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White Storks Killings in Lebanon and the Effort to Stop It: The Role of Social Media in Spreading and Counteracting the Phenomenon

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Abstract

Massive White Storks killings in Lebanon and the response to the phenomenon reflect an example of globalized ties that connect and unite European and Middle Eastern societies. Numerous migrant birds, protected in Europe, are being killed solely for entertainment when they cross over the Lebanese sky in flocks of hundreds and thousands, among them the White Stork. The national law concerning hunting has not been enforced properly for many years in Lebanon. In result there are thousands of untrained hunters who shoot everything alive visible on the sky and afterwards proudly publish photos with the pray in the social media. This deteriorating phenomenon forced local environmentalists to seek the attention and help abroad. Hence, the network of Lebanese and Polish NGOs has been established to, via diplomatic channels, put a pressure on the Lebanese government to act more consistently. It seems that such unprecedented cooperation between Lebanon and Poland has brought forth desired results and migrating birds are becoming safer – thanks to the globalization and the Internet as well.

Key words: hunting, Lebanon, migratory birds, social media, White Stork

“Stork, stork, long-legged stork,
Off to your wife you'd better fly.
She's waiting for you in the nest,
Rocking four young ones to rest.

The first he will be hanged,
The second will be stabbed,
The third he will be burned,
And the fourth will be slapped!”

Hans Christian Andersen (*The Storks*, 1838)

INTRODUCTION

Nothing better reflects the complexity of nations' ecological ties in the globalized world as the phenomenon of birds' migration. Born in one place in the north, they annually migrate thousands of kilometres through many countries to winter in a warm region of the south. Some of them, like the White Stork (*Ciconia ciconia*), got so deeply enrooted in the culture of European nations that they are being considered as national heritage or even an iconic symbol, as it is in the case of Poland. Even though migrant birds spend half of the year “abroad,” they are considered “ours,” since they are born in Europe and therefore acquire the affiliation by the right of the soil. Yet, crossing numerous human drawn borders they enter other lands where it becomes a big challenge for them to survive due to hunting and poaching, as it happens in some countries of Africa and more commonly in the Middle East. Millions of soaring birds die every year on their way through the Levant, among them – thousands of White Storks, and it should not be considered solely an issue of the states whose airspace that concerns. Migrating birds, as all animals on the planet, belong to the global ecosystem, yet as well to multiple sub-ecosystems and thus their preservation is the concern for all humans, but especially for nations that host them. Therefore, it should not be considered an infringement of sovereignty, nor an act of imperialism, nor an oriental resentment if a nation expresses its concern about the fate of migratory birds mercilessly shot over a territory of another state just to prove the poachers' manhood. Furthermore, it should be welcomed with optimism when such a harmful phenomenon pushes the Lebanese non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to whistle-blow and spread the news to their European colleagues because it fosters further research and exchange through the media and the Internet. In consequence, due to the commitment of the Polish NGOs the diplomatic channels have been activated and the pressure put on the Lebanese government to act.

Last years NGOs' reports, press releases and the Internet social media invoked the problem of migrant birds mass killings in Lebanon¹, where they were hunted down and killed in millions without any legitimate reason – not because of hunger or environmental balance – but for the very entertainment of this activity. That sparked an outrage among environmentalists in Lebanon and the common public in Poland, where one of the migratory soaring birds, the White Stork, is commonly recognized as an informal national symbol (the White Eagle being the official one) and is widely considered as “our” bird since it breeds on the Polish land and its biggest population lives there.

Obviously, and unfortunately, the White Stork is not the only migratory species to be killed² and Lebanon is not the only country whose population is poaching them – it happens as well in Egypt, Sudan, Syria and even Cyprus, France, Malta or Spain (Birdwatch 2011a, Harper 2014, Kronenberg et al. 2013, p. 182), i.e. every country birds are migrating through. Yet, it is the scale of killings (partially due to the geographic localization of the migration routes that meet in the Levant) and the long-lasting lack of response that are so disturbing in the case of Lebanon.

This article starts with a brief explanation of the bird's cultural and pragmatic role, as well as the concept of its “Polish-hood”. Then, it briefly describes the migratory routes and tries to answer the question “How many White Storks cross the Lebanese sky?” Furthermore, it elucidates the phenomenon of illegal hunting in Lebanon, puts it in the legal framework, and finally aims at reconsidering the already taken countermeasures to prevent further killings of soaring birds in Lebanon, focusing especially on the Polish NGOs and diplomatic contribution.

Methodologically, the text is based on articles published in scientific journals, European and Lebanese NGOs' reports, recent press, radio and video releases regarding the phenomenon (2011-2014); social media research (encompassing examination of the Facebook profiles of the Polish and Lebanese NGOs, Lebanese hunters and their associations); as well as on the consultations with a Lebanese environmentalist and a lawyer.

The background and the symbolic meaning of the White Stork is described upon a work edited by Jakub Kronenberg (*et alia*, 2013), the migration routes and populations, that passes through, are discussed upon the articles of Yossi Leshem and Yoram Yom-Tov (1998), W. van den Bossche (2002), and the reports prepared by the Israel Ornithological Center by J. Meyrav (2009), M. Atallah-Augé, S. Dakdouk, J. El Khoury & N. Nasser (eds., 2005) for the Society for

¹ *Vide*: Nader 2013, Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) & Lebanon Eco Movement (LEM) 2013 and: Birdwatch 2011b, Čápi východních Čech 2011, Green Prophet 2012, LosyZiemi.pl 2013, Raptor Politics 2013, RMF24 2013, Tarka 2014, TVN Meteo 2013, Wild Life Extra 2012, wPolityce.pl 2013; also: the main Facebook profiles that inform on the poaching activity are: “STOP Hunting Crimes in Lebanon”, “STOP Shooting Birds!! in Lebanon” and the “Lebanon Eco Movement.”

