

Israel's War on Lebanon's Trees

Israel has escalated its war on south Lebanon's woodland – incinerating all life in the agricultural belt and rendering it an uninhabitable buffer zone.

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Lebanon has a deep cultural connection to its trees. Its ancient [cedar tree](#), which dominates the forests of its northern highlands, holds great symbolic importance as a national emblem and is featured front and center on the country's flag.

As with other countries around the world, the iconic, resilient cedar faces the growing threat of climate change.

But Lebanon's woodland has come under an even more insidious threat in the past few months. Hundreds of acres of southern Lebanon's lush greenery and vegetation – distinct from the northern cedar forests – have come under heavy, incendiary Israeli attacks, causing severe environmental and agricultural devastation to the region.

The occupation state's use of white phosphorus bombs has dramatically impacted the lives of Lebanese residents, agricultural workers, and the south's vital [agricultural sector](#), which produces a significant portion of the country's fruit, citrus, olives, and tobacco.

According to [Save the Children](#),

“An increase in cross-border shelling and rocket fire since 7 October has triggered blazes in a key agricultural area of Lebanon that have run wild through olive groves and nearby farming communities.”

In February, the charity noted that tens of thousands of families in southern Lebanon have lost their livelihood, with Israeli military fire destroying over 47,000 olive trees – as well as other crops during their harvest.

On 4 April, outgoing Lebanese **Prime Minister Najib Mikati** [warned](#) that southern Lebanon could be designated as an “agricultural disaster zone.” Lebanon’s *National News Agency* quoted Mikati as saying:

Eight hundred hectares have been completely damaged, 340,000 heads of livestock have died, and about 75 percent of farmers have lost their final source of income.

Hezbollah’s Green Fingers

In 2013, the non-profit association Green Without Borders (GWB) was established to rejuvenate various southern areas through widespread tree-planting initiatives, causing deep distress for Israel’s military brass. In 2017, the occupation army’s **Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi** [accused](#) the Lebanese resistance, Hezbollah, of utilizing the environmental organization as a cover for its border activities.

But the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) [refuted](#) Tel Aviv’s claims. It confirmed that GWB was indeed engaged in legitimate tree-planting activity, further noting that the UN force “has not observed any unauthorized armed persons at the locations or found any basis to report a violation of resolution 1701.”

Then, the Americans got involved with the issue of Lebanon’s southern foliage. In 2023, the US Department of the Treasury [imposed sanctions](#) on GWB and its president under the pretext that the association “serves as cover for Hezbollah’s underground warehouses and munitions storage tunnels.”

Israel’s Scorched Earth Policy

Ongoing Israeli paranoia over Lebanon’s trees may explain why Tel Aviv has rained down white phosphorus over the south. These incendiary munitions burn everything in their path, including humans, vehicles, and vegetation, and are illegal to use in civilian areas under international law.

Within a month of the northern battle’s inception, [reports](#) emerged that Israeli airstrikes had destroyed several hundred hectares of woodland, including pines, oaks, and centuries-old olive groves.

Lebanese outrage has only grown since then. On 20 March, **Minister of Agriculture Abbas Hajj Hassan** [declared](#):

The Zionist entity’s attacks are not limited to the human losses that are absolutely irreplaceable. The Israeli bombing has caused severe damage to the agricultural sector, through which at least 6,000 hectares of agricultural land have been severely damaged, directly and 2,000 completely. It also destroyed 60,000 olive trees, some of which were 300 years old, as well as citrus, banana, and almond trees, as well as fruitful and non-fruitful trees, and vast areas were completely destroyed.

Hajj Hassan believes that Tel Aviv’s scorched earth policy serves two purposes: “The first is to break the will of the southerners,” forcing them to leave their lands, which will “shake the front,” and the second is to raze everything in sight “to abolish vegetation cover,” so the resistance and the Lebanese army will be exposed to Israel’s air force.

A source at Lebanon's Southern Green Association tells *The Cradle* that Israel has destroyed large swathes of the south for this purpose:

It has targeted the entire territory adjacent to the border with Palestine – an area exceeding 100 kilometers long from Naqoura to Mount Hermon and the hills of Kfar Shuba, and to a depth exceeding an average of 6–7 kilometers – in several attacks.

