

The effect of the 'Iron Swords War' on avocado cultivation in the Israeli communities surrounding the Gaza Strip

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Avocados have been grown in the Israeli villages near Gaza since the beginning of the 1970s in an area called 'Otef Aza' in Hebrew. In the last decade there has been a large planting boom in this area. The area planted to avocados in the 'Otef' is in a rather narrow strip of approximately 0-7 kilometers along the border with the Gaza Strip is an estimated 1,600 hectares, (about 4,000 acres).

On October 7, 2023, during the infiltration and massacre conducted by Hamas terrorists, the avocado plantings were hit very hard, growers were murdered, others lost their families. Most of the survivors were forced to leave the area in a mandated evacuation due to the unprecedented situation. Additionally, many of the Thai farm workers were murdered or kidnapped. The disaster that happened to the region is first a severe human and national disaster; the damage to avocado cultivation is significant.



Irrigation controller damaged by mortar bomb is fixed

A summary of the immediate situation to the avocados in the 'Otef' region follows:

Water: Most of the orchards did not have access to water from a security point of view, until mid-November and even then, there was limited access to water, and only in coordination with the military and often with military escort. It was not possible to respond to the orchard's needs in the month of October, known as a crucial month for growing avocados since this is the time that flower initiation begins for the following season, harvest begins and other important management items occur.

Some of the orchards suffered from looting and vandalism by the Gaza "civilian" rioters who infiltrated the 'Otef' in the second wave of terror. In many orchards, IDF field equipment ran over and trampled irrigation systems. Repairing the systems was complex and sometimes completion of repairs was severely delayed.



Repairing the Irrigation Systems

Many hectares of orchards were not irrigated regularly, and some were not irrigated at all until mid-November, which is approximately 6 weeks after the incursion. Some hectares are not able to get regular irrigation even now, nearly 3 months later.



Avocado trees that were not irrigated properly during the wartime



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Fertilizer: In addition to the many irrigation problems, it was not possible to monitor the fertilization and in most of the orchards there was no access to fill the fertilizer tanks.

The gibberellin spraying that is applied to help with flower differentiation was supposed to be applied in most of the orchards, but did not take place due to security problems.

Weeds: Lack of weed control caused an increase in weed growth and disruption of the planting areas, especially of young orchards. These weeds will now cost much more to eradicate than under normal circumstances.

Harvesting: In most orchards, picking was completely stopped until mid-November; long after the usual beginning of harvest!



Picking avocados near the border with the help of volunteers



A tank is dragging a truck loaded with avocados

Labor: In Israel, there is a program to allow workers from Thailand to be employed in agriculture for several years. Ninety percent of the Thai workers fled and the Palestinian workers from the West Bank are under quarantine and cannot come to work in this area.

Considering all the problems listed here and the daily struggles that many farmers still must face, I estimate that beyond the direct damage seen today in the orchards, we will notice the damage into the next harvest season of 2024/25. The economic damage is very great both in terms of price erosion at the beginning of the season and in terms of postponing operations in October that are necessary to insure a good crop the following year.

Despite all this, we, the 'Otef' farmers, will continue to plant and cultivate the orchards and fields, as a testament to our loved ones who were murdered and for the release of all the hostages.

Until the last furrow!