

# TO BHMA

International edition

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## AI Is Helping to Pick Targets, Plan Bombing in Tehran

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

By Daniel Michaels and Dov Lieber

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

The U.S. and Israeli attacks on Iran have unfolded at unprecedented speed and precision thanks to months of planning, a massive assemblage of military force and a cutting-edge weapon never before deployed on this scale: artificial intelligence.

AI tools are helping gather intelligence, pick targets, plan bombing missions and assess battle damage at speeds not previously possible. AI helps commanders manage supplies of everything from ammunition to spare parts and lets them choose the best weapon for each objective.

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## One 2021 Prediction Fed Fears of Invasion Of Taiwan in 2027

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

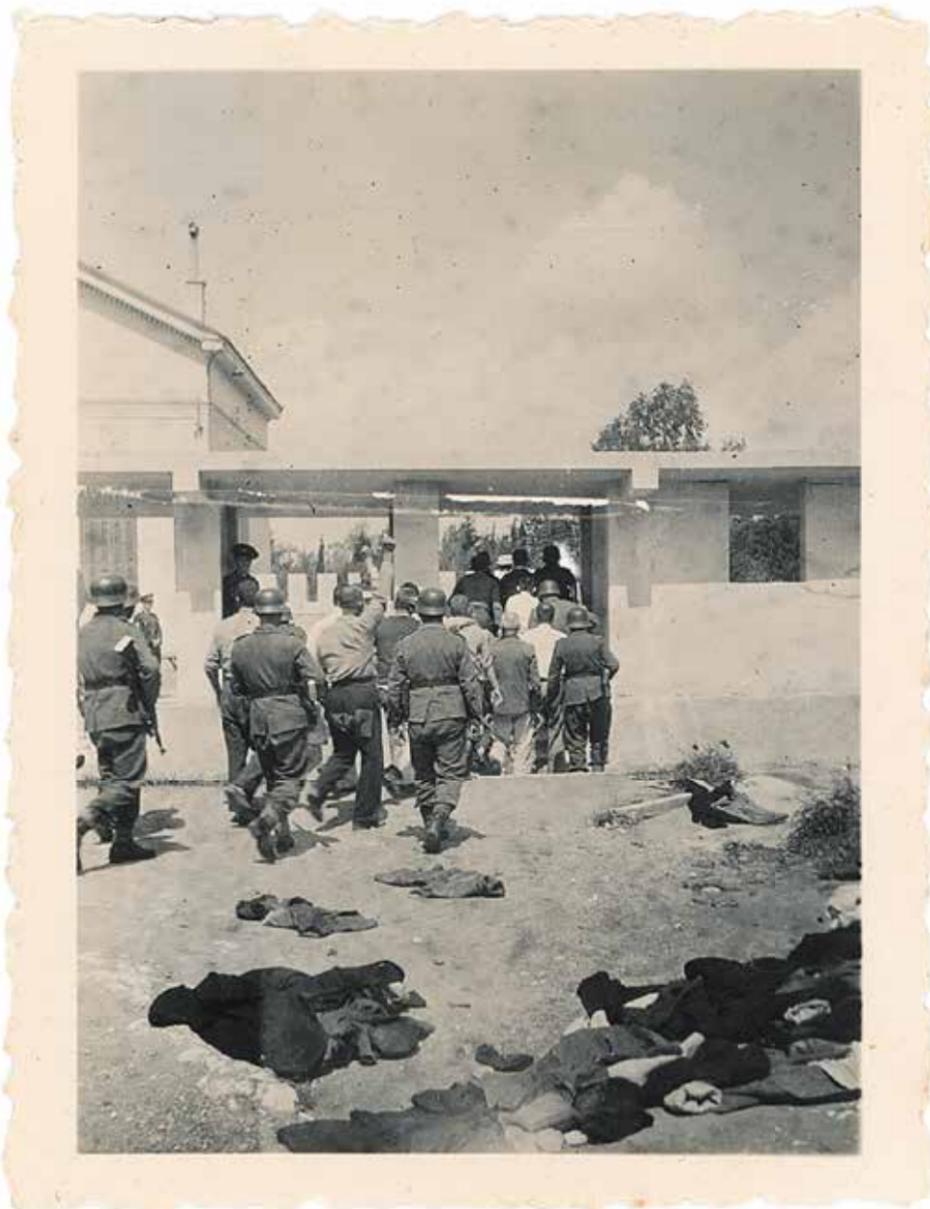
By Austin Ramzy, Chun Han Wong and Joyu Wang

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

A single prediction delivered to Congress by a U.S. admiral six years ago has shaped military strategy and spurred billions of dollars in spending in preparation for a potentially catastrophic conflict. The deadline is now just one year away.

Adm. Philip Davidson, speaking to a Senate committee on March 9, 2021, suggested that China's military advances and ambitions would threaten Taiwan "in the next six years."

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## Haunting Nazi Execution Photos Force Greek Archive

By Maria Paravantes

In a space smaller than a passport photo, just 5cm by 6, one of the most tragic moments in modern Greek history comes to light 82 years later, exposing the atrocities Nazi Germany inflicted on the Greek people.

Moments from those dark days were captured on May 1, 1944, by the steady hand of a Wehrmacht sergeant who photographed the execution of 20 Greek men.

They were among 200, most of them Communists and members of the Resistance, who were executed in batches of 20.

Each group carried their dead comrades to the army trucks before their turn came. After the shooting, the photographer walked among the lifeless bodies, taking images of

the corpses while another soldier, pistol in hand, ensured the fallen Greek prisoners were truly dead. If any still showed signs of life, he would shoot them again on the spot.

Minutes earlier, the men had been ordered to remove their coats so the bullets would penetrate their bodies more easily.

Composed and unwavering, the 20 men in the photos, just some of the hundreds who faced similar deaths across Greece during WWII and the German occupation, looked bravely into the camera on their way to the firing squad as the Wehrmacht officer immortalized the achievements of Nazi Germany on film.

Their final moments stand as a stark reminder of a dark chapter in modern Greek history that must never be repeated.

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Minutes before the execution, Nazi soldiers ordered 20 men out of a total of 200 to remove their coats, ensuring the bullets would penetrate their bodies more easily. This was May Day, 1944, at the Kaisariani shooting range, just 5km from central Athens. The next group of prisoners was forced to carry their dead comrades to the army trucks before their own turn came.

