

Israeli border towns hit with 1,000 fires in 3 months of Gaza terrorism

Hamas firebomb balloons, kites set 40 new fires Wednesday • Damage totals millions of dollars • Residents in Gaza-adjacent communities describe feeling helpless: We know how to defend ourselves from rockets, we don't know what to do against fires.



Itay Levi, left, and Adi Rozen of Moshav Netiv Haasara stand in one of the community's scorched fields Photo: Yehuda Peretz

At least 40 fires raged in Gaza-adjacent communities in southern Israel on Wednesday as a result of burning kites and balloons launched from Gaza over the border fence as part of ongoing protests organized by Hamas, bringing the total number of fires set by the group's new tactic in the past three months to over 1,000.

The fires have laid waste to over 8,200 acres of forest and agricultural land, with damage totaling tens of millions of dollars. Experts say it will take at least 15 years to rehabilitate the vegetation and wildlife in the scorched areas.

When the remote arson attacks began a few months ago, some politicians and military officials dismissed them as a passing nuisance. But the protesters added explosives-laden balloons that ignite upon landing on the Israeli side of the fence to their arsenal, and now Israeli children who come across a stray kite or balloon have to back away and tell their parents to call in sappers.

Bruria Karni-Hadas, a resident of Kibbutz Kerem Shalom, admitted Wednesday that when the kites first appeared, she dismissed them as an inconvenience.

"I didn't realize at first how big [a problem] they would become, but soon it became clear. We know what to do and how to defend ourselves from mortar shells and rockets. But now there's a different sense of helplessness, that we don't know what to do. The feeling is that there is no end in sight," said Karni-Hadas.

Karni-Hadas, a professional photographer, has been documenting the scorched region.

“We need to show as many people as possible in Israel and all over the world what’s happening here. We’re talking about enormous areas that have been burned down; about people’s livelihood; about ecological damage and harm to our health, because heaven knows what we’re inhaling.

“It’s not just the sights, it’s also the stench. There’s always an odor of burning in the air. Every time I leave the house, I see a layer of smoke hanging over the region,” she said.

Valeria Mashinsky of Kibbutz Karmia is also alarmed by the latest form of terrorism from Gaza.

“Operation Protective Edge [in the summer of 2014] was scary. There were sirens and booms, but they said an operation was on and they were going to take care of Hamas, so we were willing to suffer in silence and wait for results,” Mashinsky said. “Here, we don’t know when it [a fire] will happen. There are no early-warning alerts, and Hamas is threatening to send over burning balloons during the night, too.”

“It’s stressful and the most alarming thing is that we don’t know when it will be over,” Mashinsky said.

Mashinsky has contacted various environmental groups about the damage caused by the fires, but has yet to receive a satisfactory response.

“It drives me crazy that [environmental] groups in Israel are worried about polar bears but not about nature in their own country. Nature in the south is going up in flames - where are their voices?” she asks.

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