² In fact there are 142 species (among them many endangered) identified as poachers' prey in Lebanon (CABS & LEM 2013).

the Protection of Nature in Lebanon, and a joint report of the Committee Against Bird Slaughter and the Lebanon Eco Movement (2013). The hunting phenomenon is presented upon the aforementioned material, press news, a radio analysis (Tarka 2014), a report of B. Abi Nader of the Lebanon Eco Movement (2013), the social media research, including a content analysis of the Facebook profiles of “Lebanon Eco Movement,” “Lebanese Hunting Club,” “Lebanon Hunting News,” “STOP Hunting Crimes in Lebanon,” “STOP Shooting Birds!! in Lebanon,” “T.E.R.R.E. Liban,” some private profiles; and a conversation with Mr. Marc Roger, a member of the “STOP Hunting Crimes in Lebanon.” The legal framework is discussed with the reference to the “Hunting System in Lebanon” law (no. 580 dated 25.02.2004), three reports published recently by the Birdlife on bird hunting legislation, policy and practices in the Mediterranean and Lebanon (Atallah-Augé et al. 2005, Birdlife 2006a, Birdlife 2006b) and e-mail consultations with a Lebanese lawyer Mr. Charbel Fadel. The response to the phenomenon and the Polish diplomatic and non-governmental efforts are described in the above mentioned documents and on the websites of *Grupa Ekologiczna*, the Polish Embassy in Beirut and the Facebook profiles of the Lebanese environmental NGOs.

“OUR STORKS”

The White Stork is commonly associated in European folk tales as a child-bringer, what was cemented, particularly as an explanation given for children, with a famous Hans Christian Andersen’s story *The Storks*³. The presence of the bird in the household is also believed to be a good omen and especially a sign of fertility (Columbia 2013). According to the well documented Polish popular believes, it also protects the buildings, which host its nest, from fire, hail and thunder (Głogier 1903, Janota 1876, Lewandowski & Radkiewicz 1991, Rzączyński 1721 & 1745, Wodzicki 1877, Wójcicki 1842 – all as cited in Kronenberg et al. 2013, p. 188). Some even say that the storks are capable of carrying water to extinguish the fire on the house, but it is most probably related to an observation that storks are pouring water from their beaks onto their offspring in the nest to cool down their temperature when there is a nearby fire (Sokołowski 1932 as cited in Kronenberg et al. 2013, p. 188). However, the most reasonable explanation for such unique human acceptance towards such great birds in people’s neighbourhood is a fact that they eat frogs, lizards, vipers and rodents, i.e. the animals that are considered abominable or pest (Kronenberg et al. 2013 p. 183-184, Tarka 2014). In African regions, vulnerable to the locust

³ "Yes," their [storks'] mother agreed. "What I have thought of will be just the right thing to do. I know the pond where all the little human babies lie until the storks come to take them to their parents. The pretty little babies lie in that pond, dreaming more sweetly than they ever dream afterwards. All parents want a little baby, and every child wants a little sister or brother. Now, we'll go to that pond and bring a little baby sister or brother for each of the children who didn't sing that wicked song or make fun of us. (Andersen, 1838).

plague, storks are also known to have some impact on regulation of insect population (La Baume 1910, Vesey-Fitzgerald 1959, Milstein 1966, Anderson 1995 – all as cited in Kronenberg et al. 2013, p. 183).

In Poland, which hosts the biggest population of storks amounting to over 50.000 couples (i.e. circa 250.000 birds, including the offspring, out of the total 1 million birds) (Kronenberg et al. 2013, Tarka 2014)⁴, that majestic soaring bird has gained a reputation of a national icon and, as such, it is distinctively recognizable by all Poles – both young and old; in daily life and during national festivals. The stork – less official in its symbolism and less aggressive than the Eagle – has become also an “export symbol” of Poland – a country famous of well-preserved natural environment and hospitable people. Polish souvenir shops are full of the three storks T-shirts, mugs, fridge-magnets, pens and other stuff with the inscription ‘*Made in Poland*’ (vide fig. 1); the stork mascot has already represented Poland for many years at the EXPO World Fairs; and the greatest and most representative Boeing 787 Dreamliner, recently bought by the Polish Airlines LOT, has been nick-named “Stork” in a popular radio contest (Kronenberg et al. 2013 p. 186, RMF24 2012). The authors of the quoted article (Kronenberg et al. 2013) point out that the employment of the stork motif in such an important and prestigious event as the EXPO means that in the judgement of the PR specialists, the stork is as much useful for the country branding and as much recognizable as amber or Chopin’s Mazurkas (p.186)!



Fig. 1. (To the left): The logo of “Made in Poland,” a promotion campaign of Poland among foreign visitors, that appeared on T-Shirts, mugs, fridge-magnets, pens and other souvenirs.

⁴ In 2004/2005 season, several international censuses estimated the total population at about 230.000 pairs (Yavuz, Yavuz, Tavares, Bar 2012); more on the international census can be read in G.C. Boere, C.A. Galbraith, D.A. Stroud (eds.), *Waterbirds around the world. A global overview of the conservation, management and research of the world's waterbird flyways*, The Stationery Office, Edinburgh 2006, p. 493-495 (available at www.jncc.gov.uk/worldwaterbirds - 2014.04.17).

(source of the image <http://orfinsklep.pl/en/product,17640794,magnet,bociany,made,in,poland.html> – 2014.04.21)

Fig. 2. (To the right): An example of a mobile phone case designed for the Polish Diaspora in England available in a French on-line store – not only it reflects the popularity of the stork motif and its Polish affiliation, but also the pan-European folk explanation for the ancient question “where do the babies come from?” (source of the image:

http://www.cafepress.fr/+stork_baby_poland_england_iphone_4_slider_case,508475771 - 2014.04.21)

Thus, the White Stork represents Poland not without a reason – it has gained its “citizenship” by *ius soli* it “wears” the Polish national colours (red and white) and in its slow and soaring flight the bird is majestic enough to arouse respect and admiration, as the national symbol should. Yet, also this elevation has a pragmatic foundation – storks have always been useful (and not only demographically) for households and the environment: they regulate the populations of smaller animals, provide shelter for many other species in their nests and reflect the cleanliness of the environment (“*the White Stork is a good biodiversity indicator*” – Tabólka, Sparks & Tryjanowski 2012 as cited in Yavuz et al. 2012) – (Kronenberg et al. 2013, p. 183-186). Presently, they also increase our *joie de vivre* of communing with nature – artificial platforms for the nest are being created (what attracts birds to breed and increase the population as studies in Italy, Croatia and Israel showed – Santopaoletti, Godino, Golia, Mancuso et al. 2013), the electric wire infrastructure is being improved and the wounded storks are rehabilitated in a special health centre for protected animals (TVN Meteo 2012a), cameras are mounted in nests to broadcast births of young storks (since 2006 a stork’s nest in Przygodzice has been seen on-line by 2 up to 5 million people from approximately 200 countries – TVN Meteo 2012b) and visitors come to show the birds to their children... Now, everybody knows that storks not only bring children, but whole families! A small Żywko village that lies on the Warmia-Mazury stork route is visited annually by more than eight thousand people and thus “the stork agro tourism flourishes: there are new recreation and hiking trails created (for pedestrians and cyclists)” all over the Northeastern Poland and even „a White Stork Museum has been established by the initiative of League of Nature Protection” (PAIiZ 2007). Obviously, the villages that attract storks, attract tourists.

