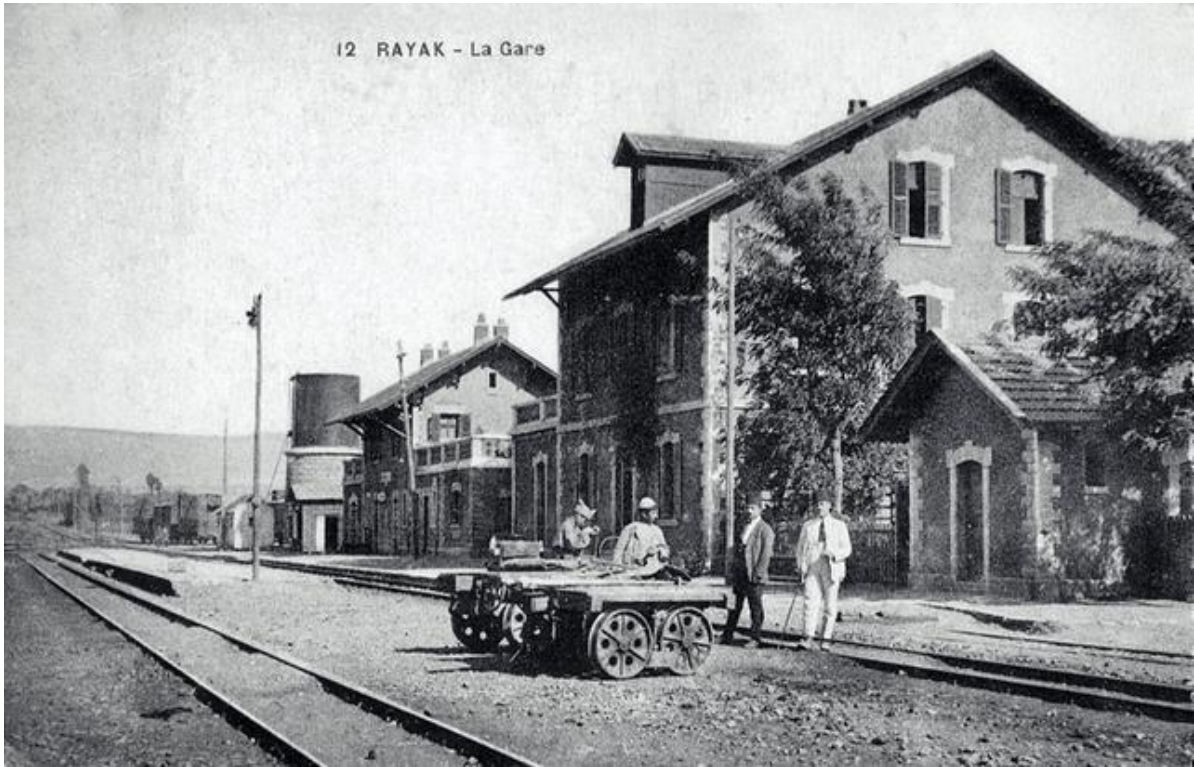
Thus the railways described in these pages came into being when there were no international boundaries on the ground to consider.

EXPANSION AND DEVELOPMENT

The Beirut to Damascus track was narrow-gauge, but 1.05m wide, rather than the usual width for narrow gauge of 1.00m. This was due to the influence of Turkey, the controlling power at the time, which saw advantage in having this line follow the unusual 1.05m gauge of its own military rail network.

Rayak, on the Bekaa Valley floor, became the headquarters, workshops and locomotive construction depot of the Lebanese railways. The original locomotives were of Swiss design, from the locomotive works at Winterthur. Some German locomotives were also acquired. However, it seems that locomotive construction soon became localised at the Rayak works.

