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ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES SERIES

# LEBANON'S UNREGULATED FORESTS:

## HOW TRAGEDIES CAN IGNITE HOMEGROWN TRANSFORMATIONS

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## About the author

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Photo cover: Akkar el-Atiqa field event, July 2022 - © Sammy Kayed

April 2023

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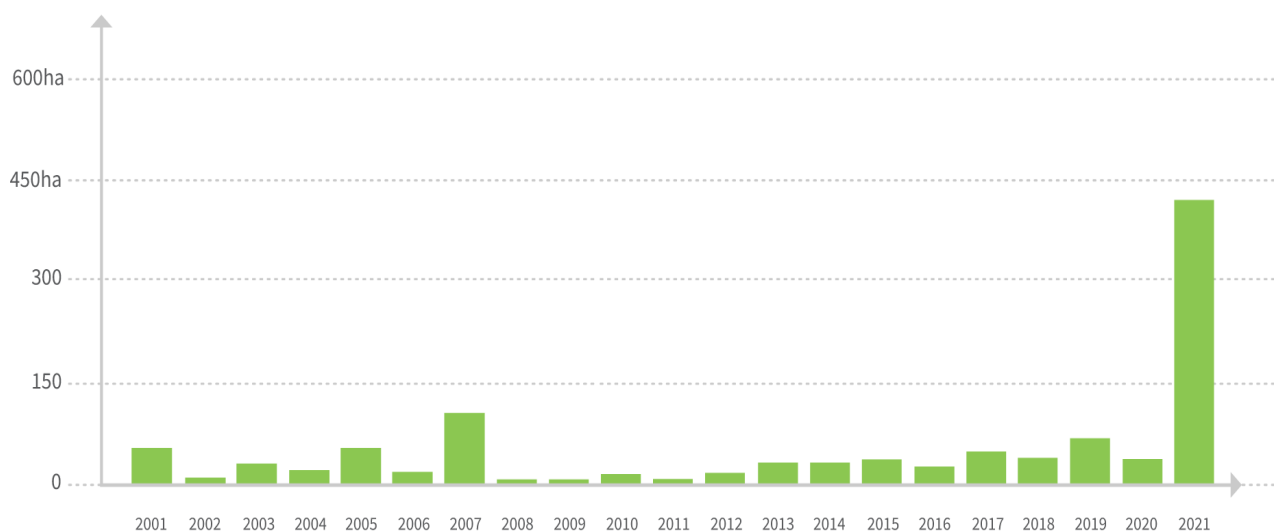
# 1 Lebanon's Unregulated Forests: *How Tragedies Can Ignite Homegrown Transformations*

One could argue that Akkar, more than any other region in Lebanon, epitomizes both the country's incredible natural heritage and its spiraling economic and political crises. While Lebanon sets records for the loss of purchasing power, rapid financial collapse, social injustice, and frequency of government deadlock, Akkar regularly emerges as the most challenged across multiple dimensions of poverty.<sup>1,2</sup> Yet, it is considered to have the richest forests, biodiversity, and water resources in a country that regionally stands apart for these attributes.<sup>3</sup> Separations between natural wealth and socio-economic poverty are being joined by newfound opportunities, materializing over the last three years, with residents seeking to relieve their financial troubles by cutting trees. With little to no state regulation in forests, Akkar has become a hotbed for this understandable but possibly ecologically irreversible recourse.

This paper tells the story of how the greatest rate of forest loss in Akkar's recorded history is being met by local activists organizing, resisting forest over-exploitation, garnering resources, and onboarding the wider community in an

species being unique to a geographical area)<sup>4</sup> in the Middle East region.<sup>5</sup> Studies indicate that Akkar enjoys the highest overall density of ecosystem services, the many human benefits and basic life-supporting services provided by nature, in the country.<sup>6</sup> However, every one of these benefits or lifelines derived from nature is being disturbed by the staggering loss of local forests.

In 2021 alone, the loss of forests in Akkar was about 1,200% higher than the average over the previous 20 years.<sup>7</sup> This region is home to the largest continuous conifer forest and the greatest density of trees in Lebanon, and in one year, 5.4% of that tree cover was lost.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 1:** Tree cover loss in Akkar Lebanon between 2001 and 2021 reported in hectares (Source: Global Forest Watch, 2022).

unprecedented fashion. Their acts of solidarity happened in the face of recent conflict and casualty over forest resources stressed by climate extremes. Given the sensitive nature of the paper, the author chose to keep interlocutors, contacted between September and December 2022, anonymous.