In Poland, where a White Stork’s nest is “a traditional landscape component” (PAIiZ 2007), the birds themselves are a part of the natural heritage, a national symbol, and... an economic variable. That is why unfounded killings of those animals spark outrage among Poles who consider them “our storks.”

MIGRATING ROUTES AND THE LEBANESE BOTTLENECK

Geographically a part of the Levant, Lebanon is a tiny country of just over 10.000 square kilometres (1/30 of Poland's area), populated by fewer than 6 million inhabitants (5.88 million est. in 2014 – CIA 2014) and situated just below the Eastern migratory bird route. Its territory is divided into four main longitudinal regions: the coastal plain, the Lebanon, the Anti-Lebanon mountains with the narrow Beqaa Valley, that lies in between, and a prolongation of the Jordan Valley (an important route for migratory birds).

Each spring and autumn few million of migrant birds pass through the Levant on their way to Africa and back. Among them White Storks, whose European population divides almost equally for the birds that travel through the Western route (via Gibraltar) and the Eastern, the Levantine route. There is also a stork population that lives in Asia, but they take further East routes, especially in the autumn, when almost all of them travel via the Arabian Peninsula (*vide* fig. 3).

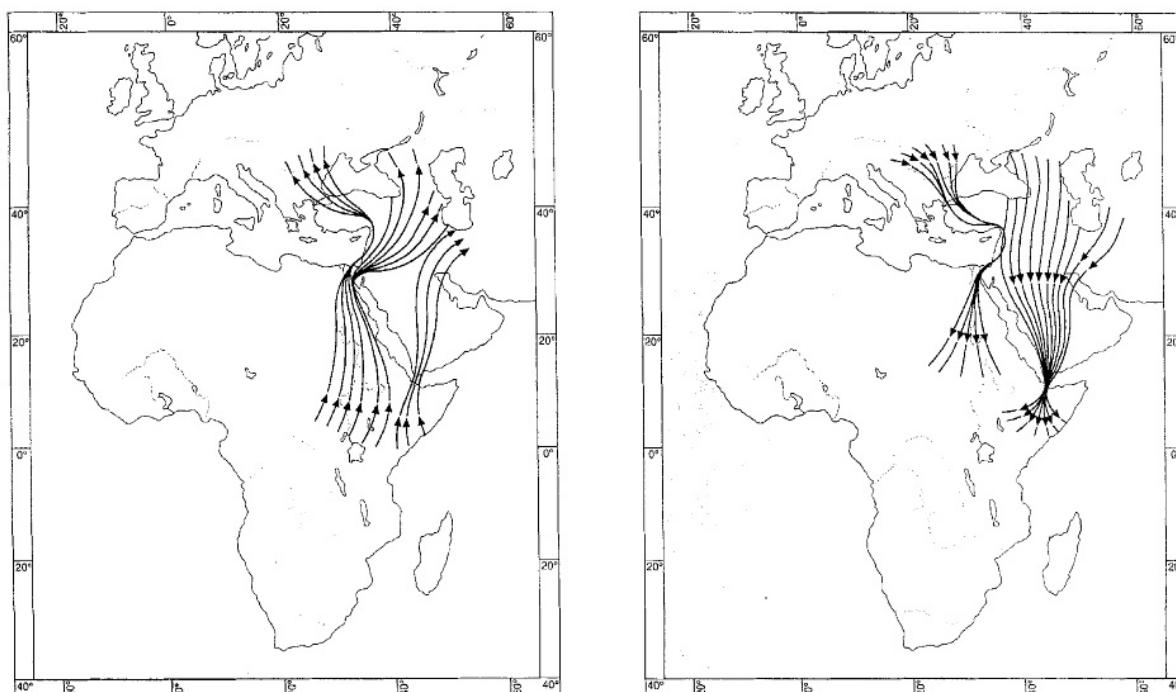


Fig. 3. Schematic view of the migration routes of soaring birds in the Middle East: spring (to the left) and autumn (to the right), (Yom-Tov & Tchernov 1988 as cited in: Leshem & Yom-Tov 1998, p. 50)

Although the above maps are only schematic, they show the importance of the Eastern route, which is taken annually by the Central and Eastern European storks. Therefore, all the soaring birds meet over the skies of Lebanon and Syria, what makes these lands crucially

important for the preservation of the birds. In reality, the Eastern route consists of several corridors, what is illustrated further in the text.

Due to the lack of studies in Lebanon, it is hard to estimate the numbers of White Storks that cross the Lebanese sky and their exact routes, yet the Israeli research can shade some light on that issue. According to Yossi Leshem and Yoram Yom-Tov (1998), soaring birds flying over Israel tend to take various routes depending on a season: “in the autumn, White Storks pass over only along the Jordan Valley axis, whereas in the spring, about half the migrating storks also pass over the western edge of the central mountain range” (p. 41). The research carried out during the four consecutive years of late 1980s showed that in the autumn 88% of White Storks tend to fly over a narrow front of 52-70 km east of the Mediterranean coast (via Jordan Valley route) and only 12% of storks passed on the western side of the central mountains (i.e. via the coastal channel) – (Leshem & Yom-Tov 1998, p. 43). On the other hand, during the spring season “White Stork migration was the most conspicuous” – according to the authors of the study – since it contradicted the former hypothesis that the Jordan Valley route was the main migration route for those birds. The research showed that “at least half of the migrating White Storks moved along the western slopes of Israel's mountains (239.100 +/- 61.400 birds)” (Leshem & Yom-Tov 1998, p. 44). Other surveys done in Israel during autumns of 1988-96 resulted in 73.153 to 313.108 White Storks passing through the Bet She'an Valley (the Eastern Israeli corridor used by the majority of White Storks migrating in autumn) with the exceptionally high number of 538.000 birds calculated in 1997 (Van den Bossche et al., 2002, p. 69). In a more recent survey carried out by the Israel Ornithological Centre (IOC) in the autumn 2009 315.000 White Storks were counted in Israel in the Dead Sea region (Meyrav 2009, p. 2). The results of the presented surveys show important differences in yearly counts and regardless of the numerous surveys it is hard not only to give the number of storks entering Lebanon, but even of those that just cross the Israeli sky.