GREEK MINISTRY OF CULTURE

TO BHMA International edition

## Rhodes' Path to Regeneration

By Cheryl Novak

Flames tore through the pine-covered hills of Rhodes, sending smoke billowing toward the beaches below. From the air, the fire twisted into towering tornado-like columns that seemed to drive the flames forward toward the sea.

Along the island's narrow coastal roads, tourists hurried on foot toward evacuation points where buses

waited and small boats were gathered offshore. Some carried suitcases. Others had come straight from the beach, still in their bathing suits, holding only a phone or a small child.

The wildfires of July 2023 necessitated what Greek authorities described as the largest evacuation ever carried out in Greece, with more than 19,000 people fleeing hotels, villages and beaches by land and sea.

The blaze ultimately

burned about 17,773 hectares, damaging homes and hotels and destroying large stretches of forest across one of Greece's most important tourism destinations, an island that receives millions of visitors each year.

Rhodes was not alone that summer. Across the Northern Hemisphere, prolonged heat and drought created the conditions for one of the most destructive wildfire seasons in recent years.

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Forest ravaged by the 2023 fires, near the Holy Monastery of "Our Lady of Ypseni" on Rhodes.

ARTICLE & PHOTOS BY CHERYL NOVAK

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One with the future

# How AI Is Turbocharging the War in Iran

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Intelligence, targeting and damage assessments are accelerating thanks to military versions of software now remaking business and daily life

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Before Israeli jet fighters launched ballistic missiles that killed Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei at his residence a week ago, launching the current regional war, Israeli intelligence services had for years been monitoring hacked Tehran traffic cameras and eavesdropping on senior officials' communications—increasingly relying on AI to sift through a flood of intercepts.

The use of AI in the campaign against Iran follows years of work by the Pentagon and lessons learned from other militaries. Ukraine—with U.S. help—increasingly relies on AI in its war against Russia. Israel has tapped AI in conflicts at least since the October 2023 Hamas attacks.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has urged accelerated adoption of AI to create “an ‘AI-first’ warfighting force.” At the same time, he is engaging in a public battle with Anthropic, a critical AI supplier, and the Pentagon has contracted with rival OpenAI to use its models in classified settings. President Trump has ordered the government to stop using Anthropic's products. But U.S. officials say the fight unfolding in Iran is showing the usefulness of Anthropic's AI agent, Claude.

The U.S. and Israel have declined to discuss exactly how they are employing AI in the widening conflict, but recent comments from military leaders and technical experts provide a window.

Most military AI applications aim to give commanders and planners more complete information, faster than is now possible. That, in turn, should let them make better and quicker decisions than the enemy can, gaining a battlefield advantage.

The U.S. says it has struck more than 3,000 targets in Iran since the attacks began Saturday, using an array of weapons including attack drones launched from ships, F-22 jet fighters taking off from Israel and B-2 stealth bombers flying from the U.S.

While the complexity of managing so many aircraft and weapons is getting a boost from AI, its use remains limited and the cost of badly informed decisions remains high. U.S. military investigators believe American forces likely were responsible for a strike on the war's



Two F-22 Raptor fighter jets.

first day that killed dozens of children at a girls elementary school in Iran, The Wall Street Journal reported.

Talk of military AI can conjure images of killer robots, but the reality is that its biggest uses now are often off the battlefield, in time-consuming and labor-intensive fields like intelligence, mission planning and logistics.

These noncombat areas are ripe for AI-inspired efficiency because out of every 10 people in the military, at most two face combat. Up to 90% of personnel are in support roles.

The Pentagon's AI tools are similar to ChatGPT and other mass-market large language models, but limited to warfare and trained to tackle specific tasks using relevant information, seeking to avoid glitches and inaccuracies often besetting AI.

Still, war is among the most chaotic and complex human endeavors—posing unique problems for even the cutting edge of robotic thinking. The Pentagon's first AI chief, retired Air

Force Lt. Gen. Jack Shanahan, said building military AI is tough in part because much of the available data for training is out of date or unclear.

“The Department of Defense was built as a hardware company in the industrial age, and it has struggled to become a digital company in a software-centric era,” said Shanahan, who oversaw an AI-powered project in Iraq, dubbed Maven, almost a decade ago.

Military strikes start with intelligence. Gathering and parsing it can require thousands of analysts grinding for hours over communications intercepts, photographs and radar images as they try to divine the locations of missile launchers, tunnels and other targets.

Human analysts can examine at most 4% of the intelligence material that is typically collected, say U.S. officers who have worked in the field.

“The biggest immediate impact of AI is in intelligence,” said Israeli Col. Yishai Kohn, the defense

ministry's head of planning, economics and IT. “Many potential missions simply never happened because the manpower didn't exist” to assess vital intelligence, said Kohn.

AI-powered machine vision can now quickly find vast numbers of targets—with the ability to single out specific models of aircraft or vehicles. It can listen for and summarize relevant conversations from intercepts.

“Intelligence agencies already have access to tons of video data, and current AI enables them to detect exactly what they need within an ocean of data,” said Matan Goldner, chief executive of Conntour, an Israeli company selling software to its and other countries' security agencies that allows them to query video databases the same way LLMs are used to find patterns in texts.

Just as with mass-market AI, users can bore into results with queries, such as to identify every missile launcher located near a hospital. They can also set

on actions that are more likely to achieve their objectives.

In the pre-AI world, after rough outlines were agreed on for an operation, commanders and specialists would develop mission plans, compiling paper-stuffed binders in a week-long exercise. AI can potentially do the same work in days, military leaders say.

Planning any military assault—from the fast, targeted mission in January to seize Venezuelan strongman Nicolás Maduro to the war with Iran—brings together subject-matter specialists including intelligence officers, combat commanders, weapons experts and logistics managers. Sessions can include around 40 people.

“The more people you add into planning, the longer it takes,” said a U.S. Army officer in Europe with experience in the process.

As preparations advance and plans evolve, each specialist revises their own plans, with knock-on effects for the others. If intelligence reports, for example, shift a bombing target to a more-distant objective, commanders may opt to use different aircraft or weapons, which in turn can affect crew rostering, flight planning and fuel consumption.