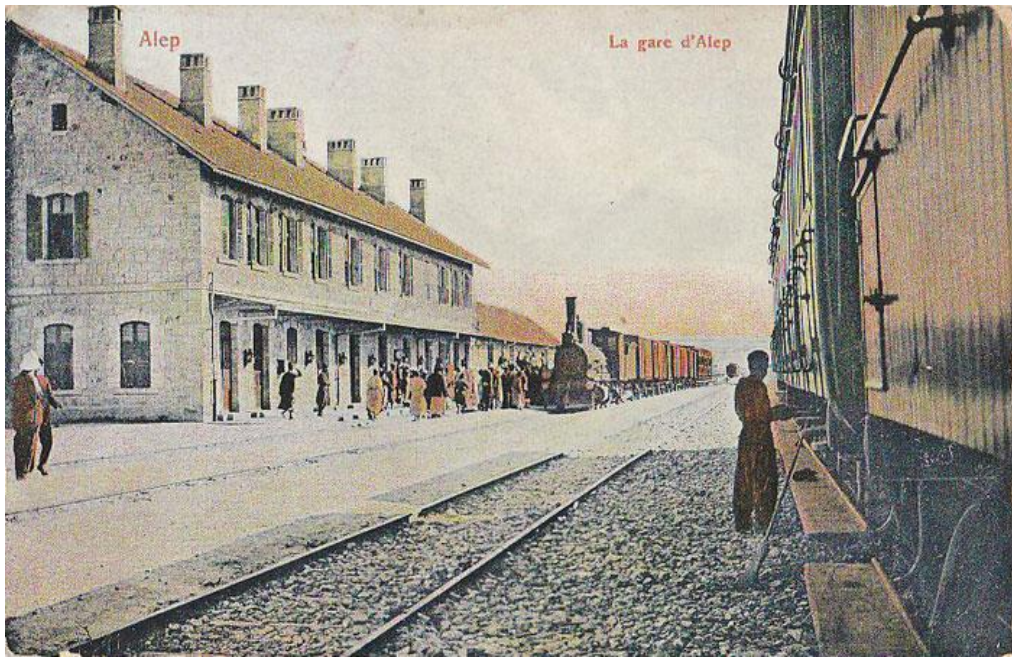
It also became an important railway junction when a 300km branch line to the north was completed eleven years later in 1906 (this time standard gauge, 1.435m or 4ft8½in), up the Bekaa Valley and on to Homs and Aleppo (both in today's Syria). This would later on provide a connection to the Ottoman standard gauge rail network coming down from Constantinople (Istanbul), across Turkey to Aleppo and then onwards from Aleppo to Baghdad and the Persian Gulf.



Rayak station, looking east towards the Anti-Lebanon mountains, 1920s,



The abandoned Rayak train factory today



The original Aleppo railway station, where the branch line northwards from Rayak terminated, in a view around 1910, looking south-west back towards Homs and Rayak. A much grander new station was built 1,000 metres north-east along the track to serve as the terminus of the Ottoman line from Istanbul when that line was completed to Aleppo in 1912 on its way to Baghdad. The original station above (whose buildings no longer survive) was subsequently known as the French Railway station, while the newer, grander station (whose buildings are still intact today) became known as the Baghdad station.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

B03523

Aerial reconnaissance photo of Aleppo, looking east, taken at end of the 2nd World War in 1918. The 1906 original Aleppo station (marked French Railway Station) is just left of centre. The track from Homs and Rayak approaches from bottom right. The 1912 main Aleppo station (Baghdad station) with its yards and outbuildings is further up the track at top left. Aleppo's celebrated Baron Hotel is the large building situated on the other side of the road immediately above the area of darker vegetation towards top, just right of centre. That road runs left and then down to the main station.

INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

The standard gauge branch line northwards from Rayak to Homs and Aleppo was finished in 1906, a couple of years before the Hejaz Railway line was completed from Damascus southwards to Medina (in today's Saudi Arabia). So, once the Ottoman rail line from Istanbul was completed to Aleppo in 1912, for a while it was possible to travel by train all the way from Europe through Constantinople/Istanbul, down through Turkey to Aleppo and Homs to Rayak/Beirut and then – changing to the narrow gauge line – across to Damascus and (for a short period) a further 1,300 km south from Damascus to Amman (Jordan) and Medina.

The 1908 Hejaz railway, however, was short-lived. Most of it became abandoned in 1920 as a result of the First World War and its political and military aftermath. However, the line did continue in service, in various guises, from Damascus as far south as Amman, Maan and Aqaba in Jordan. Regular passenger service still until today operates on a daily basis between Damascus and Amman.

The Hejaz line southwards from Damascus used the same Turkish 1.05m narrow gauge that had been used on the Beirut-Damascus line. The Beirut line, which had already been serving Damascus since 1895, was linked in to the Hejaz line at the latter's new terminus in Damascus and shared with it the splendid new terminus building subsequently erected there in 1913.



Recent view of the old Spanish-inspired Hejaz Railway Terminus in central Damascus, opened in 1913. An old locomotive has been preserved and stands on a plinth at the right hand corner of the building. Trains to the south and to Amman, Jordan, now start 2½ miles further out along the old line at Kadem station, while trains on the old Beirut line terminated long ago at Al Hameh, some 5 miles out on that line. The Hejaz terminus site is now to be redeveloped, but the old heritage building seen in the image will be incorporated in the new plans.