Akkar is Lebanon's northmost governorate comprising only 7% of the nation's territory but retaining one of the highest levels of biological diversity and endemism (the state of a

4 [Science Direct, Definitions of Endemism](#)

5 [Ecologica Mediterranea, Towards the establishment of a natural park in Eastern Mediterranean forests](#)

6 The study's ecosystem service factors included provision of food, water, and raw material; regulation of climate, water flows, soil fertility, water quality, pollination, and habitat; and support of cultural identity and recreation (AUB, [The importance of protecting the Lebanese High Mountains: A preliminary ecosystem services assessment](#))

7 [Global Forest Watch, Lebanon](#)

1 [UN ESCWA, Multidimensional poverty in Lebanon \(2019-2021\)](#)

2 [World Bank, Lebanon: Multi-dimension Poverty Index](#)

3 [AUB, The importance of protecting the Lebanese High Mountains: A preliminary ecosystem services assessment](#)



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The primary driver of this loss is wildfires with 87% of the 2021 loss stemming from fires fueled by disproportionate climate change.<sup>7,8</sup> Lebanon is located in one of the world's most vulnerable climate change hot spots,<sup>8</sup> with temperatures expected to rise 20% faster than the global average.<sup>9</sup> As climate change increases the severity and frequency of wildfires, high-altitude ecosystems such as the juniper forests of Akkar have been documented burning for the first time.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the fires, over the last three years, Akkar's forests have been facing higher rates of tree cutting.<sup>7</sup> The rising cost of diesel has caused a massive market shift towards the use of wood for heating and a wrenching drive for local communities not only to cut more trees for personal heating but for their livelihood as well. With Akkar's wood for sale across the country, tree loss is breaking past historically sustainable boundaries.<sup>11</sup> A resident of Akkar el Atiq, the largest village in the mountainous parts of Akkar, explains how "the majority of the 20,000 people living here have either retrofitted their diesel furnaces to wood or bought wood furnaces for heating." On a visit to her village, she further explained: "We used to all rely on diesel for heating but the huge increases in diesel cost and reduced purchasing power have caused nearly everyone to transition to the use of wood." One gas station owner told *Almashareq News*:<sup>12</sup> "Diesel sales have declined by 80% compared to the same period last year"; while a wood vendor told *Al-Monitor*:<sup>13</sup> "This year we've witnessed the highest demand for wood logs ever as people are using wood not only for heating but for cooking too." And so, loggers, known by interlocutors to be primarily from the area, are persistently present in the forest where fuel wood is streaming out. Some are cutting within their own means using traditional methods, chopping by hand, and loading donkeys for transport. But even with this traditional method, the interviewed residents of Akkar el Atiq are concerned with the number of people relying on the surrounding forest these years. During a hike I took in October 2022 with 12 members of this community around the Qammoua forest, one person noticed: "We've been in here for three hours and we've already seen around 15 men with their donkeys or motorcycles loaded with wood and exiting the forest... imagine that this is happening here daily." One of those men with a wood-strapped donkey approached us, explained he is cutting trees to provide for his disabled child, and asked us to record his name and phone

number in case we are part of an NGO providing any cash for work opportunities. A resident explained we are not but took his contact details, nonetheless. The previous day, I visited a school in the area during an awareness session about forest loss organized voluntarily by engaged community members. Afterward, the school principal, whose students are working with their fathers to cut trees, told me: "I don't blame them... as much as I love our forests and trees and educate the students on our duties to protect them, I cannot tell a father who is desperate to keep his family fed and warm to not cut a tree... In these times, I'll encourage him to cut the tree and to cut it with his head high."

But the old-fashioned loggers trying to provide for their families are countered by a more sinister force at work in the rich oak and conifer forests of Akkar. Intentional fire ignition and armed men cutting trees, unanimously reported by 10 interlocutors questioned on the issue, along with incidents of territorial conflict over trees are periodically threatening the area's stability.<sup>14</sup> On 25 August 2021, an intense armed clash broke out between residents of neighboring villages of Akkar al-Atiq and Fneideq over logging, which led to one death, two injuries, and the fear of a widening conflict.<sup>15</sup> Interlocutors who know people from their community involved in the incident said the person tragically passed away because he was not evacuated quickly enough from the densely wooded area. This compelled local authorities to cut a new road into the heart of the forest above Akkar el Atiq with the rationale of enabling better defense of the forest. Ironically, the road has done the opposite, opening an easy access route for tree cutters.