The Eastern Israeli corridor, as depicted on the figure 4., according to observations, continues to the Lebanese Beqaa Valley (Leshem & Yom-Tov 1998, p. 44), but it can turn out that the birds steer further east to Syria and thus omit Lebanon. In the opinion of van den Bossche (et al. 2002, p. 64) “most White Storks on autumn migration enter Israel not from the north, but from the northeast and east. The majority enters Israel between the southern part of the Golan Heights and the southern edge of the Dead Sea,” therefore skipping Lebanese airspace.

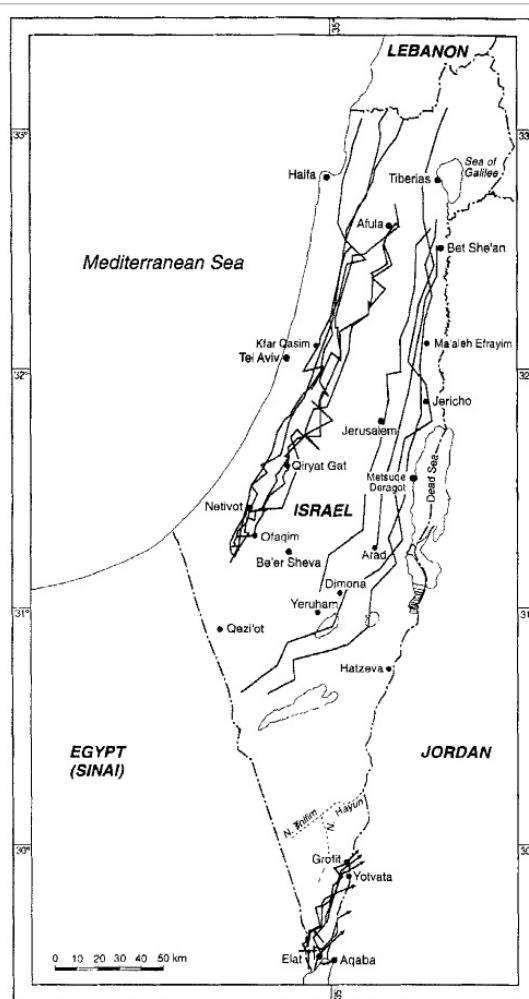


Fig. 4. Migration routes of soaring birds in Israel. Flocks using the western route were White Storks, the eastern route were White Storks and Lesser Spotted Eagles (the easternmost line) and the southern region were Honey Buzzards (Yossi Leshem, Yoram Yom-Tov; “Routes of...”, *op. cit.*, p. 44).

Leshem and Yom-Tov (1998) add that migrating storks are “probably divided almost equally” between the Israel and Jordan routes during both seasons (p. 51). On the other hand, the quoted survey of the IOC estimates the number of the birds crossing over Jordan for “anywhere from 20.000 to 150.000 storks” – therefore far fewer (Meyrav 2009, p. 2).⁵

Thus, it seems obvious that the birds that fly through Jordan continue via Syria but for those that pass over Israel it is not that clear. Generally, those of the Western Israeli corridor (during spring even up to 180.000-300.000) have to enter Lebanon, yet probably some of the storks travelling over eastern Israel (during autumn 70.000-310.000, exceptionally 580.000) come from or enter the Syrian airspace instead of flying via the Beqaa Valley. Hence, it can be estimated that 150.000-300.000 White Storks enter Lebanon, some of them twice a year. It can constitute a similar amount of the birds nesting in Poland, a country of about 37 million

⁵ The Israel Ornithological Centre complains on lack of surveys on the Jordanian side.

inhabitants, therefore, for fewer than 6 million Lebanese, such a number of birds (and it is only one of approximately 400 species crossing the Lebanese sky) can falsely appear as infinite. That probably lies at the foundations of irrational massacres done on migratory birds just for entertainment.

Only during two migrant seasons, two million European migrating birds pass over Lebanon to winter in Africa and to breed in Europe (Atallah-Augé, Dakdouk, El Khoury & Nasser 2005, p. 9/15). The already quoted report prepared by the Lebanon Eco Movement in collaboration with the German Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS & LEM 2013) points at two main corridors for migrant birds: the coastal pathway – considered the most important, and the above mentioned Beqaa Valley. “The plateau is in places only a few kilometres wide. And precisely at this bottleneck, where the migration flocks are funnelled into a narrow corridor, bird hunting has a long tradition” (p. 2). On the other hand, *The National Report on Hunting. Country: Lebanon* prepared by the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL) describes three corridors in the country, naming the Beqaa Valley the most important, especially for the soaring birds. The third corridor lies within “the Anti-Lebanon mountain range and is mainly used by soaring birds during the spring migration” (Atallah-Augé et al. 2005, p. 8/15), (*vide* figure 5. for the schematic maps of the routes). The report (Atallah-Augé et al. 2005) points out also several other “micro-flyways” with the Beirut valley, which is considered as a main hunting spot (due to its proximity to the capital) and a very popular *Bhamdoun Markwas* (“shooting range”), a place that is covered all over with empty cartridges (p. 8/15). And not less significantly, just next to the town of Chtaura, which is one of the closest cities to Beirut in the Beqaa Valley, the authors of the report counted 20 large hunting shops in the distance shorter than 50 metres (Atallah-Augé et al. 2005, p. 9/15).