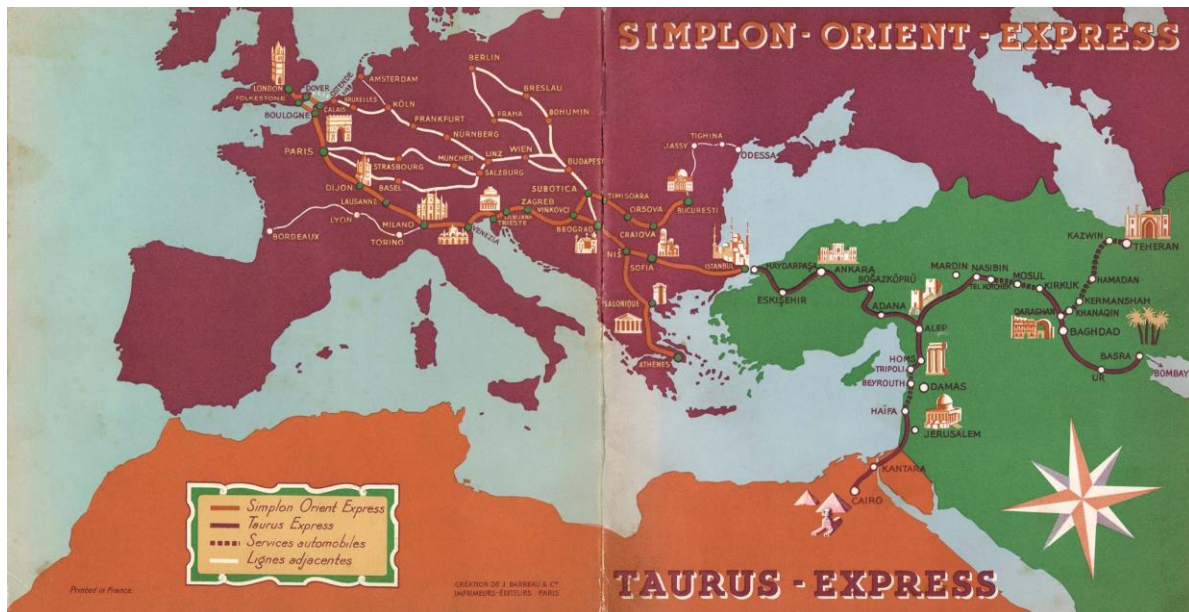
1965 image of the Damascus-Amman train at the Damascus terminus.

In the 1930s the Compagnie Internationale des Wagon Lits (CIWL) operated sleeping carriages on its Taurus Express route from Istanbul (Asian side) to Baghdad (in today's Iraq) via Aleppo (in today's Syria). This express route connected in Istanbul (European side) with the Company's Simplon Orient Express sleeping car routes to major cities across Europe.

On the Taurus Express there was even a once-weekly through sleeping carriage that continued from Aleppo to Homs and then on the spur line (built 1911) to Tripoli on the Lebanese coast. Taurus Express passengers continuing on local services from Aleppo/Homs to Damascus, however, still had to change at Homs to the Bekaa Valley line running down to Rayak, there further changing to the narrow-gauge line from Beirut through the mountains to Damascus. A new direct line from Damascus to Homs/Aleppo was, however, finally built by Syrian Railways in 1983. This skirted the Anti-Lebanon mountains on the east side and rendered the old transit through Rayak redundant.

In the 1930s a through link from Calais, on the French Channel coast, all the way to Cairo was also much touted by the railway companies and by CIWL, whose sleeping car and dining coaches were transferred from train to train across Europe, thus permitting these "through" services. However, the Calais to Cairo route was arduous and not really a "through" train service. At very best there were seven stages: (i) Simplon Orient Express across Europe to Istanbul (European side); (ii) transfer by passenger ferry across the Bosphorus; (iii) Taurus Express from Istanbul (Asian side) across Turkey to Aleppo in Syria and Tripoli in Lebanon; (iv) transfer by private bus of over 200km down the Lebanese coast to Haifa in Palestine; (v) local train through Palestine and Egypt to El Kantara on the Suez Canal; (vi) passenger ferry across the Suez Canal; (vii) local train for the final short leg to Cairo. The "grand express" experience and the comfort of the CIWL railway coaches only went as far as Tripoli in Lebanon. From there it was still another day's road journey (by road) to Haifa and from there another day by rail, Suez Canal ferry and then rail again into Cairo. The Calais to Cairo rail route of the 1930s was always a myth and never really existed.

The Taurus Express continuation from Aleppo on to Baghdad also involved, until the 1940s, a similar bus leg of over 350 km between Nasibin and Kirkuk in Iraq.



A 1930s route map from Compagnie Internationale des Wagon Lits, showing its Calais-Istanbul Simplon-Orient Express route and the Istanbul-Baghdad Taurus Express route with the Aleppo-Homs-Tripoli branch. The CIWL promoted the Taurus Express as continuing all the way to Cairo in Egypt, but the stretches in Lebanon from Tripoli to Beirut and from Beirut to Haifa in Palestine were operated by luxury road vehicles and not by train. At that time the Lebanese coastal line was not yet constructed, being completed only during the 2nd World War and opening in 1945.

