

## Who Started Syria's Forest Fires?

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The past two weeks have seen fires devour large areas of forest and farmland in coastal Syria, forcing some residents to evacuate their homes and raising fears that influential figures may be considering seizing some of the affected land.

Fires often break out in Syria during the heatwaves that come with the dry season in August and September. But this year's fires were faster and more widespread, devouring hundreds of hectares of land in five neighbouring governorates. This area includes the Arz and Shuh nature reserves between Lattakia and Hama — "arz" means cedar and "shuh" means fir — as well as parts of Hama's Ghab Plain and Masyaf, and forests in Tartous. The fires reached as far as Wadi Al-Nasara in Homs governorate, as well as opposition-held areas in Idlib.

Lattakia's Agriculture Directorate estimated that around 220 hectares of land in the governorate had been burned in the fires, including 100 hectares of farmland. The fires also damaged 150 hectares of land within the extension of the Arz and Shuh reserves in neighbouring Hama governorate.

According to local media, firefighting helicopters did not intervene until the fires approached a regime military base where Russian officers were also based, near the village of Al-Haylouneh in rural Hama. Several days after the fires started to spread, the [Ministry of Agriculture](#) and Agrarian Reform published photos of Syrian army helicopters and Iranian aircraft helping to fight the blaze.

By September 10, most of the fires were under control as the heatwave subsided. Two days later, on September 12, Prime Minister Hussein Arnous led a government delegation that visited the areas impacted by the fires in Hama, and voiced his assurances that the government would do what it could to compensate for the losses to nearby forests. The government would also appraise the amount of damage to private property in order to compensate residents, he said.

The [Ministry of Interior](#) announced on September 11 that it had arrested six people for causing the fires in Tartous and referred them to the judiciary after investigations reportedly showed that they had set fire to their own farmland. The announcement came after the Lattakia Fire Brigade said on September 6 that most of the fires had been caused by people burning weeds in order to clear their land or setting fire to nearby forests in order to expand their farms. The [Ministry of Agriculture](#) said three days later, on September 9, that the fires in Hama's Ayn Al-Kroum district had been started deliberately, and that it had confiscated five vehicles transporting lumber. Investigations showed that the fire in the Shuh reserve started due to negligence of a local resident, the ministry added. As for the fire in Masyaf, it reportedly lit up after a resident burnt agricultural waste on his land, allowing the blaze to spread to a nearby forest.

Most forestland in Syria is owned by the state and cannot be expropriated. No administrative authority can change those lands' legal specifications, according to Forestry Law No. 6 of 2018. Article 14 of the law explicitly prohibits land titling or leasing of state-owned forests that have been burned or damaged, no matter the cause of the fire and whether the area is registered as state-owned or not. The law also stipulates that the land be immediately reforested.

However, Article 14 does allow transfer of forestland ownership to administrative units (local governing bodies), provided that the Council of Ministers has issued a decree based on a proposal from the [Ministry of Agriculture](#) that the change of hands is for "the public interest". Article 47 of the same law also allows exchanges between privately owned forestlands, and between state-owned forests, by decree from the Council of Ministers. Effectively, the law permits the transfer

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of state forests from state ownership to administrative units and private ownership.

A human rights source in Latakia close to the governorate council told *The Syria Report* that local gangs along the coast were behind some of this year's forest fires. The groups, he alleged, are working to seize forestland and sell it to Russian investors. The fires were happening in a systematic manner, as Russian helicopters did not intervene to put out the blazes, despite their ability to do so and their proximity to the forest fires, the source added. *The Syria Report* cannot verify these claims.

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