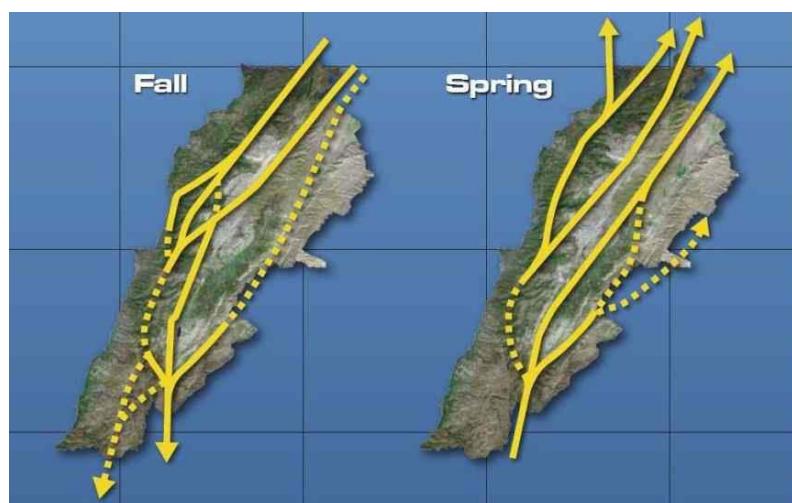


Fig. 5. Main migrant routes in Lebanon (solid lines – known, dashed – possible) during autumn and spring according to the Lebanese environmentalists (Fig. by A. Rocha in: Nader 2013, p. 3).

THE HUNTING

Hunting White Storks is neither a new phenomenon, nor it happens only in Lebanon. For instance, in Wad Medani, in eastern Sudan, where much of the Polish Stork colony winters, farmers and shepherds were catching resting storks with bare hands or with boomerangs called *safaroque* in order to diversify their daily menu, causing about 3.000 deaths annually in the late 1980s (Schulz 1988 as cited in Kronenberg et al. 2013, p. 182). Yet, these birds were, and probably still are, killed in primitive (i.e. also limited) way in order to be eaten. On the contrary to the hunters in the Mediterranean (including not only Lebanon and Syria but also France and Spain) who kill White Storks with sophisticated weaponry for the so called sport or trophy. In the late 1990s the estimated number of White Storks killed annually by all hunters and poachers on the three continents amounted to 15.000, i.e. 2-3% of the total population that takes the Eastern route (Berthold 2000 as cited in Kronenberg et al. 2013, p. 182). Presently, the environmentalists of Lebanon inform of 5.000 to even 10.000 White Storks being killed in Lebanon itself (Roger 2014),⁶ and according to Marwan Owaygen from the UNDP Regional Centre in Cairo, “records of 70-100 birds per day per person are not surprising figures during spring migration” (“Egypt Bird Group” 2008). Only “this spring [of 2014] in two different situations, 200 White Storks were killed in roosting area” (Roger 2014). The overall number is alarming since it seems that the amount of the killed birds is raising due to an uncontrolled poaching activity, what can have an impact on the entire stork population and thwarts European efforts to increase the bird's European population and to reintroduce them in places where they are already extinct.

The modern way of hunting in Lebanon has a tradition of only about six decades – it was in the 1950s when the president of the newly created Lebanese Republic introduced the British style of hunting with rifles and dogs as a sport. The president was a charismatic person, and thus his *entourage* quickly adopted the lifestyle, unsurprisingly the fashion was further spread among entire Lebanese population due to the low cost of hunting equipment, huge amount of migrating birds and lack of other activities in rural areas. Presently, hunting remains popular because of these very reasons, yet it is as well “practiced as a source of income given that [small] birds are considered a delicacy in the country; other reasons include a way to relieve pressure; a hobby, sport and way to be in nature; and male-bonding activity allowing to escape women [sic!]” (Atallah-Augé et al. 2005, p. 5, 8/15).

⁶ Data acquired from Marc Roger, a member of „STOP Hunting Crimes in Lebanon” in conversation on 21st April 2014 via the social media. As well „if one compares the proportion of Facebook profiles checked by us to the total numbers of active hunters in the Lebanon, the numbers of birds shot every year must amount to several thousand individuals of each species [the White Stork and the Honey Buzzard].” (CABS & LEM 2013, p. 10).

Nowadays, another phenomenon accompanies and fuels hunting – it is the social media. The poachers are very fond of their prey to the extent that they expose it proudly in the Internet, especially on the Facebook portal, where they enjoy acclaim of their friends. The photos, sometimes abominable in their brutality or wicked sense of humour, are made public and signed with names, and commented without any sense of wrongdoing or fear of being prosecuted (hunting on migratory birds is forbidden in Lebanon – more on that further in the text). The LEM and the CABS collected those pictures and recognized most of the prey (see the quoted report): more than 13.000 birds were killed (among them not only White Storks but at least 143 other species, also protected and endangered throughout Europe, as e.g. the Lesser Spotted Eagle⁷), and “this figure represents only a minuscule fraction” of the hunters’ activity – the environmentalists say (CABS & LEM 2013, p. 3). Just a few examples of the photos are presented below to illustrate the disturbing phenomenon of the marriage of poaching and the social media (*vide* fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Photos found on the social media (Facebook): above from the left: Lesser Spotted Eagles (*Aquila pomarina*); a child holding a Black Stork (*Ciconia nigra*) – hunting with and by children is not an exception; White Storks killed during the spring migration of 2014; below to the left: White Storks hung “to dry” (all

⁷ Regarding the Lesser Spotted Eagle: „*Apart from modification of habitat, the on-going hunting on the migratory flyways (it is apparently the favourite raptor hunted in Lebanon, where local information suggests killing of 100s and even 1,000s every autumn) has been one of the causes attributed to the decline.*” (Meyburg et al., 1997, p. 8).

reposted by “STOP Hunting Crimes Lebanon”); below to the right: a photo posted on April 12, 2014, with the user’s name and surname on the Facebook profile of the “Lebanon Hunting News” with a description “27” (number of killed Storks), received almost as many “likes.”

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

A quarter of century of an internationalized civil war (1975-1990), followed by the Israeli and Syrian occupation, another conflict with Israel (2006), present unrest of Syrian conflict with massive refugee influx, and Hezbollah increased military activity are permanently accompanying the daily Lebanese life, and thus consistently receding the environmental issues into the background.