Aleppo thus became an important railway node in 1912 when the Ottoman network from Istanbul reached there, with a continuation further east planned as far as Baghdad (which took some time to complete). The short branch south west from Homs to Tripoli on the coast was completed also in 1911. The branch line up the Bekaa Valley from Rayak up to Homs and Aleppo had already been completed in 1906, but it was the links northwards at Aleppo, completed in 1912, that truly linked Beirut, Rayak and Damascus into the international rail network through the station at Aleppo.

Aleppo has thus been one of the key towns in the rail history of this region. It is also classic Agatha Christie¹ territory. In September 1929, at the start of her long association with this region and with its railways, she travelled by train all the way from Calais to Aleppo and on to Damascus, along the route described in these pages. Her legendary thriller, *Murder on the Orient Express*, starts precisely on the platform at Aleppo station. The grand Aleppo railway station, built in 1912, still stands today.

¹ Agatha Christie (1890-1976), celebrated British author of 60 or more detective novels, many of which were set in the Middle East. "Murder on the Orient Express" is possibly the most renowned of them all and has been made into a movie more than once.

MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS

The opening words of Agatha Christie's celebrated detective novel:

“It was five o'clock on a winter's morning in Syria. Alongside the platform at Aleppo stood the train grandly designated in railway guides as the Taurus Express. It consisted of a kitchen and dining-car, a sleeping-car and two local coaches.”

In the book, the detective Hercule Poirot boards the Taurus Express in Aleppo, after a mission in Syria, in order to travel to Istanbul and there connect with the Simplon-Orient Express through to Calais on his way back to London. It was after Istanbul on the Simplon-Orient Express, stuck somewhere in the snow in the Balkans, that the novel's main events took place.



Aleppo railway station – 1920 view from street – probably close to how Agatha Christie saw it.



Aleppo main railway station – recent view from street.



Aleppo station platform – a recent track-side view – probably little changed since Agatha Christie's time, except for the addition of an upper storey where it did not exist before.

(Wartime photos from 1918 show an almost identical view – see below.)



Aleppo station platform – a 1918 view – at the end of the 2nd World War after the defeat of the occupying Turks.

Agatha Christie is known to have stayed in Aleppo at the then renowned Hotel Baron before writing *Murder on the Orient Express* (published 1934). She wrote the first part of it in the hotel in 1933. The hotel was an important staging point for all manner of government intrigue and espionage in the region and was a recognised hangout for spies – of which Agatha Christie may possibly have been one herself. The hotel's location is shown in the 1918 aerial photo on page 11.



The renowned Hotel Baron (built 1909-11) in Aleppo. A third storey was added in 1940 (see next image).



Hotel Baron today, not in service, but showing the third storey added in 1940.



Hotel Baron interior (recent)



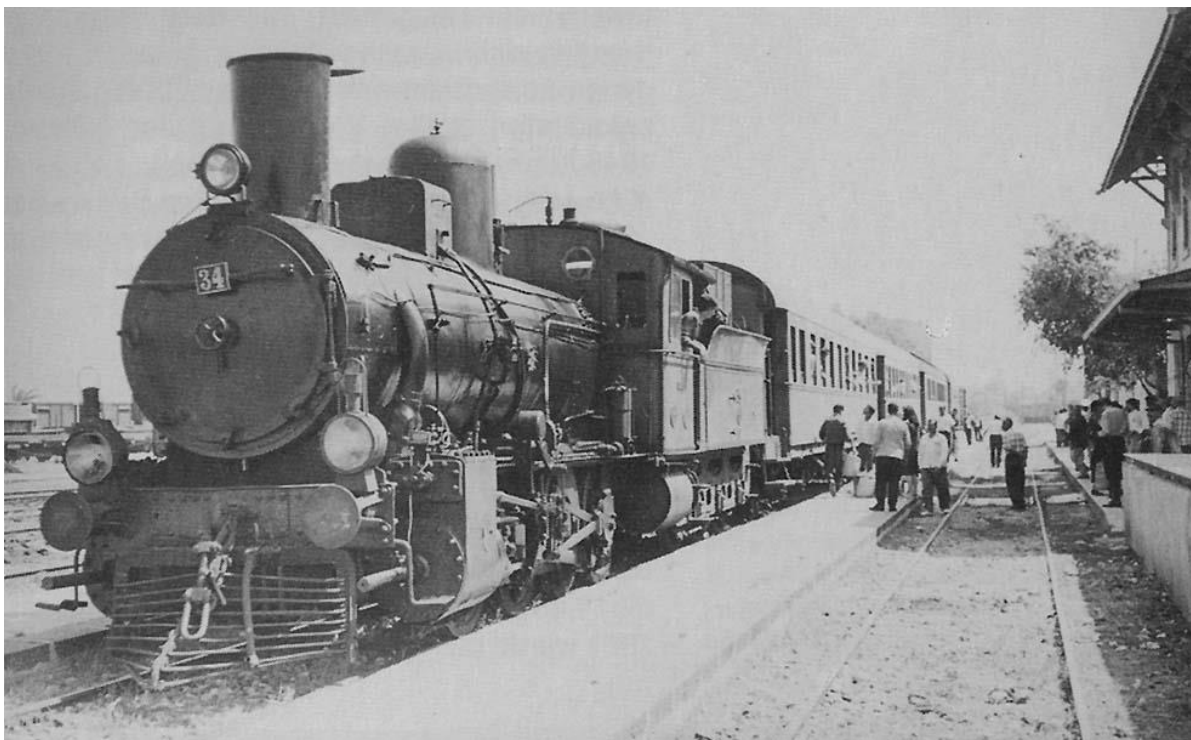
Hotel Baron interior (recent)