Until now, updating all those factors was slow and often subjective. Now AI can process complex interactions instantaneously, accounting for how each change ripples through military choreography.

Once a strike occurs, AI can speed assessments of battle damage, via image-processing software like tools helping with initial intelligence. While analysis is limited by the quality of imagery—which can depend on factors as basic as weather and whether a target is above ground—AI's ability to merge varied inputs is changing the discipline. In a process known as sensor fusion, AI can digest visuals, radar, heat signatures and mass-spectroscopy to synthesize a list of possible conclusions. Fast analysis of where attacks succeeded or failed in turn helps refine lists of subsequent targets.

One thing AI can't replace is human judgment. Many military officials involved in AI projects warn that the technology's capabilities risk prompting an overreliance on information it provides—a trend linked with the phrase “The computer said to do this.”

To prioritize targets and develop a course of action, the Pentagon is increasingly using AI to run models and digital wargames. In one of many efforts, last year it contracted with Pittsburgh-based Strategy Robot to develop advanced systems that can churn through vast numbers of scenarios despite imperfect information. From potentially millions of iterations, planners can zoom in

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The year 2027 will be looming when President Trump meets Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Beijing in several weeks, given that China has been hoping to extract a concession on U.S. support for Taiwan.

But Davidson's forecast was based on an American intelligence assessment that has received little outside scrutiny. After making its debut on Capitol Hill, the “Davidson window” quickly became Washington's accepted truth—a belief that China's military buildup puts Taiwan at risk of invasion as early as next year.

Xi, meanwhile, hasn't publicly set any deadlines on Beijing's longstanding quest to take control of Taiwan, whether peacefully or by force. Nor has China published any remarks from Xi that explicitly link the 2027 date with Taiwan-related military capabilities.

Gen. Mark Milley, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in June 2021 that the date was based on a speech given by Xi that challenged the Chinese military to step up its modernization.

Milley, in repeating the 2027 date, took pains to emphasize that the deadline was China's target for military readiness, not a deadline to invade.

The distinction has often been ignored. The “Davidson window” created a sense of urgency from Capitol Hill to the Pentagon to Taipei, fueling fears of an impending conflict.

Some analysts and former officials say the U.S. emphasis on a 2027 deadline has stoked an arms race and stirred fear and pessimism in the region.

“Beijing's goal is to wear down the psychological will of the people of Taiwan,” said Ryan Hass, director of the John L. Thornton China Center at the Brookings Institution and a senior adviser on China in the Obama administration. “The more that U.S. officials amped up their warning that doomsday would arrive for Taiwan in 2027, the more it securitized perceptions of Taiwan, scared away foreign capital and talent, and induced pessimism inside Taiwan.”

Since 2021, U.S. spending on Pacific infrastructure has surged as part of a strategy to counter China, said Jennifer Kavanagh, director of military analysis at Defense Priorities, a think tank that advocates for reducing military commitments abroad.

“You don't build runways in the Pacific islands to compete with Russia, right?” she said.

Between 2012 and 2024, about \$260 billion a year in



Chinese military vehicles carrying DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missiles parade past Tiananmen Gate during a military parade to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in Beijing.

## How One Man's Prediction Fueled Fears of a 2027 Taiwan Invasion

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

A U.S. conclusion about China's military plans quickly became a deadline for battle preparations

U.S. military spending went toward militarized rivalry with China, according to a new paper by Kavanagh. That amounts to roughly 30% of total military spending over that period.

The Biden and Trump administrations have also approved about \$19 billion in weapons sales to Taiwan since 2021.

Xi has stressed that the Chinese Communist Party prefers a peaceful resolution to the Taiwan situation, while declaring that Beijing wouldn't rule out the possibility of using military force.

China, however, did little to play down the 2027 claim. After a meeting in 2022 with President Joe Biden, Xi grew animated when talking about Taiwan, but U.S. officials were left with the impression there was no Chinese timeline to invade the island. Trump said in August that Xi told him he wouldn't invade while Trump was in office.

If Beijing hasn't emphasized its invasion threat in meetings with U.S. leaders, it has done so in military displays. China has amplified the message most vividly by periodically encircling Taiwan with air and seaborne forces and parading its arsenal through Beijing last year.

Most people in Taiwan shrugged off the “Davidson window” at first. The is-

land's leaders were reluctant to raise concerns of an impending Chinese invasion.

That changed when President Lai Ching-te took office in 2024. In his first year, Lai named China a “foreign adversary” and told the island to be prepared for a potential attack.

In November, Lai sharpened the message, introducing a \$40 billion special defense budget and arguing that the funding was necessary in light of Beijing's goal of achieving the capability for “unification by force” by 2027. Local headlines blared: “President Confirms 2027 Invasion Deadline.”

A few hours later, Lai's

office pivoted and clarified that the president was citing international assessments and U.S. congressional reports rather than predicting a launch date.

Despite the walk-back, 2027 is now a benchmark for the Taiwanese military. Its annual war exercises last summer were explicitly set

against a 2027 invasion scenario.

For China, the year 2027 will be the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party's military wing—what is now the People's Liberation Army—and will mark the first phase of Xi's plan to forge a “world-class military” by the middle of the 21st century.

The “PLA centenary goals” pegged to 2027 include overhauls to the military's organizational structures, hardware upgrades and realistic training aimed at making China's armed forces more agile and technologically adept.

Beijing hasn't linked the centenary goals with

**Most people in Taiwan shrugged off the ‘Davidson window’ at first. That changed when President Lai Ching-te took office in 2024.**



A military delegate from the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) arrives for the second plenary session of the National People's Congress (NPC) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China, March 9, 2026.

the party's request to gain control over Taiwan.

Xi's broad targets for military modernization are spread across three phases. China wants to “basically complete the modernization of national defense and the armed forces” by 2035, before the final push to “construct a world-class military” that is capable of taking on any adversary, particularly the U.S., by the 100th anniversary of the People's Republic in 2049.

Davidson retired in 2021. He couldn't be reached for comment on the legacy of his Capitol Hill testimony. In a 2024 interview on the “Why Should We Care About the Indo-Pacific?” podcast, Davidson said he remained concerned about Chinese activities “between now and 2028.”