However, Lebanon is a part of several multi-lateral international agreements that have direct or indirect relevance for protection of migratory birds. Although the country did not sign the 1979 Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS, the so called Bonn Convention), it ratified an agreement within the CMS framework: the African-Eurasian Waterbird Agreement that “includes recommendations regarding the use of lead shots, hunting of waterbirds, conservation of key sites for their protection and species-specific action plans.” The Levantine state is also a party of the Convention on Biological Diversity of 1992, the Ramsar Convention (i. e. the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, especially as Waterfowl Habitat) of 1971 and the Barcelona Convention (the Convention for Protection against Pollution in the Mediterranean Sea) of 1976 with the protocol concerning the Specially Protected Areas of Mediterranean Importance – all those acts obligate Lebanon to protect migratory birds or their habitats (Birdlife 2006a, p. 10).

And so, reviving from the ashes of the civil war at the beginning of the 1990s, the Lebanese government wanted to manage hunting in the country. Since there had been no monitoring, nor studies on wildlife population for last decades, the government initially banned all hunting activities in order to buy some time for studies and to prepare a proper legislation. The ban was introduced for 5 years in 1995.⁸ However, it was renewed four times due to the lack of consensus among the interested parties: the government, the environmentalists and the hunting lobby. It fuelled frustration among hunters, and with weak enforcement of the law, the prohibition has been widely ignored (Atallah-Augé et al. 2005, p. 5/15 and Birdlife 2006a, p. 3). In 1994 when the ban was voted, there was 14.000 registered hunters; presently, the estimations vary from 60.000 (maximum – according to hunter organizations) to 600.000 (according to environmental NGOs), with a possible amount of 300.000-400.000 judged upon the extent of

⁸ The date sometimes varies depending on the sources.

hunting activities (Atallah-Augé et al. 2005, p. 5 & 12/15). To compare, the Polish Hunting Association counts 116.000 members (*Polski Związek Łowiecki* 2014).

Finally, in 2004 a new act on the hunting system in Lebanon was voted in the parliament (“Hunting System in Lebanon” – law no. 580 dated 25.02.2004)⁹. The idea of the legislation was to regain the control over hunting by allowing to hunt certain species during strictly defined seasons and enforcing protection over endangered species. Therefore, the article XXII abrogates all the previous law inconsistent with the new legislative, and already in the article 4.(a), the law explicitly prohibits hunting migratory birds all over the year without any exception.¹⁰ Moreover, the article XI bans the export of the prey without a permission issued by the Ministry of the Environment (such activity has been highlighted by environmentalists as well). The article XIV and XV define possible punishment: imprisonment up to one month, a fine of 500.000 Lebanese Pounds (ca. 330 USD), cancellation of the hunting license, and in certain cases: confiscation of the weaponry and any illegal hunting equipment.

The implementation of the law has been delayed due to the assassination of the prime minister Rafiq Hariri the following year, the subsequent political turmoil and, reportedly, until the Law 580 is fully implemented, the hunting ban of 1994 is still in force – with its fines that were much lower for killing migratory species than the “national” ones (Birdlife 2006a, p. 3). However, the fines are never levied on poachers, since the level of corruption reported by the SPNL was significant, with bribes sometimes equalling to a weekly salary of the law enforcement officers (200-500 USD) – (Atallah-Augé et al. 2005, p. 7/15). According to the Lebanon Eco Movement, the full implementation of the Law 580 was still pending acceptance of the remaining application decrees in 2013 (CABS & LEM, 2013, p.2). Yet, a Lebanese lawyer, Charbel Fadel (Fadel, 2014), consulted for the purpose of this article, stated that “the hunting law was published and several executive regulations were issued after its publication” and since “a law becomes enforceable ‘*et entre en vigueur*’ once it’s published in the official gazette.” Therefore, legally the Hunting Law number 580 is valid and binding (even if not enforced by the appropriate institutions in daily life).

Discussing the law, it is worth mentioning the religious law, since for devoted people it is not less important, than the state law. And Lebanon “has the most religiously diverse society in the Middle East, comprising 17 recognized religious sects” with slightly more than 1/3 of them being Christian and the majority of them being Islamic (Dukata 2007, p. 85). As for the

⁹ Available at the website of the Lebanese Ministry of the Environment (<http://www.moe.gov.lb> – 2014.04.23): „*qanwn rqm / 580, nżam alyd albry fy lbnan*”(transliterated from Arabic).

¹⁰ Transliterated as follows: „*almadhb alrab'eh : a*”

yhd d wṣyr alwsayb , b'ed astħarħ almjls , altra'ed almsnħb ktra'ed syd walmsmħb syda fy awqat m'eynh nyħadd tk̇ alawqat . fyma kbla altra'ed alty thdd wsqaan llsqrb alsabq , t'etḃ jmy'e altynr walbywanat albryb almqymb walmbajrb mhmyh 'ela mdar alsnh nyħżr sydha ,” ibidem.

Christians (and the Jewish) the Book Leviticus of the Bible (and the Torah) see the stork as an unclean animal that should not be eaten: “These are the birds you are to regard as unclean and not eat because they are unclean: the eagle, the vulture (...) the stork...” (Leviticus 11: 13-19) – it can have some impact on Christian dislike towards the consummation of those birds’ meat (Kronenberg et al. 2013, p. 182). For Muslims it is even more obvious. The hadiths – the stories narrating the Prophet Mahomet’s life – clearly reveal his inclination towards wellbeing of animals. According to one of the stories, narrated by Abdallah bin Ja'far, “the Prophet passed by some children who were shooting arrows at a ram. He told them off, saying: ‘Do not maim the poor beast’” (bin Ja'far 7:238 as cited by CHAI). In other narration it is stated that: “the Prophet forbade an animal being made a target;” (Anas, no. 1606 as cited by CHAI) furthermore “the Prophet condemned those people who take up anything alive as a mere sport;”(bin ‘Omar, np. 1958 as cited by CHAI) and finally: “the Prophet forbade blood sports” (ibn Abbas 8:15, no. 2603 as cited by CHAI). Even during the war, a Muslim should not kill an animal he is not going to eat – according to the instruction given to his army by the first caliph Abu Bakr after the Prophet’s death (CHAI). Therefore, for Islam believers, it is clearly prohibited to shoot the animals without a reason, and an entertainment is certainly not one of them.