TAURUS EXPRESS TO BEIRUT – AND FURTHER

The rail line along the Lebanese coast – from Tripoli in the north, down to Beirut and then further south to Sidon and Tyre and on to Haifa in Palestine – was constructed during World War 2 by British Commonwealth military engineers, to facilitate movement of men and materials. This mirrors the construction of the Haifa to Suez Canal rail line (reaching the Canal at El Kantara) by British military engineers during the previous World War.

For a short while in the 1950s and 1960s, after cessation of world war had allowed railway companies across Europe and the Middle East to rebuild their international services, the Taurus Express from Istanbul extended its scheduled Istanbul-Tripoli “through” service onwards to Beirut, taking advantage of the new line. Thus travellers from Europe, making the connection across the Bosphorus in Istanbul, could then travel directly in comfort as far as Beirut.

The other half of the Lebanese coastal line, southwards from Beirut towards Palestine, was sadly of no use at that point for international through services, since the territory south of the Lebanese border had been occupied by Israel in 1948 and the southern part of the coastal line that ran through it to Haifa had been severed and blocked. The Suez Canal had in fact been bridged with a swing railway bridge in 1942, but this was removed in 1947 after being damaged by a steamship. So, for a short period after 1942 (but before the Canal railway bridge was removed in 1947 and before the Palestine territory came under Israeli occupation from 1948), there was indeed a working rail connection all the way from Istanbul (Asian side) to Cairo.



1965 view of the Taurus Express at Tripoli station en route to Beirut.

BEKAA VALLEY

Incidentally, the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon is the northernmost section of the geological phenomenon known as the Great Rift Valley, running from Lebanon all the way down to Mozambique in southern Africa. The Valley – really a series of contiguous trenches related to similar geological fault systems – runs down through the Dead Sea, Gulf of Aqaba, Red Sea, Kenya’s Rift Valley, Lake Malawi and eventually Mozambique. The Valley in Lebanon, in its central stretch, is a trench some 15km (9 miles) across and 600m (2,000 ft) deep. In Kenya, descending the escarpment down into the Rift Valley there on the road from Nairobi to Nakuru (on the valley floor), which I have done, is very much like the descent by road in Lebanon from the escarpment at Dar Al Baidar down to Rayak on the valley floor and also entails a similar 600m or 2,000ft sharp drop.

DAMASCUS

Damascus is perhaps surprising for being one of only a few ancient and medieval cities that became and remained important without having direct access to the sea – either by being on the coast or on a major river giving access to the sea. Damascus lies only 80km (50 miles) from the eastern end of the Mediterranean and the Lebanese coast at Beirut – the same distance that separates London from Brighton. However, Damascus is separated from the coast by two major intervening mountain ranges, the Lebanon range and the Anti-Lebanon range. It is as though London were separated from Brighton on the coast by two mountain ranges of up to 6,500-8,000ft in place of each of the North and South Downs hills with their gentle rise to less than 1,000ft. Like a few other important historical cities with no ready coastal access, Damascus owed its importance largely to land trade routes. It lay at the intersection of trade routes from Egypt and NE Africa up into Asia Minor and from the Mediterranean coast across to the Euphrates valley, Persia and beyond.

Damascus also benefited from being an oasis city in the midst of an arid region. Several rivers rising in the Anti-Lebanon mountains channel their waters south and east down towards Damascus, including the river Barada which runs for 85km down to and through Damascus. The Rayak-Damascus rail track runs along almost the whole length of the Barada river valley on the last rail section before Damascus. These various rivers and streams from the Anti-Lebanon mountains have over the centuries, from Roman times or earlier, all been split, subdivided and rechannelled as they reach the Damascus area to support a vast irrigated area of some 400 sq km east of the city. The river waters disappear into the ground in this area and do not flow any further. They are thus “rivers to nowhere”.

