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Pining for a forested past

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caption: Beirut's pine forests used to cover over 1.2 million square meters, but today are confined to a small park largely closed to the public. (Image via Google Earth)

Options are limited for anyone looking to spend Earth Day in Beirut embraced by trees.

While the capital's municipality boasts 49 parks, taken together they comprise only 2.3 percent of Beirut's 20 square kilometers. City residents say they want more green space, but prospects for that happening soon look slim.

The trees and fields that until relatively recently comprised the vast majority of today's municipal Beirut have mostly been paved over and replaced with houses and high rises. Beirut today has around 460,000 square meters of green space - half of it closed to the public - a starkly different look for the land that now comprises the city.

Beirut has spent the majority of its 5,000-year life as a city enveloped by trees and fields. When Crusaders surrounded it early in 1110, the walled city surrounding the port was barely 211,000 square meters large and was ringed by pine forests.

Wood from the trees helped the invaders wage war - as it would later with foreign armies, from the Malmuks to the Allies during World War II - and the forests started shrinking. Druze Emir Fakhr al-Din II, who ruled Beirut from 1593 until 1635, restored the "picturesque pine groves" during his reign, wrote Samir Khalaf in his book *Heart of Beirut*.

By 1696 pine forests covered some 1.25 million square meters of modern Beirut and its southern and eastern suburbs, according to Taha al-Wali's 1993 book *Beirut: History, Culture and Urbanism*. Over 150 years later, the tide began to turn as Beirut exploded.

At the turn of the 19th century, most of the 6,000 or so Beirutis lived inside the 211,000 square meter walled city, which was known as "a charming, labyrinthine medieval enclosure surrounded by an unspoiled natural habitat with a fresh, healthy and seasonable climate," Khalaf wrote.

Throughout the 1800s, new residents poured into the city, spilling beyond its medieval walls. As Beirut grew, its Ottoman rulers roped off a large swath of pine forest from development and what is today known as the Horsch Beirut (Beirut Forest) became municipal property in 1878 - two years before the city's population swelled to 100,000.

The forest, however, shrank and shrank as Beirut grew, dwindling to 800,000 square meters in 1967 and 330,000 today, according to an article by Fadi Shayya in the book *At the Edge of the City*, which he edited and released this year.

Horsch Beirut now represents 72 percent of Beirut's green space but a full 66 percent of its greenest area is closed to the public. After Lebanon's devastating civil war, the municipality closed the forest - which was bombed by the Israelis in 1982 - to redesign and re-plant it.

Aside from a brief period in the 1990s, only a small area of the forest, dominated by a parking lot and athletic courts, has been open to the public. Authorities have long argued that the experiment of opening the entire forest failed because those who came littered, damaged property and turned the place into a make-out spot, according to Shayya's book.

Today only people over the age of 35 with special permission from the Municipality of Beirut can enter the garden - something a few authors in Shayya's book suggest is motivated more by ensuring the forest is the domain of the affluent and well-connected than preserving it.

Maya Rahbany, an agricultural engineer who works for the municipality, told NOW Lebanon that opening the 66 percent of the forest dominated by trees and plants does not seem likely in the near future.

"Eventually, we're going to try to open it," she said. "It's a matter of time."

How much time? Rahbany said the decision rests with the municipal authorities. Beirut's mayor did not respond to an interview request.

In the coming years, however, a 70,000 square meter public garden should open near the coast. Construction giant SOLIDERE - incorporated by the late former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri to rebuild downtown Beirut - is building the park on reclaimed land, though the company's most recent [annual report](#) does not say when it will open.

The company also plans to open a 23,000 square meter "[Garden of Forgiveness](#)" adjacent to Nejme Square, though progress on the project has stalled, and the company has not recently released an expected completion date for it.

These two gardens, however, were first planned in the 1990s, and few new public park designs have been announced since.

The [Green Party](#) has a plan for turning 8.5 kilometers along the Beirut River into public green space, though it would require the coordination and action of several municipalities and take over 10 years to complete.

In the lead up to last year's parliamentary elections, candidates for Beirut's first district on both sides of the political aisle told NOW Lebanon that residents listed more green space as one of their top concerns. As construction continues unabated around the city, it's getting harder to imagine where any new parks will go.



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