He adds that the military operations “aim to make the area uninhabitable for Israel to implement a buffer zone inside Lebanon's border.”

There is a clear, deliberate burning of the forest cover, destruction of olive vines and fruit trees, and contamination of the soil, which explains the intensive use of white phosphorus.

GWB President Zuhair Nahle, who has been personally sanctioned by the US Department of Treasury, makes clear to *The Cradle* that his organization is authorized by the Lebanese Ministry of Interior.

Among our goals is to establish nurseries to produce forest and fruitful seedlings for afforestation and to care for what we have planted. We are an environmental organization that operates throughout all Lebanese territories, not just in Lebanon's south.

Nahle also points out that Israel has a problem with Lebanese forestry in general because it obscures their illegal reconnaissance activities. Tel Aviv, it should be noted, violates Lebanese airspace hundreds of times per year to carry out recon operations, in blatant violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701:

Israelis generally hate [Lebanese] tree-planting and forestry because the forest tree and its leaves don't help them see what is under its dense branches. Also, it doesn't allow radar and heat waves to penetrate. Thus, Israel feels uncomfortable regarding planting trees or protecting them ... We have 18 sites in South Lebanon.

GWB's Connection to the Resistance

Speaking to *The Cradle*, retired General of the Lebanese Armed Forces **Naji Malaeb** says that GWB indeed “bothered Israel.”

The fact that Hezbollah is deployed in an area where the UNIFIL and the Lebanese army are deployed too, without having a military barracks, a headquarters, or a visible weapons store, means that it has already been smeared behind other names, including Green Without Borders.

Malaeb emphasizes that Hezbollah retains its military capabilities, regardless of Israel's many, varied efforts to counter them, including burning down all the greenery in sight:

“After the assassination of Hamas leader Saleh al-Arouri (on 2 January 2024), Hezbollah was able to launch 62 rockets at once from southern Lebanon.”

“Where were these missiles fired from while the area is being monitored by the Israelis, from the air?” he asks.

Nicholas Blanford, a Beirut-based American researcher and journalist who has covered Hezbollah for years, shares with *The Cradle* that “GWB’s motto is ‘The Shade of the Resistance,’ which certainly indicates a connection to Hezbollah. But I don’t believe Hezbollah denies this association.”

The main purpose of GWB in the south was to establish observation posts along the Blue Line. These posts were not hidden; some were towering structures reaching 15 meters or more. By now, all of the observation posts have probably been destroyed.

Blanford claims those “posts served for observation, keeping an eye on Israeli movements. There was probably a psychological element to it as well because the Israelis were always complaining about the GWB posts but couldn’t do anything about them.”

Environmental and Strategic Considerations

Yet Blanford also emphasizes that Hezbollah likely didn’t utilize GWB for concealment purposes:

Hezbollah often utilizes existing forests and woods to shield their activities from the overhead view, such as from Israeli jets and drones. There were several positions in Wadi Salouqi, and they were not kept secret. The entrances to these positions were visible from the main road running through the Wadi.

He further explains that Hezbollah’s military preference is for low-signature tactics, such as the use of underground bunker and tunnel networks, exemplified by the famous Mleeta tunnel network dating back to the 1980s.

Blanford notes that Hezbollah does use vegetation cover, like bushes and trees, to launch attacks on Israeli positions, highlighting their strategic use of natural terrain for operational advantage – as do all armies.

There are parallels between the US’s use of Agent Orange in the Vietnam War and Israel’s similar deforestation efforts in southern Lebanon during the 1990s.

Blanford recalls witnessing Israel’s firing of phosphorous shells into dry undergrowth near Arab Salim, illustrating a longstanding military tactic aimed at destroying potential cover utilized by adversaries.

Clearly, Hezbollah recognizes the strategic importance of trees in providing cover to its fighters, just as the occupation military’s actions reveal Israel’s readiness to destroy Lebanon’s entire tree population as a war tactic in full-spectrum warfare, akin to Tel Aviv’s total-destruction approach in Gaza.

Nevertheless, history – and indeed Gaza – proves that this strategy will [ultimately be futile](#), offering only short-term tactical advantages. Lebanon’s trees are deeply rooted in the land, as is its resistance.

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