THE BEIRUT RAILWAY TODAY – AND TOMORROW

The Beirut-Damascus line stopped running in 1976, early on in the Lebanese Civil War period. The same applied on the branch line from Rayak up to Homs. Track, installations and buildings everywhere were abandoned. Materials have progressively been salvaged for other uses and some buildings taken over by new occupants. Over the years most of the track hardware, including the rails, has disappeared. However, the entire original route alignment all the way from Beirut to Damascus (as well as from Rayak up to Aleppo) can still be picked out easily on Google Earth satellite photos.



The former station at Baalbeck, on the Bekaa Valley branch line (completed 1906), seen in 2009 and apparently in use now as a residence. This is typical of the station architecture all along the line. The buildings are all reminiscent of French regional railway style.



The former station at Bhamdoun, a mountain village between Beirut and the summit at Dar Al Baidar, is now being destroyed by the construction of the new express highway beside it.

There was some freight service on the coastal line between Tripoli and Beirut (cement trains) for a while after the Civil War, but even this finally expired in 1996. On the Syrian portion (the Damascus end) of the Beirut-Damascus line there were some intermittent services after the through line ceased operating after 1976. These included weekend passenger excursion trains running from Damascus up to the border with Lebanon and back and occasional charters for groups of foreign railway enthusiasts. These excursions continued until at least 2008, although by then they ran only as far as Zabadani, about three-quarters of the way up the line to the Lebanese border. The image on page 1, repeated on page 4, may even be of one of these latter day excursion trains, and not a regular service from the line's heyday.



A chartered excursion train in Sep 2000 leaving the old Hejaz Railway Terminus on the Damascus-Beirut line with a party of railway enthusiasts for a return trip to Sergahayah on the border with Lebanon. Some conservation of old rolling stock, steam locomotives and track appears to have been undertaken on the Syrian side of the border well into the 2000s, but may have ceased now.



. The above excursion train in 2000 pausing to take on water.



The old passenger building at the Beirut terminus station at Mar Mikhael near the port, seen abandoned in 2009.

Some places and buildings along the old railway line have resurrected themselves in new guises, while still recalling the history that preceded them.



The old station area at Saadnayel, on the floor of the Bekaa Valley, has been turned into a railway park. In the background some 10km away looking west, is the Lebanon mountain range, which the track had to climb over on the way here from Beirut.

The Mar Mikhael area around the old Beirut terminus station complex has now evolved into a well patronised, trendy, sophisticated area of bars, restaurants and night-clubs. The railway is recalled in a number of the bars.



Evening image of the open-air Train Station Bar, in old railway sheds in the resurrected Beirut terminus area.



The Beirut Central Station bar, in the vicinity of the old terminus.

One boutique bar, the popular Beirut Central Station Bar, recalls the Beirut of yesteryear in its publicity, beautifully written in the inimitable, poetic Lebanese style. (The war reference is to the Lebanese Civil War, 1975-90, which dramatically changed the way of life in Beirut.)

“Summer outdoor party spot extraordinaire

The 60s in Lebanon were like a perfect woman: rough around the edges, but so gorgeous you could only think it was too good to be true. There's a reason they called Beirut “Paris of the Middle East” and it's due to its amazing people, fine food, and extraordinary music. But all went down the drain when war struck our majestic country and the things we lost are too many to mention. We lost our train station; a truly golden aspect to our paradise. You might think that these days are long gone, but we hear your cries and we deliver.

The train is back and with it brings back the glory of the golden days. Join us starting 6 pm, for beautiful sunsets and even more breath-taking nights with fresh cocktails, live grilled food, and great music. Allow us to help you relive a time that could only be described as art, a time where our train station was still gliding on its rails reminding us of a glorious time.”

THE CATASTROPHE ON 4 AUGUST 2020

It is sad that the catastrophic explosion at the port of Beirut happened right next to the re-born neighbourhoods of Mar Mikhael and Gemmayzeh where the Beirut railway terminus stood and operated for some 80 years – and where the railway has been so well remembered in the bars and other establishments of the area. At the time of writing it is too soon to know how the extensive damage in the surroundings of the old railway area will affect the area's residents and the area's future life and its recall of the railway years. The explosion, quite coincidentally, came exactly 125 years to the day after the first train left the Beirut terminus on its way to Damascus.

FUTURE REVIVAL OF THE RAILWAY?