Even though the hunting ban of 1994/1995 was intended to serve the environment and migrant birds, its prolongation has been deeply harmful. Not only it weakened the respect for the law, but also committed to the emergence of thousands of untrained poachers who received no education on hunting ethics, good practices or bird identification, and therefore shoot indiscriminately to everything that crosses the sky. “The impact of the ban on hunting has been tremendous on bird population” – the report of the SPNL points out (Atallah-Augé et al. 2005, p. 6/15).

Furthermore, the report published by the Birdlife on hunting practices in the region („Birdlife” 2006b) adds: “Lebanese hunters shoot migrants in preference to residents because they believe migratory birds have higher reproduction rates/ large populations; they provide no ecological benefit; the hunters feel no connection with them; they believe impacts of migrant hunting in Lebanon are insignificant compared with those in Turkey” (p. 6). Such an approach “has nothing to do with hunting, since it does not regulate the population, it is a robbery on the environment done for entertainment, for primitive exercise” – Andrzej Kurszewicz, the director of the Warsaw Zoological Garden, comments on the phenomenon. Further, he adds: “for the ecosystem it is a loss, especially when the phenomenon is massive... It can have an impact on the Polish population” (Tarka 2014).

Political instability and, in consequence, inability to cope with legislation and law enforcement in the country that lies on an important migratory route have resulted in a situation that is undoing the European efforts to protect populations of numerous migrant, sometimes endangered, species. The Lebanese environmentalists, grouped in the Lebanon Eco Movement, being aware that their own voice fails to be heard among the Lebanese policymakers, decided to draw European attention to the phenomenon. Yet, it is a Polish diplomatic effort that seems to give a sign of change in the Country of Cedars.

INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS

The phenomenon has been known for many years, but most probably due to the social media the problem has become visible for the broader public. It is therefore possible that the very same instrument that fuels poachers' eagerness to hunt (i.e. the social media), could help counteract the phenomenon.

The Facebook profile "STOP Hunting Crimes in Lebanon" (over 15.000 followers) was registered on November 27, 2013, to share the poachers' photos with their prey and spread the news about the on-going carnage – the staff has collected more than 20.000 such pictures published on the Facebook. These photos were analyzed by the Committee Against Bird Slaughter and the Lebanon Eco Movement and the results were published in a form of two quoted reports in March and June 2013 (CABS & LEM 2013, Nader 2013). Yet, earlier it was the "STOP Shooting Birds!! in Lebanon" Facebook profile that denounced poachers' activity (since May 7, 2011). Upon those data and signals made by the members of the LEM, a lot of press releases have been published¹¹ and the Polish environmental activists shocked by the information they had read in the article "Birds massacred in Lebanon – Unfettered hunting a disgrace" (*Wildlife Extra* 2012) decided to act. Most probably this article was crucial in fighting the phenomenon – the very text was cited by *Grupa Ekologiczna* (the Polish Ecological Group) as a reason to intervene (Grupa Ekologiczna 2014), and furthermore, it reveals the Lebanese source of the news, what is very important for the good name of the country. In consequence, on January 14, 2013, a group of ten Polish NGOs wrote a letter to the embassy of the Lebanese Republic in Poland (with a copy to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs) demanding the necessary actions to be undertaken by Beirut (Grupa Ekologiczna 2013).

Simultaneously, in March 2014 *Grupa Ekologiczna* in collaboration with the Association T.E.R.R.E Liban prepared and distributed, with a help of the Embassy of the Republic of Poland

¹¹ *Vide* the footnote 2 and particularly Wild Life Extra 2012.

in Beirut, leaflets and posters (fig. 7)¹² about the White Stork in schools; and *Polska Agencja Prasowa* (the Polish Press Agency) prepared a short video for educational purposes that describes the importance of the animal¹³. Activities such as “A day with the birds” that aims at raising awareness about birds’ protection are conducted for families with children in a common effort by the Polish Embassy and T.E.R.R.E. Liban.¹⁴

It is important to teach potential future hunters about the necessity to preserve wild animals, yet it will be much harder to shape the awareness of the already self-made hunters. On Facebook there are hunting groups that support the environmental protection (like “Pro Lebanese Hunters,” ca. 6.800 members) but there are also much bigger groups whose message can be seen as ambivalent, if not cynical. One of them is the Lebanese Hunting Club (over 16.000 followers) that alternately publishes (or allows its members to publish) photos discouraging to shoot protected species (fig. 8) and photos with hunters’ mass-shot prey or video that glorifies massive and excessive hunting like that one whose snapshots can be seen below (fig. 9).



Fig. 7 & 8. A leaflet of Grupa Ekologiczna and T.E.R.R.E. Liban (to the left) and a picture posted by the Lebanese Hunting Club on Mother's Day (to the right).

¹² Those can be seen on the official website of the Embassy of the RP in Beirut: http://beirut.msz.gov.pl/en/news/let_s_protect_storks (2014.04.30).

¹³ The film with the English subtitles can be seen on the YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xre0veatIN4> (2014.04.22).

¹⁴ For more details see the Facebook profile of “T.E.R.R.E. Liban association.”

