



# Potato Farming in Bekaa: Lebanon's Hidden Crisis

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## Investigative Report: Potato Farming in the Bekaa Region

As the conflict continues to expand across Lebanon following the events of September 23, Lebanon's potato farming sector faces significant and interconnected challenges. These difficulties include disrupted distribution and export pathways, escalating labor costs, and a premature frost that recently threatened crop quality. Farmers, like Rami Qamar, a major potato trader in the Bekaa region's Qab Elias central market and member of the Vegetable Importers and Exporters Union, are struggling to adapt to these swift and severe shifts in demand, production, and pricing.

### Sharp Decline in Demand and Market Disruption

"A drastic fall in demand", Qamar describes the situation in the potato sector. Where he **once sold approximately 25 tons of potatoes per day, his daily intake has dwindled to only one ton**, with overall sales falling to five tons over a five-day span. This reduction is largely due to the loss of sales in key areas such as Nabatieh, Tyre, Sidon, and southern Lebanon, which previously accounted for 75% of his market. The Qab Elias market, which typically supplies all of Lebanon, now faces difficulties in even reaching major distribution channels in Beirut. The Sin El Fil market is one of the few still operational, but its demand remains weak, severely affecting the flow of goods. These issues have brought the wholesale market almost to a halt. Even local demand is waning as nearby restaurants, previously substantial buyers, have closed their doors. Qamar, like many other farmers, now faces a surplus of early-season potatoes in storage while the new season's crop is

about to add even more to this stockpile. «I currently has 1,000 tons of early-harvest potatoes in cold storage, which can only last two months and costs \$50,000. The upcoming harvest will add 20,000 tons to the stockpile, incurring an additional \$100,000 in storage costs», Qamar said. Qamar's usual export routes have also been disrupted, as major export companies have ceased operations at Beirut Port due to security concerns. Moreover, the bombing of the «Masnaa» border crossing has halted exports to Syria, causing further strain.

### Impact of War on Local Markets and Prices

As a result of the conflict, Lebanon's potato prices have plummeted. In the wholesale market, the price of a kilo dropped from 50,000 Lebanese pounds before September 23 to 37,000 pounds within just 20 days. Qamar reflects on how this situation differs markedly from the July 2006 war, during which potato demand spiked.

«In 2006, prices climbed from 200 pounds to 1,100 pounds per kilo as the war created supply shortages. Transport costs also surged due to high demand. In contrast, the current conflict has had the opposite effect: with demand down, transportation costs have actually decreased from \$100 to \$75 per trip between the Bekaa region and Beirut, stated Qamar. Qamar also emphasizes how transportation fears are disrupting supply chains. He mentioned that «many shipments are delayed or halted entirely due to the risks of night-time bombings, and there is ongoing concern over road safety, as trucks could be targeted directly.»



### Labor Shortages and Rising Employment Costs

Potato farming has long relied on a Syrian labor force, but many of these workers have returned to Syria due to the conflict, creating a severe labor shortage. This scarcity has driven daily wages up, nearly doubling from 350,000 Lebanese pounds per day. Additionally, Qamar's six market employees, each earning \$500 per month, continue to receive their wages, even though the market has significantly slowed. This additional burden on his business is becoming increasingly unsustainable.

### Devastating Frost and Crop Damage

An unseasonal frost has compounded the difficulties facing farmers, harming crops prematurely. Typically, potato harvesting starts in mid-November, with irrigation halted two weeks before harvesting to allow the potatoes to absorb nutrients. However, this recent frost damaged the crops' greenery, reducing the plants' capacity to absorb water and nutrients, which could slash yields by up to 40%. Other vegetable farmers have been similarly affected, with the frost damaging beans, cucumbers, tomatoes, and zucchini.

### Rising Costs for Seeds and Fertilizers

Farmers are also facing a 30% increase in the costs of essential farming supplies like seeds and fertilizers, which are mostly imported. Shipping costs have similarly risen due to the conflict. The price of potato seeds, which was \$850 per ton before the war, now stands at \$1,300 per ton. Export companies now demand full payment upfront before shipping and no longer guarantee delivery, reflecting the increased risks of conducting business under current conditions.

### Financial Constraints and Future Uncertainty

Initially, Qamar had hoped the war would end swiftly, similar to the conflict in 2006, and maintained his regular production levels, unlike other farmers who reduced their output due to lower demand. Yet as many farmers have left their fields in southern Lebanon, unable to continue operations or repay loans, Qamar finds himself possibly needing to finance these farmers again in order to maintain the region's annual production volume.

### Post-War Plan: The Urgent Need for Sector Support and Intervention

Looking forward, Qamar emphasizes the **importance of collaboration between farmers, unions, and the Ministry of Agriculture** to assess remaining potato stock and establish a coordinated plan for distribution, marketing, and export. **Lebanon's annual potato production totals around 70,000 tons**, with the Bekaa region alone producing 20,000 tons. This amount previously met demand in the Gulf, with surplus for local consumption. However, if the war continues and next year's planting season is disrupted, Lebanon could face a serious food security crisis.

In anticipation of potential port closures, Qamar has already purchased seeds to plant in the Akkar region, which is relatively secure. However, he is concerned about the viability of selling his crop given the ongoing conflict. Traditionally, Lebanon relies on Egyptian potato imports beginning in February when the local harvest depletes. If the war continues until then, Lebanese potatoes could replace Egyptian imports, but around 25% of stored potatoes may spoil, further complicating supply and raising prices.



## The Need for Immediate Government and Union Intervention

Qamar expresses hope that the war will end soon and calls on the Ministry of Agriculture and agricultural unions to step up and play a proactive role in rescuing this critical sector. He recalls how, after the 2006 war, Lebanese banks provided low-interest loans, and Gulf countries offered significant support to rebuild. Today, Lebanon's banking sector has been weakened by the 2019 financial crisis, and the future of external support remains uncertain.

With the banking sector still in recovery and little clarity on future international support, Lebanon's agriculture sector faces significant obstacles. Without urgent intervention, the industry may suffer lasting damage, threatening not only the livelihoods of farmers but also Lebanon's food security and economic recovery.