“They are doing full-blown rehearsals, across multi-domains, and from multi-directions on attack scenarios,” the retired admiral said. The lesson China seemed to have taken from Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, he added, “is that a much more comprehensive attack, delivered with much more violence, is actually the solution.”

China has met some bumps on the way to its military development goals. It hasn't fought a full-scale war since battling Vietnam in 1979, and Xi has purged much of the military's top leadership over corruption allegations and questions of loyalty.

Such campaigns have involved the removal of lower-ranking military officials connected with the purged leaders and will likely result in a sense of paralysis among those who survive, analysts have said.

Still, China's military spending has steadily increased by close to 60% between 2015 and 2024. It has rolled out equipment that would likely be employed in a Taiwan invasion, including missiles, new aircraft and attack drones, its most advanced aircraft carrier and new ships that can form mobile piers to move equipment and troops ashore.

Even if 2027 doesn't represent a deadline for an invasion, China's moves to strengthen its military, or shifting demands on U.S. forces such as the conflict in Iran, could increase the possibility of an attack.

“If Beijing's perception of its relative military capability increases and it believes the U.S. advantage has disappeared, then deterrence inevitably weakens,” said Sarah Beran, a former U.S. diplomat and director for China and Taiwan at the National Security Council during the Biden administration. “And that certainly increases the likelihood of military action.”

# Nazi Execution Images Prompt Greece to Create National Photo Archive

Shocking images of the 1944 May Day executions in Kaisariyani reveal Nazi brutality and spur Greece to preserve its visual history

Continued from Page One

The images remained largely unknown until this year.

## €100,000 for a glimpse of history

The photos of the Kaisariyani May Day execution, 262 of them in all, shocked Greece after coming to public attention late in February, when Tim de Craene, a Belgian WWII memorabilia collector, decided to sell them on e-Bay.

The listing included the photos taken by German sergeant Hermann Heuer along with 16 documents, among them a collage of newspaper clippings and several Greek banknotes, assembled from his personal archive.

Within days, the discovery was sending shockwaves through Greece.

The Greek Culture Ministry moved quickly to stop the auction and negotiate the purchase of the collection. In less than two weeks, a committee of historians, archivists and conservators verified the authenticity of the images and the ministry began talks with de Craene.

"This is the first time a public body has moved so quickly and in such a coordinated manner to halt an auction and acquire material that forms a significant part of modern Greek heritage," Culture Minister Lina Mendoni said during a presentation of the photographs in Athens in the first week of March.

The Greek Culture Ministry paid a total of 100,000 euros to acquire the collection. The entire archive is now officially the property of the Greek state.

## Three images too disturbing to sell

In addition to the 10 Kaisariyani photos that had already been made public, the minister presented three shocking photographs of the May Day execution.

The images were considered too disturbing for public sale, and eBay had refused to list them, Mendoni said. The minister also requested, out of respect for the deceased and their families, that two of these should not be published. The third shows the moment the command is given and the Nazi soldiers open fire, leaving the 20 men dead.

Mendonis said the photos will go on public display in the future. "For the time



PHOTOS BY GERMAN MINISTRY OF CULTURE

being, 82 years later, we must show respect."

## May Day 1944 - Athens

The executions captured on film took place at the rifle range in Kaisariyani, a district near downtown Athens, which is now one of Greece's most important wartime memorial sites. The Nazis killed the men in retaliation - a common practice - for the murder by resistance fighters of German Major General Franz Krech in the town of Moloai, in the Peloponnese. The 200 men were political prisoners held at the Haidari concentration camp.

Mendonis said the collection provides a rare and coherent visual record of the German occupation of Greece during World War II. Until now, historians have had few visual records of the mass executions carried out by German forces during the occupation. The Kaisariyani photographs change that.

## Kaisariyani photos next steps

The photos have now been officially designated "national monuments," said Mendoni.

This status places them under state protection and requires their preservation, scientific documentation and eventual public presentation.

The next phase involves extensive research. Historians will examine the circumstances surrounding the photographs and attempt to identify the people depicted. Families of the victims will also be contacted where possible. Once the research is completed, the findings will be presented at an academic conference, the minister added.

So far, no relatives of the executed prisoners have come forward, although several institutions have already expressed interest in the material, including the National Resistance Museum in Kaisariyani, the Municipality of Haidari, the Communist Party of Greece and the Municipality of Kaisariyani.

## Photographs of war... and leisure

For historians, the images are significant not only for their subject matter, but also for what they reveal about the photographer's mindset. According to the ministry's committee of experts, the

collection reflects a broader photographic culture within the German army during the war.

Maria Mertzani, head of the Directorate for the Conservation of Ancient and Modern Monuments, said the material has survived in remarkably good condition despite its age.

"It's over 80 years old, so it requires special care," she said. "Our priority now is conservation, digitization and long-term protection." Stavroula Fotopoulou, head of the Directorate of Modern Cultural and Intangible Cultural Heritage, said historians have immediately recognized the importance of the photographs.

"It was crucial that we acquired the material, so it can be preserved and made available for research." Fotopoulou noted that the photographs form part of a vast visual record produced during the war. "We are very much aware of the many photo collections circulating from the Third Reich, the Wehrmacht and Nazi soldiers," she said.

"It is estimated that more than 40 million pho-

tographs were taken by Wehrmacht soldiers, and more than two million by Goebbels' propaganda apparatus."

## The power of propaganda

The images served both personal and political purposes. "Goebbels created a massive propaganda machine with professional photographers from the Propaganda Units, but everyone—soldiers and their families—were also encouraged to photograph their experiences. Why? So these photographs could come back and tell the story of the Wehrmacht's success," Fotopoulou explained. Goebbels served as Germany's Minister of Propaganda from 1933 to 1945. He used the arts and the press to promote Nazi ideology. Actions were carefully orchestrated to convince German citizens of the importance of the war effort and to stir their patriotism.