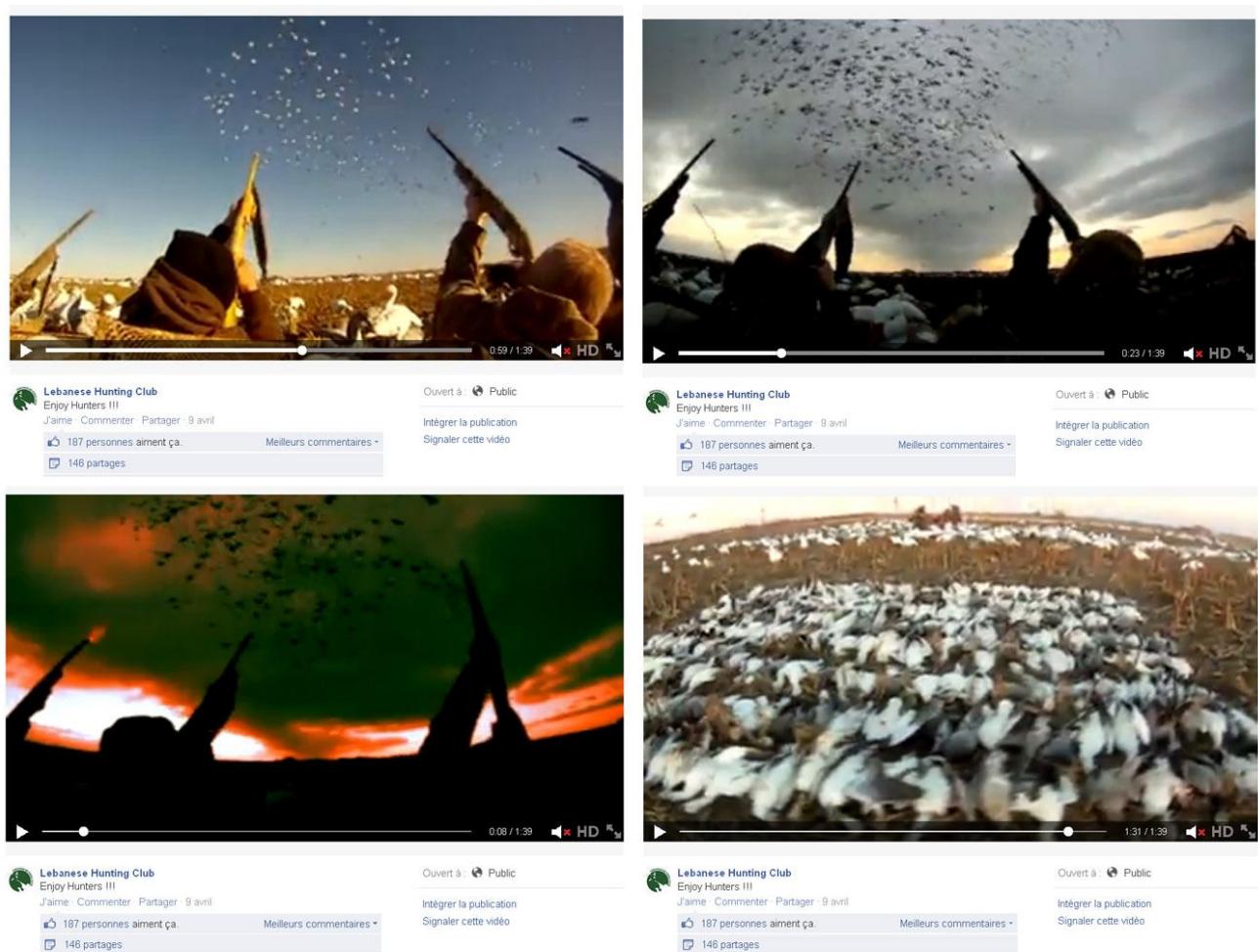


Fig. 9. A compilation of snapshots of a video published by the Lebanese Hunting Club on its Facebook profile on April 9, 2014 with description: “Enjoy Hunters !!!” (and 187 “likes”). The last frame shows the prey of dozens shot birds and the hunters’ post among with artificial birds (the video can be seen on: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=696137433781883&set=vb.298608453534785&type=2&theater> – 2014.04.30).

Finally, on April 11, 2014, the Polish ambassador met with the Lebanese Minister of the Environment, Mohammad Machnouk, to discuss the issue of “mass killings of migrating birds.” The minister declared his support for the Polish educational campaign and announced that on April 7, a decree was issued that introduced the Environment Protection Service, which aim is to counteract poaching. “The new law will allow to establish an organization specialized in controlling and enforcement of a hunting law (implemented by the parliament in 2004). Additionally, a countrywide registry of hunting law violations will be created to record all people involved in illegal killings (Stork killings included)” – as the Polish embassy in Beirut informs (Embassy of RP in Beirut 2014). It would be possible that a person that appears in the register would not be granted a visa to the Schengen area – the chairman of *Grupa Ekologiczna* specifies (Grupa Ekologiczna 2014). Hopefully, it is not just a political statement and the freshly appointed

executive will have the ability to enforce the law and significantly curb illegal hunting in Lebanon. We cannot be sure whether the Polish diplomatic efforts directly influenced the recent decree, yet, it seems that the Lebanese government understood that killing migrant birds on its territory is harmful to the image of the country, particularly in the EU,¹⁵ which is one the biggest donors of the Official Development Aid to Lebanon.

CONCLUSIONS

„Do kraju tego, gdzie winą jest dużą
Popsować gniazdo na gruszy bocianie,
Bo wszystkim służą...
Tęskno mi, Panie...”

(“For the land where it's a great travesty
To harm a stork's nest in a pear tree,
For storks serve us all...
I am homesick, Lord!...”)¹⁶

Cyprian Kamil Norwid, *Moja piosnka (My Song)*

The phenomenon of migratory birds killing in Lebanon, although not the biggest threat to the migrant birds (deprivation of habitat being the major), illustrates the broader problem of excessive hunting of animals and reveals the ties that connect, seemingly not related, nations in the globalized world. It also portrays how the modern communication technology, as the Internet and the social media can help to act in favour of the environment and exercise a leverage, via diplomatic channels, on the government of the state that was reluctant to protect the common natural heritage before; and most optimistically – that there are people around the globe for whom the fate of endangered animals is important and they are eager to act together despite the distance.

One cannot be sure about the outcome, especially given the unrest in the Middle East and rising political instability in Lebanon itself. Yet, since the network among the Polish and Lebanese NGOs has been established, the educational campaign began, the diplomatic machine

¹⁵ On the European level, Ireneusz Kaluga of Grupa Ekologiczna met the EU parliament member, Jolanta Hibner from the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI) striving for support of the European institutions. The parliament member expressed her interest in pursuing the matter. (Ireneusz Kaluga on the Facebook profile of „Grupa Ekologiczna” on March 31, 2014).

¹⁶ Translated by Walter Whipple; <http://www.mission.net/poland/warsaw/literature/poems/mysong.htm> (2014.05.10).

has been started and the proper authorities are being brought into existence, it seems that Lebanon has entered the right way to decrease the annual wildlife damage done by illegal hunting. Even though it will take many more years to limit the poaching, it seems that the issue has finally reached the agenda.

To conclude, though the problem requires deeper studies regarding the numbers of White Storks entering Lebanon, those being shot, their routes, stopovers, the habitat deprivation and even food contamination, etc., the issue that is the most urgent now is the continuous, consistent and real institutional protection of wildlife in the ancient and beautiful Country of Cedars.

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