More recently, around two dozen people (most of whom are known to residents of the area) are believed by residents to be intentionally lighting fires to ease the way for tree cutting or are shamelessly cutting huge numbers of trees in response to the market's high demand for heating wood. When I asked residents why they believe fires are used as a stepping-stone to tree cutting, there was compelling consensus: fires, first and foremost, reduce the social backlash faced by tree cutters. One local explained it to me by saying: "We are the forest's best defense but when the forest burns, our community tends to perceive the forest as dead and is, therefore, more likely to disregard rampant tree cutting." When fires are not a factor, community members in Akkar talk about incidents of trees being cut by armed men who appear ready to go to extreme lengths to ensure their operations are not disrupted.

Three community members I interviewed tell of one incident,

8 [Journal of Climate Risk Management, Local adaptive capacity to climate change...Lebanon](#)

9 [IPCC, WGII Sixth Assessment Report](#)

10 [The National News, Bushfires threaten to destroy Lebanon's ancient mountain forests](#)

11 [L'orient le Jour, A tale of opportunity and need: Illegal logging is rife in North Lebanon](#)

12 [Almashareq News, Lebanese face a cold winter without mazout](#)

13 [Al-Monitor, Lebanese turn to wood logging in preparation for winter](#)

14 [The Arab Weekly, Forest fires add to Lebanon's combustible climate](#)

15 [Reuters, Lebanese army deploys to area in north after deadly violence](#)

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combining fires and violence around tree cutting, that allegedly happened late in the fall of 2022. They reported that when a small but growing fire in the forests above Akkar el Atiqa was reported to the local civil defense firefighting unit, a team was deployed. As the firefighters made their way up one of the forest's peripheral dirt roads, they were met by a couple of men blocking access. As the firefighters explained they were coming to put out the fire, one of the men told them they are not allowed to pass and must turn back. The firefighters became adamant about passing and an altercation took place where one of the firefighters was stabbed with a knife and his team had to return to the village to seek medical attention. The firefighter has since recovered but the fire was not put out and the firefighter was politically pressured to drop the charges against his attacker. The same community members who tell this account, also explained how this was just one of the instances that demonstrated the kind of violence some were resorting to and the unknown power holders that back them. Local police who were allegedly informed in the summer of 2022 of the homes and names of two dozen armed men cutting trees have not prosecuted any of them. Additionally, over eight months ago, at least 100 illegal logging violations were submitted by the Ministry of Environment (MoE) to prosecutors but there is no evidence they are being investigated.<sup>16</sup> As one activist living in the village of Qoubaiyat explained: "The people trying to protect nature would be better off without any of the little established government present here... this might at least level the playing field... but with their presence, those who are exploiting the forest are backed up and keep winning."

Municipal forest guards used to patrol the forests of Akkar reasonably well facilitating more sustainable and equitable tree cutting. However, their devalued wages, alleged increases in bribery, and hesitation around stoking tensions have combined to push them to either turn a blind eye to unsanctioned logging or reportedly resort to tree-cutting themselves. A recipe for greater disaster lies before the area as a result of wildfires fueled by climate change, practically non-existent government regulations, the increasing reliance on wood for heating and livelihoods, and incorrigible appetites to light fires and cut trees. If the current trend of forest loss continues for the next few years, this biodiversity jewel of Lebanon and the multigenerational livelihoods it has supported will become unrecognizable.

Despite government shortcomings and grave risks associated with resisting over-exploitation, Akkar's ecological calamity is not falling on deaf ears. Grass root activists are in high spirits and have been organizing, resisting, garnering resources, and onboarding the wider community. The four interviewed

activists agreed that their activities generated around three years ago; the same period when forest cover loss increased dramatically. They are pushing a multitude of efforts forward that primarily revolve around building reciprocity between local communities and the forest and brilliantly increasing the caliber of social backlash that over-exploiters of the forest must face.