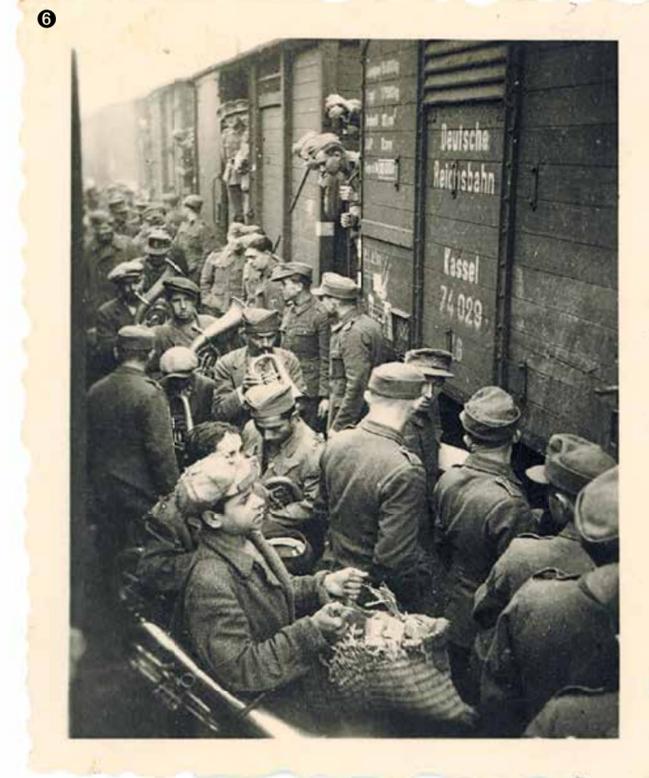
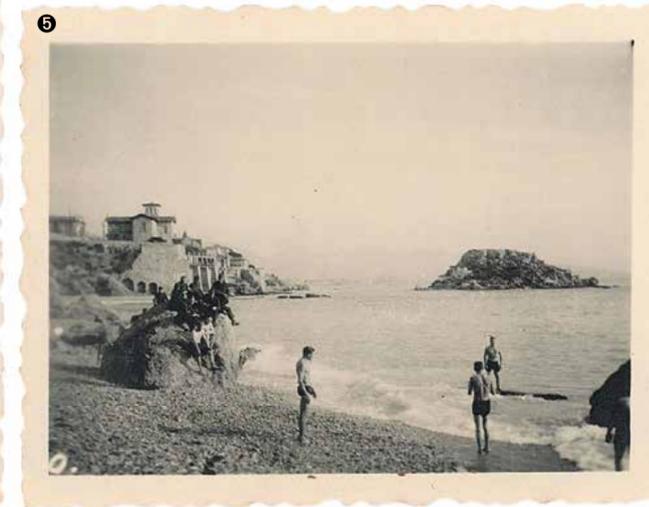
The Kaisariyani photographs were likely not official propaganda but part of this broader culture. Historian Valentin Schneider, a World War II spe-

cialist at the National Hellenic Research Foundation who will lead the research project, describes them as "hybrid" images.

"They are private photographs documenting everyday life in the army, but they exist within the wider framework of Nazi wartime culture," he said.

Other images in Heuer's archive illustrate this contrast. Alongside the photographs of executions, there are casual snapshots of soldiers relaxing on beaches near Piraeus, touring the Acropolis or posing during training exercises. The juxtaposition is unsettling. "These were souvenirs of the Nazi experience abroad," explains photographer Socratis Mavrommatis. "The sergeant is detached from the crimes being committed. That's why his collection includes spontaneous shots of everyday life."

In addition to the 13 photos of the political prisoners boarding the convoy from the camp in Haidari to their execution, others depict moments captured in Piraeus, Malakasa and Isthmia, as well as troops departing



←

1. The moment the Nazi soldiers are ordered to pull the trigger. May Day 1944 at Kaisariyani, Athens, Greece.

2. The 20 Greeks are lined up minutes before their execution at the Kaisariyani firing range, today a major WWII memorial site.

3. The political prisoners, mostly Communists and resistance fighters, walk toward their death, looking straight into Heuer's camera.

4. Wehrmacht sergeant Hermann Heuer with his camera photographed by a soldier.

5. Alongside the photographs of executions, there are casual snapshots of the soldiers' everyday life in Greece. Souvenirs of the Nazi experience abroad.

6. Nazi soldiers prepare to board a train to Yugoslavia on their way to Greece, where they are stationed during the German occupation (April 1941–October 1944) in WWII.

Germany by train and traveling through Yugoslavia to Athens in December 1943.

The point was to enrich Goebbels' narrative that war was an adventure of discovery and exploration, says Schneider.

## Toward a national photo archive

During the press conference in Athens, Mendoni announced plans to create Greece's first National Photo Archive, which will operate as part of the National Archive of Monuments.

"The time has come," she said. "It is now more necessary than ever, and there is so much material available."

The archive will gather and preserve historically significant photographic collections from across Greece. Among other materials to be featured are photographs from the former royal estate at Tatoi, images documenting the arrival of Greek refugees from Asia Minor, and photographic records from the Archaeological Service.

The new archive will also collaborate with private collectors, she said.

The Kaisariyani photo-

graphs will likely become one of its most powerful testaments.

## The question of German reparations

Greece has repeatedly sought justice for the devastation caused during the German occupation of 1941-1944. The Nazis left the country's economy shattered, destroying infrastructure, factories, roads and ports. Tens of thousands of civilians died from famine, forced labor, reprisals and mass executions.

One of the most devastating impacts of the occupation was the forced loan imposed in 1942. Nazi Germany compelled the Bank of Greece to provide interest-free loans totaling 476 million Reichsmarks to finance their military operations in the country.

Greece has raised the issue of reparations several times over the years, including in 1960, after German reunification in 1990, and more recently between 2015 and 2023. According to estimates cited by Greek officials, the country's claims could amount to 300-350 billion euros.

Germany maintains that the matter was settled through post-war agreements, though Greece was never party to these, and the 1990 Two Plus Four Treaty. Greece insists that the claims remain legally active and enforceable, particularly in relation to the occupation loan and damages not covered by earlier agreements.

For decades, historians relied largely on written testimony and photographs of wartime destruction, bombed factories, ruined infrastructure and starving civilians to illustrate the scale of suffering during the German occupation. Visual documentation of mass executions in Greece was largely absent from public archives.

The newly-acquired Kaisariyani photographs change that. They provide rare visual evidence of Nazi war crimes committed in Greece and contribute to a fuller historical record of the occupation.