Over the years, there have been numerous plans and proposals to revive the Lebanese railways, some focused on the Beirut-Damascus line, others on the coastal routes north to Tripoli and south to Tyre. Even with the entirely logical plan to tunnel 30 km or so through the Lebanon range from Baabda, just outside Beirut, to Chtaura on the floor of the Bekaa Valley, so as to avoid the strenuous route over the Dar al Baidar col, a revival of the Beirut-Damascus line seems a complete non-starter – for a variety of reasons: sheer economics, the much improved highway to Damascus, the preference for car travel over train and the governmental and bureaucratic paralysis in today's Lebanon. On the other hand, reinstatement of the coastal lines north and south from Beirut in some form would possibly be more likely to attract support, in view of the relief that this would bring to traffic congestion on the narrow coastal corridor linking Beirut with the other towns on the coast. However, governmental and bureaucratic and funding obstacles still render this extremely unlikely.

So, the Beirut-Damascus line as it existed is now dead and seems unlikely to be resurrected – but its memory lives on! This brief photo-essay from one very interested spectator will, it is hoped, add to that memory. The line was a remarkable piece of railway engineering and it deserves to be remembered.

LAST MEMORIES



A typical mixed passenger and freight train, probably late 1960s, on the rack & pinion track near the summit at Dar Al Baidar.

DUAL GAUGE TRACK



An interesting recent shot of the rail track close to the old Beirut terminus. The track here appears to be set up for both the original 1.05m narrow gauge line of 1895 and the 1.435m international standard gauge that was used when the coastal lines from Tripoli to Beirut and from Beirut south to the Palestine system were completed during the 2nd World War by Allied military engineers. The north and south coastal lines met and had their separate terminus, depot and yards alongside the Beirut river, 2km inland from the existing Beirut terminus area, but adjacent to the final stretch of the old Damascus line running down to its terminus by the Port. At this point there appears to have been some connection between the two networks – possibly to allow military freight to be brought directly from the Port – as evidenced by this stretch of track, where the new lines, with their wider gauge, appear to share the limited track space with the existing narrower 1895 line in an unusual “dual gauge” arrangement. Dual-gauge is very rare and is usually found only where networks using different gauges have to share limited track space, as for example in Switzerland where narrow-gauge mountain railways exist alongside standard gauge main and regional lines and sometimes have to share limited terminus space at interchange stations.

Photo essay by Brian Walling, Penang, Malaysia, September 2020
v2.0 (minor revisions) August 2023

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Walling is an economist, a graduate of Cambridge University, UK, and of its oldest college, Peterhouse (founded 1284), who has worked internationally in large, blue-chip companies and who takes a keen interest in the structure and activity of the countries and markets in which he has operated.

He was born and educated in England, but his family's origins, prior to 1800, are Dutch, from Delfshaven, near Rotterdam in Netherlands. In Delfshaven his family can be traced back to the mid-1500s.

His career has been very international and he has lived and worked in a number of countries in Europe, Middle East and Asia. In the late 1960s he was a frequent visitor to Beirut in connection with the marketing activity of a major UK company and its local Lebanese partner where he worked in the public health field. He subsequently spent most of the rest of his working life in the Middle East, including a spell in Iran (Ministry of Economy) and in Saudi Arabia (Saudi Arabian state oil company, Saudi Aramco). He is now retired and living with his wife permanently in Malaysia, where he operates informally as an art economist.

The time he spent in Lebanon was early in his career and relatively short. It nevertheless left him with deep and unforgettable memories of the country and its people, as well as its culture and history, and he has followed the news from Lebanon ever since then. The catastrophe of 4 August 2020 in Beirut and fresh contact with his Lebanese partners of half a century ago have further revived many of these old memories. Among these memories was the Beirut-Damascus railway, which he frequently saw in action when he travelled the highway from Beirut over the mountains to the Bekaa Valley. This has prompted him to retrieve a number of old notes and materials on the railway from his archives and to edit and update them into a brief photo-essay on this remarkable piece of Lebanese history. It is hoped that this will contribute to the many memories of the railway held by several generations of Lebanese and visitors to Lebanon.

During his time in Beirut, Brian worked from an office at the top end of Rue Foch, in the old commercial heart of Beirut, near the old souks and close to the Port (only 1,000m in fact from the site of the 4 Aug 2020 explosion). He thus became familiar with the old city centre. He stayed initially in Minet El Hosn close to the Phoenicia and old St Georges hotels, not far from the Rue Foch office. He later moved to the Hamra area (at that time the very fashionable, western-oriented area of cafés, cinemas and entertainment) and lived in a building facing the old Commodore hotel.

Brian's interest in railways in fact dates from his secondary school days in England in the mid-1900s, when he attended a boarding school (Christ's Hospital, Horsham, Sussex) that boasted its own railway station on one of the main lines from London to the south coast and where steam trains of an earlier era could still be seen passing the school every day.



