

The Northern Front in the Iron Sword War and Its Impact on Northern Forests

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The Iron Swords War, which began in October 2023, opened a northern front with Hezbollah, escalating during the summer of 2024. This caused damage to forests and open areas under KKL-JNF management in northern Israel. With the ceasefire along the northern border taking effect in late November 2024, the fires in the forests finally subsided.

Throughout the war, Hezbollah continued firing without pause, striking strategic locations, towns, and surrounding areas. These areas are interwoven with nature reserves, farmland, and KKL-JNF forests. In the northern region, approximately 29,600 dunams (2,960 ha) out of 540,000 dunams (54,000 ha) of managed forests and open areas were damaged. The Upper Galilee, which suffered daily strikes, was the hardest hit. Several large wildfires broke out, devastating vast areas that could not be extinguished as KKL-JNF firefighting teams were prohibited from approaching within 3 km of the border.

The forests that sustained the most severe damage were Bar'am, Biriya, Nabi Yusha, and the Naftali Mountains.

The Naftali Mountains Forest, which had already suffered major fires in the past, was once again heavily impacted. The rocket and drone strikes ignited large-scale wildfires that burned approximately 14,300 dunams (1,430 ha)—nearly 80% of the forest area. Despite the vast scope of the damage, many broadleaf species such as the Kermes oak (*Quercus coccifera*),

the Atlantic pistachio (*Pistacia atlantica*), and the Palestine pistachio (*P. palaestina*) are expected to regenerate. Pine trees that were completely burned following canopy fires will be cut down and cleared from the area. Cypress trees are more resistant and less vulnerable to wildfire damage (Xanthopoulos, 2011).

Over the next two to four years, a survey of the Naftali Mountains Forest will be conducted to gather data on vegetation conditions and forest regeneration. It is estimated that about 40% of the coniferous forest area was completely incinerated, while the remaining 40%, which experienced ground-level fires rather than canopy fires, is expected to recover naturally. This assessment also applies to other northern forests.

Among all vegetation formations, coniferous forests were the most extensively damaged (approximately 24% of all vegetation formations), mainly because they were planted across vast areas. The affected forests will require significant rehabilitation work by the forestry teams.

In Biriya Forest, rocket strikes and interceptions damaged around 3,400 dunams (340 ha) out of 19,500 dunams (1,950 ha). In the Nabi Yusha Forest, about 2,200 dunams (220 ha) out of 13,080 dunams (1,308 ha) were impacted. In the Bar'am Forest, approximately 1,400 dunams (140 ha) out of 13,200 dunams (1,320 ha) sustained damage.

Many forests in the Lower Galilee were also affected, with about 3,000 dunams (300 ha) damaged. The extensive damage in this area, in proportion to the size of the area affected, included the forests of Ein Dor, Beit Keshet, Masad, Mount Tabor, Lavi, Ein HaNatziv, Kfar HaHoresh, the Switzerland Forest, and Tur'an.

The Sulam Ridge at the northern tip of the Western Galilee suffered significant damage too. East of Rosh HaNikra, approximately 1,000 dunams (100 ha) were

affected—700 dunams (70 ha) of which are forest lands.

The damage to the forests during the Iron Swords War was comparable in scale—and in some areas, greater—than that sustained during the Second Lebanon War in 2006. Yet, nearly a decade after that war, the forests had almost fully recovered, whether through replanting or natural regeneration. There is reason for optimism.

References

Xanthopoulos G. 2011. Cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*) and forest fires.



An Iranian missile in Biriya Forest
Photo: Eli Haputa



Bar'am Forest, July 2024
Photo: Shimone Elgrabli



The fire-damaged Chen Scenic Lookout in Biriya Forest, prior to its total collapse.
Photo: Arthur Yankilevitch



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