

## Disputed land

Contributed by Ana Maria Luca, NowLebanon  
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The grey-haired service driver is a tall man in his 60s. A veteran of the Lebanese Armed Forces, he sits in front of the little shop next to his house in Il Ka&rsquo;a, in northeast Lebanon, and is reluctant to talk with journalists. He even refuses to give his name.

There are problems in the village.

Not only with the Syrians, just nine kilometers away. The village council resigned three months ago due to &ldquo;domestic problems&rdquo; that nobody here wants to mention. It had to do with politics, villagers say, and the fact that the pro-Syrian opposition won the elections in the village.

Even so, Ka&lsquo;a has a long and troubled history with neighboring Syria, which invaded the village in 1978. On June 28 1978, the Syrian army rounded up at least 30 young men from the village; none of them were to return home. The villagers call it the Massacre, although representatives of the local municipality avert their eyes when asked about it, and refrain from accusing Syria. The Syrians continued to occupy Ka&lsquo;a for 27 years and though they officially withdrew from this area in April 2005, the villagers told the UN in 2007 that Syria maintained a presence, occupying over 15 square kilometers.

&ldquo;There are no problems with the Syrian side,&rdquo; the service driver insists. &ldquo;They are cooperating with the Lebanese Army. We never fought over the land like they do in Aarsal. Most of us have papers for the lands,&rdquo; he adds. But as the conversation continues, his story begins to change.

&ldquo;The Syrian army has a checkpoint a few hundred meters in to the Lebanese territory,&rdquo; he suddenly remembers. &ldquo;It&rsquo;s at the stream.&rdquo; The border area where he works is dangerous, he now says. &ldquo;There is a village built there, on the border, on the land that used to belong to Il Ka&rsquo;a. We call it Beit al Radi. There are Lebanese and Syrians living there. But it is dangerous for two women to go there. They might put the guns to your heads and steal your car!&rdquo;

After we promise that his name will not be used, he rescinds his initial &ldquo;no problem&rdquo; story altogether. &ldquo;Il Ka&rsquo;a used to be 8 square kilometers and we now live in 1,5 square kilometers. The Municipality lost 80% of the land to the Syrians in time. They don&rsquo;t always occupy by force. They marry Lebanese women and then they buy the land and register it on the wife&rsquo;s name. That&rsquo;s how the village of Beit al Radi appeared 9 km away from here. I work there, but for you it is dangerous to go.&rdquo; The area is known for smuggling, he adds.

According to a report released in 2009, Syrian nationals currently occupy Lot No 7 of Ka&lsquo;a/Jiwar Ma&rsquo;iya, which is near the village and is co-owned by several residents of Ka&lsquo;a.

Another report, released by the UN in 2007, said the Syrian army has maintained a checkpoint within the municipality of Il Ka&rsquo;a. But representatives of the local municipality maintain there are no major problems with the border or Syria.

Syrians occupying and cultivating land inside Lebanon? It doesn&rsquo;t happen in Il Ka&rsquo;a, says Qaim Makam, who has headed the local government since the municipality president resigned three months ago. He doesn&rsquo;t look happy to have been cornered by journalists. &ldquo;The problems in the region are about the Lebanese state lands cultivated illegally by villagers,&rdquo; he says, carefully choosing his words. &ldquo;They are both Lebanese and Syrians. As soon as the demarcation of border is resolved, the problems will be over. The Lebanese courts will issue verdicts on the Lebanese lands after the demarcation. The same will happen in Syria. It is all in the care of the Lebanese Syrian Higher Council!&rdquo;

The Higher Council, however, has yet to convene. Its president, Nasri Khoury did not respond to repeated request for an interview. In August 2008, the presidents of Lebanon and Syria agreed to begin the work of the committee. Nothing has happened yet.

The neighbors of the service driver, who have gathered in front of his house, shrug their shoulders and stare at the ground. They can&rsquo;t talk about it. &ldquo;It is difficult to be against the political rule of the village. We need to be with them, in order to have peace and quiet,&rdquo; the service driver says.