They also prepare the ground for renewed discussion centered on the deep political divisions of the Greek Civil War that followed (1946-1949).

# Rhodes' Path To Regeneration

After wildfires forced the largest evacuation in Greece's history, volunteers, scientists and businesses are working to restore Rhodes' burned forests, and ultimately testing whether Mediterranean landscapes can recover in a hotter climate



Tree planting with volunteers and Common Nature on Rhodes.

Continued from Page One

Weeks later, on the Hawaiian island of Maui, fast-moving fires swept through the town of Lahaina, killing more than one hundred people. In retrospect, Rhodes was lucky.

Nearly three years later, the smoke has long since cleared from Rhodes' coastal hills, but the fire's path remains visible. Blackened tree trunks still stand where forest once covered the slopes.

In some places, however, volunteers are beginning the slow work of restoration—felling unstable trees into terraced retaining walls, planting fence-protected saplings and installing irrigation systems.

## Organizing the 'next day'

Much of the restoration work now underway is being coordinated by Common Nature (Gia ti Fysi), a local environmental cooperative that has become an organizing hub for post-fire regeneration.

The organization was founded in 2019 with a practical goal: to bring structure to environmental actions in burned ecosystems on Rhodes.

Tree planting campaigns had taken place on the island before. But they often ended once saplings were put in the ground.

"The problem was not planting trees," Nektarios Kalorigou from Common Nature tells *To BHMA International Edition*. "The problem was everything that comes after."

Young trees require fencing to protect them from grazing animals, irrigation during dry periods, and ongoing monitoring to determine whether they survive their first years. Without those steps, planting efforts often fail.

From the beginning, the cooperative worked with scientists and universities to design restoration projects, and with local tourism businesses to support them. Hotels and tourism agencies helped finance studies and provided staff to assist with work in the field.

Yet, "after the large wildfire, everything changed," Kalorigou says.

Today Common Nature operates as an environmental coordination



Head of Common Nature, Nektarios Kalorigou, informs volunteers of proper tree-planting techniques.

hub, working with public authorities, universities and private businesses across a range of conservation projects.

## A surge in volunteers

The wildfire triggered a surge in civic participation across the island.

Thousands of residents have taken part in environmental activities organized by the cooperative. Some work directly in burned areas, planting and maintaining saplings. Others contribute through administrative or logistical support.

Kalorigou relates how a volunteer with heart problems offered to help from home. "Even if my job is

scanning documents,' he wrote to the group, 'I want to participate.'"

The organization attributes this response partly to the collective shock caused by the fire.

"At that time, the wildfire created a deep collective trauma," Kalorigou explains. "The forest landscape still bears a large wound."

At the same time, Kalorigou cautions against assuming the disaster transformed environmental attitudes across the island.

"I have concluded that the large wildfire managed to increase the need for action—but only among those who already had this type of sensitivity. The rest, those who were indifferent, have remained indifferent."

## A morning on the burned hillside

On a cool winter morning in the hills above the coast, volunteers gather beside a narrow dirt road which once ran through woodland.

They move slowly across the slope, carrying small saplings, shovels and plastic containers filled with water. An expert walks among them, checking planting distances and soil depth. Some volunteers kneel beside shallow holes in the ground, while others install protective fencing around newly-planted trees.

The work is quiet and methodical. The soil between the rocks can be dry even in winter. Young trees must be placed carefully so

their roots can reach moisture deeper in the ground.

## Tourism businesses join the effort

One distinctive feature of Rhodes' recovery effort is the participation of the island's tourism sector.

Hotels, tourism agencies and other businesses have contributed both funding and personnel to environmental initiatives coordinated by Common Nature.

According to the organization, 36 hotel groups representing 107 hotels are now involved.

Their support has financed scientific studies, irrigation systems, equipment and operational costs. Employees from tourism companies often join volunteer groups working in burned areas.

"Local tourism businesses have played a decisive role," Kalorigou says.

However, their cooperation extends beyond forests. Volunteers and businesses also assist in monitoring marine wildlife and sea turtle nesting along the island's coastline, as well as supporting environmental education programs.

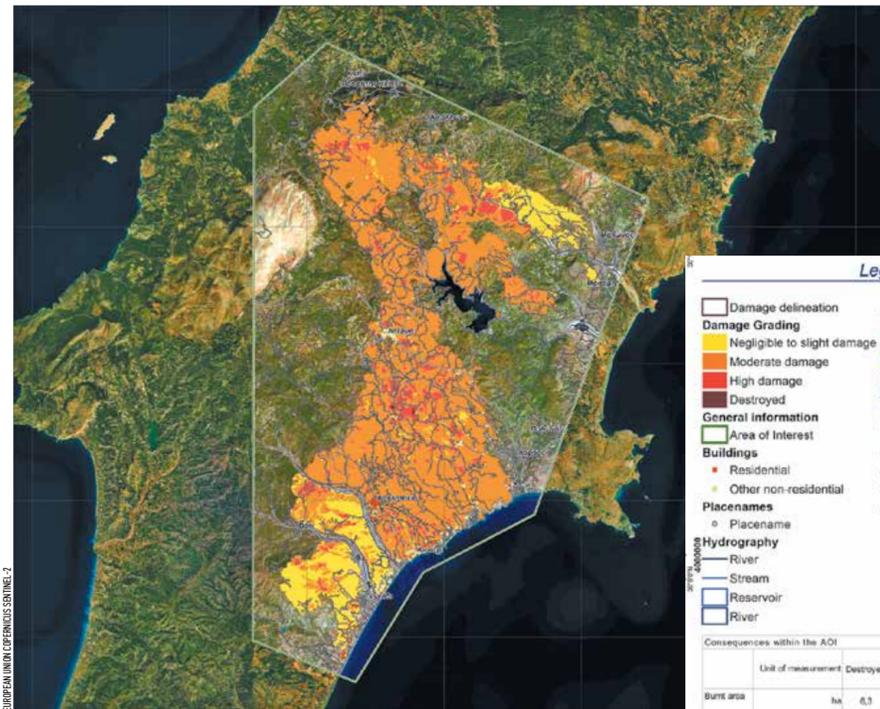
And while many companies participate through their environmental, social and governance (ESG) initiatives, the organization emphasizes that hands-on participation is often more valuable than financial contributions alone.