Brian's photo of a steam train passing his school in 1954. This locomotive was built in 1905 and continued in service until 1964, when the local branch lines on which it ran started to be closed down. This photo was taken with a very simple Kodak Brownie Box camera. It nevertheless captures the power and motion of the 60 tonne locomotive and its train well. The locomotive, an old Southern Railway 0-4-4 tank engine, is numbered 30052.

ANNEXE

1. Plan of Beirut published 1998 showing the original 1895 Damascus line (red highlight) terminating at Mar Mikhael near the Port and the newer 1945 north and south coastal lines joining and sharing a new terminus some 2 km further inland from the Port.

Mar Mikhael terminus

North coastal line

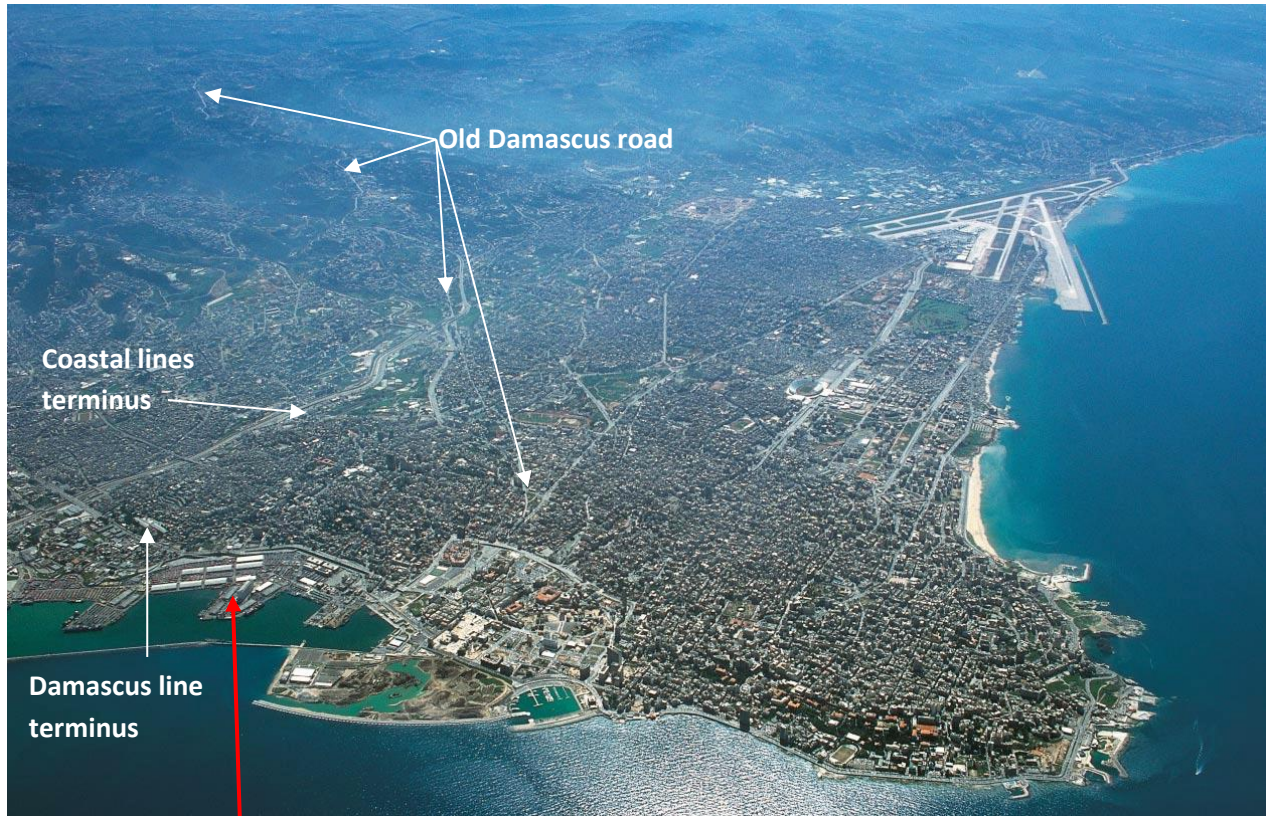
Coastal lines terminus



South coastal line Damascus line

ANNEXE

2. Recent aerial view of Beirut, looking southwards across the city to the airport, with pointers to (i) the old Damascus line rail terminus area at Mar Mikhael near the Port; (ii) the location of the terminus of the newer north and south coastal lines; (iii) the old Damascus highway starting from the city centre and climbing into the hills; (iv) the site of the Beirut Port catastrophe on 4 August 2020.



Site of the devastating 4 Aug 2020 explosion at Beirut Port, very close to the railway heritage area centred on the old Damascus Line terminus.