While the Council for Environment and Heritage Protection has been active for 30 years as a group of nature enthusiasts in Quobayet, four years ago they registered as a not-for-profit organization, pulling in new resources and local participants to popularize community forest protection. They more regularly invite community members on trips to forage wild edibles and turn them into traditional meals as one of the most relatable entries into reciprocity with nature. Four years ago, they also created the Rural Encounters on Environment and Film (REEF) Festival as the first environmental film festival in the Arab world. Realizing that so many love watching films, they established this festival to attract new audiences to engage in Akkar's nature. One member of the group explains how this festival is creating "unbelievable" economic opportunities for the local community. After a few years, many local livelihoods are reportedly supported by the festival, which in turn nurtures forest protection. One member of the Council explains during a foraging trip they invited me to: "This successful eco-house we are at is surrounded by forests and the owner is constantly keeping watch and immediately confronting or socially exposing loggers operating in public land... He is one of the many small businesses that now recognize that their livelihood depends on it." They are also pressuring local and national decision-makers through direct conversation, exposing their affiliation to environmental damages, and mobilizing their growing network to speak to their representatives about keeping land public as a potential place for establishing common ground between conflicting parties. The same Council member says: "We love this land even more because it belongs just as much to me as it does to you or someone from the far south or the far east of the country."

For the last year and a half, the Environment Academy (EA), housed at the American University of Beirut's Nature Conservation Center, has been supporting local organizing around the nation's largest continuous conifer forest surrounding the community of Akkar el Atiqa. As the Director and Co-founder of the program, I have been supporting a team of four environmental activists making up the EA Local Community Team to further strengthen reciprocal practices between the forest and those who benefit from it, including shepherds, farmers, students, craftspeople, scouts, public authorities, as well as residents who recreationally spend time in the forest or traditionally harvest wood for personal use. Together, we have been slowly giving rise to a

<sup>16</sup> [L'orient le Jour, A tale of opportunity and need: Illegal logging is rife in North Lebanon](#)

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national nature reserve. The idea of a reserve is still foreign or off-putting to some members of these groups who are concerned it will compromise their livelihood or private land development plans. Subsequently, we are doubling our efforts to converse with many members of these groups about a more inclusive type of nature reserve where they are involved in collectively developing a governing ecosystem management plan that they can believe in and steward. The EA Local Community Team has put together an impressive file including the official backing of Akkar el Atiq's Municipal Council, a report evidencing the multiple intrinsic values and ecosystem services of the forest, dozens of official real estate certificates for each land parcel included in the reserve's boundaries, and a filled MoE application form to establish a national nature reserve. The file has been submitted to the MoE after a half-dozen co-creation meetings with them. In July of 2022, during a field visit I took part in with the Minister of Environment – where over 100 community members joined to support the work of the EA Local Community Team – a respected elderly member of the Akkar community responded to the introduction of the Minister saying: “We no longer need to be convinced that creating a reserve is good for us and our environment... our lived experience over the past couple years has already taught us this.”

Akkar Trail was established in 2012 as an informal group of nature enthusiasts focused on hiking. In the last two years, they have widely expanded their reach and diversified their activities formally registering as a not-for-profit organization and engaging many of Akkar's residents in a multitude of homegrown and crowd-funded actions. The group has helped create six new walking trails in the forests of Akkar, secured multiple firefighting trucks for their villages, facilitated the planting and caretaking of over 11,000 native forest trees, and supported programs to provide community members with rapidly growing trees that can be planted on private lands to provide an alternative source of firewood in a couple of years. The great majority of these efforts are crowdfunded by the diaspora or residents of the area, which speaks to Akkar Trail's organizational capacity and the current atmosphere of community mobilization around local forests. One member I interviewed explained: “In this short time we've taught many people to love nature, and this is represented in another event we just put on where over 500 community members came out to plant trees in multiple areas where they have been heavily cut.” Some of their involved local activists are even pouring their own money into keeping the response alive with another member reporting: “I lost my truck when trying to help put out a fire in 2021... I can't afford to replace it, but I have no regrets about what I did.”

Akkar's growing spirit of activism, love of the land, and protest against exploitative forces are creating real reasons for hope in an otherwise desperate context. The area is demonstrating

how homegrown actions can give way to possibly transformative results in times of regulatory breakdown. The achievements of these grassroots initiatives have, in part, been made possible by their ability to place iNGOs, universities, and other development actors behind locally formed goals rather than those imposed by organizational headquarters on target areas. These case studies and accounts demonstrate how the grassroots of Akkar are synergizing to increase the power of community organizing and community backlash; one of the last promising forces against irreversible over-exploitation of Lebanon's richest forests. I hope Akkar's grassroots might inspire other parts of the country and other communities across the Middle East and North Africa region who face environmental injustice or over-exploitation of natural resources to organize and find their own ways of acting amidst government inaction. As one local activist concluded in my interview with him: “We are reappropriating the rise of the phoenix, and we are doing so out of love for our lands and nature.”

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### About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

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