"The work in the field is labor-intensive," he explains.



Common Nature conducting turtle nest conservation measures.

Volunteers cool themselves during a wildfire in Vati village, on the Aegean Sea island of Rhodes, southeastern Greece, July 25, 2023. A third successive heat wave in Greece pushed temperatures back above 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) across parts of the country Tuesday following more nighttime evacuations from fires that have raged out of control for days.



A visual representation of the delineation and grading damage caused by the 2023 wildfire in Rhodes, Greece.

## When tourists want to help

Visitors frequently ask whether they can participate in restoration activities.

In practice, that is not always easy.

Tree planting generally takes place outside the summer tourist season, and burned forest areas can be difficult to navigate safely.

In one early effort pre-dating the wildfire, the organization invited tourists to join in tree-watering activities.

Some arrived prepared with proper footwear and clothing. Others came wearing beach sandals.

"They couldn't take so much as a single step through the dry shrubland," Kalorigou recalls.

Coastal conservation work has proved more accessible. In partnership with the Rhodes Hydrobiological

Station, volunteers—including visitors—help monitor marine wildlife and nesting activity along the island's beaches.

Tourists also play another role: as observers of environmental change.

"They are often the first to notice the effects of the climate crisis."

## Regeneration in a changing climate

Restoring a burned forest in the Mediterranean is not simply a matter of planting trees.

Greek forestry policy traditionally prioritizes natural regeneration, allowing ecosystems time to recover before taking action.

In forests that have burned only once, scientists often recommend waiting about three years before planting new trees. Areas that have burned repeatedly may require interventions sooner.

But climate conditions are altering the assumptions behind those models.

New sprouts must now survive intense sunlight, scorching soil temperatures and prolonged drought. Grazing animals—particularly goats and deer—can destroy young plants before they establish themselves.

Protective fencing can help, but it requires constant maintenance. Winter rains may erode soil beneath fences, allowing animals to enter protected areas.

"Continuous human presence is essential," the organization says.

## Choosing the right species

Debate about reforestation often focuses on which trees should be planted.

Mediterranean pine forests are sometimes criticized as being particularly vulner-

able to fire. Some observers suggest replacing them with more fire-resistant species.

But Common Nature says species selection follows strict scientific guidelines determined through formal reforestation studies.

Public opinion, Kalorigou says, cannot override ecological realities.

## Working with authorities

The organization says it maintains close cooperation with the local Forest Service, which approved its first reforestation study following the wildfire and is currently reviewing a second.

Common Nature also collaborates with the Region of South Aegean, the Municipality of Rhodes, the Dodecanese Chamber of Commerce, and the Rhodes Hoteliers Association.

Still, the group believes

Greece's forestry departments need more staff and resources to manage post-fire landscapes effectively.

## The challenge ahead

Asked about the greatest obstacle to recovery, Kalorigou answers without hesitation: "Excessive heat."

High temperatures intensify drought, increase fire risk and place additional stress on young vegetation.

Preventive work, such as clearing forest fuel and managing landscapes, remains essential but expensive to implement nationwide.

For that reason, the organization believes a civil society with enhanced ecological awareness and knowledge will play an increasingly important role in environmental protection.

## Recovery or transformation?

Nearly three years after the fires, parts of Rhodes are slowly beginning to regenerate.

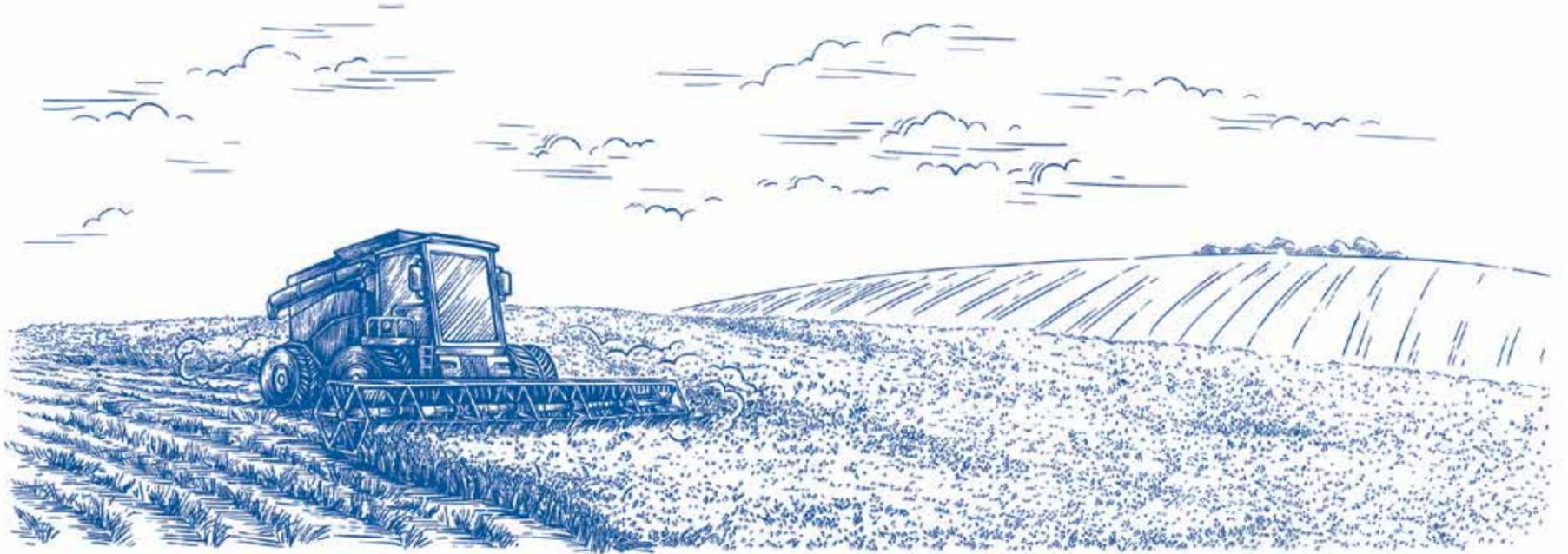
But scientists are increasingly warning that Mediterranean ecosystems are entering a period of profound change. Rising temperatures, repeated fires and prolonged drought are reshaping landscapes that evolved under very different climatic conditions.

Whether the burned hillsides of Rhodes will once again become forests—or gradually transform into something new—remains uncertain.

For now, volunteers continue planting, watering, fencing, and hoping that the small saplings they have planted can survive another scorching Mediterranean summer.



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# Greek Islands Are Abandoning Their ‘Roots’

As tourism reshapes island life, farming, fishing and livestock breeding are steadily retreating—raising urgent questions about who now defines development, and whether the land can remain a living part of island economies rather than a backdrop for visitors

By Machi Tratsa

The islands did not simply change. They put on a disguise.

Where land and sea once set the rhythm of real life for decades, a new reality has taken hold—one in which the rise of tourism goes hand in hand with the retreat of agricultural production. New residents have stepped into the foreground, bringing different priorities. Thanasis Kizos, professor in the Department of Geography at the University of the Aegean, speaks of an island “colonization”.

He is referring to investors searching for the next attractive destination, second-home owners buying a “refuge” of quality living, digital nomads working remotely with a view of the Aegean, and retirees returning to their place of origin.

“They come, they buy, and they decide that ‘this is as far as it goes’ in terms of population, economic activities, and so on,” Kizos tells *TO BHMA*. He points out that they may often have good intentions, because they want an island that is beautiful and gentle—but not necessarily productive.

In this way, informal limits are placed on growth prospects and on the kinds of activities considered acceptable—limits that often do not coincide with the needs and expectations of local people.

At the same time, however, the locals themselves gradually abandoned traditional activities such as farming, livestock breeding, and fishing, turning instead to tourism, which promises a higher and steadier income. According to data from researchers at the University of the Aegean, agricultural holdings on the Aegean islands fell

by 39% in the fifty years from 1961 to 2010, with the steepest decline recorded between 1971 and 1991.

## The land they left behind

On some islands, the withdrawal from the primary sector was almost complete by the year 2000, as in Kimolos, Chios, Salamis, Nisyros, Psara, Ammouliani and others, where the drop reached 90%.

Over the 1961–2010 period, the number of agricultural holdings shrank by more than 90% in Skopelos, Serifos, Chios, Ithaca, Agathonisi, Nisyros, Kalamos of Kefalonia, Halki, Psara, Thasos, Oinousses and Agios Efstratios.

Out of the roughly 80 islands included in the University of the Aegean study, only a handful recorded an increase: Aegina (73.2%), Fournoi (59%), Alonissos (18.7%), Rhodes (11%), Elafonisos (5.1%) and Zakynthos (2%).

The sharpest decline was in annual crops—cereals and legumes—which fell by 74%. On many islands they nearly vanished. The traditional complementarity between farming and livestock breeding broke down, while livestock farming, where it

survives, has become more intensive but with fewer holdings.

It is telling that the number of sheep farms fell by 78%, while the number of animals per holding rose by 71.4%. On islands such as Hydra and Anafi, livestock breeding has been almost entirely abandoned.

The reasons do not lie in tourism alone. According to Kizos, agricultural production ceased to be attractive as a main profession, migration weakened farming households, and the geographical characteristics of the islands make it difficult to develop large-scale holdings.

At the same time, local economies are being transformed into a model in which landscape, gastronomy and daily life become part of a package for sale—in other words, a curated version of island life tailored to visitors’ expectations.

## In search of balance

The primary sector, however, is not a relic of the past. It shapes the landscape, sustains biodiversity, and supports local identity.

The processing of agricultural production could be linked to tourism, provided

there are businesses open to innovation. The question now is whether the islands can avoid the monoculture of tourism and the parallel retreat of agricultural production, and redefine a balance in which the land is not merely scenery but a living part of their economy and society.

Within this changing island landscape, the University of the Aegean has done more than simply document the trend. It has also tried to strengthen the primary sector by developing a series of digital tools for farmers on Lemnos and Kythera, as well as Samos, Lesbos and other islands.

The main application, Kizos explains, functioned as a cultivation diary and farm management tool: the producer could view fields on a map on a mobile phone or computer screen, and record ploughing, fertilization, irrigation and crop protection.

The idea was to make costs “visible,” so that farmers would know precisely, for example, what pesticide they were using, when, and with what result—thus avoiding unnecessary use of products that increase costs and degrade the quality of produce.

At the same time, the digital tool generated reports

for certification purposes and also incorporated a “citizen science” dimension, allowing farmers to upload photographs of flora and fauna species, thereby contributing to biodiversity mapping.

Yet despite careful design and free access, the response was uneven.

In Lemnos, where certification was individual and producers—working in wheat and barley cultivation or phrygana grazing lands—did not see an immediate economic return, participation was limited. Most did not enter data systematically, remaining disconnected from the final market and the added value of their product.

It is no coincidence that among the few who did use the tool was a woman farmer with a university education, many fields, and her own bakery, where she processed the wheat and barley she produced.

By contrast, in Kythera, where certification of products friendly to the landscape and biodiversity was organized collectively through a cooperative, there was greater pressure and greater incentive to comply.

Access to the German market for certified products,

with a better price for olive oil, made the benefit visible, the professor stresses.

## Innovation—and its limits

The University of the Aegean team also developed applications for managing the olive fruit fly control program, which are used in olive-producing regions on islands such as Lesbos and Samos, as well as in mainland areas including Halkidiki and Thesprotia.

Using an Android application and GPS verification, the visit of the trap inspector—the worker who places and checks olive fly traps—and the number of insects are recorded in real time, while spraying operations are mapped as well.

The system is used by Departments of Rural Economy and Veterinary Services in various regions of the country, allowing for more targeted interventions and, potentially, the creation of risk maps—a critical tool in the era of climate change.

But, as the professor emphasizes, “technology is not just software, but people.”

Innovation does not simply mean drones and sensors; it also means social and organizational adaptation to the islands’ particular socio-ecological systems.

As he puts it, when producers can see a tangible benefit and have a share in the added value of their product, they are more willing to use the available tools. Where they cannot see that benefit, they abandon them—just as they are gradually abandoning agriculture itself, turning instead to a tourism industry that often treats the primary sector as an “annoyance,” even though it is precisely that sector that sustains the landscape, biodiversity, and resilience of the islands.



Tourists arriving at Thassos port, August 2024.