South African citrus industry laments further escalation of Middle East war

By Fred Meintjes | 27 July 2026

CGA chief executive Dr Boitshoko Ntshabele warns that the resumption of Middle East hostilities poses a serious threat to South African citrus exports

Dr Boitshoko Ntshabele
Image: CGA

The fragile Middle East peace deal agreed in June has collapsed, and with it, the challenges related to the passage of ships and the goods they carry in that part of the world have resumed.

That is the view of Dr Boitshoko Ntshabele, CEO of the South African Citrus Growers Association (CGA), who noted that it is bad news for the country's industry and the world at large.

“The Middle East market takes 20 per cent of our fruit and with the peak of our season upon us, there is cause for concern,” he said.

South Africa has now entered the peak of it Valencia season and has already reported a record lemon campaign, which is likely to produce a crop which will be 10mn cartons more than last year.

“We had undertaken from the start of the season to provide all players with better information and for them to make well-informed decisions in order to mitigate known risks,” Ntshabele continued.

”Information this week indicates an increase in volumes with lemons as a key driver.

”The Middle East market is a natural home for our lemons,” he outlined. “The growth in our volumes is certainly up against a litany of challenges.

“The 2026 export season has been quite eventful, from geopolitical events to natural events.

”At the same time, we had some positive developments in supporting the flow of fruit to destinations on a long-term basis,” said Ntshabele.

He singled out the private public partnership venture in the port of Durban as one of those significant developments.

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The signing of an improved cold treatment protocol for citrus exports to China, which was later supported by the new tariff-free export regime – a gift to 53 African states – was also a significant event.

“This came on the back of a framework agreement between China and South Africa concluded in February,” Ntshabele continued.

”Expectations are that, as SA, we have two years to conclude a trade agreement with China. We hope that progress is being made in this regard.

”We also saw developments towards a Preferential Trade Agreement with India that would ease tariff pain faced by SA exports to India,” he confirmed.

“The 2026 export season has been quite eventful, from geopolitical events to natural events.

”At the same time, we had some positive developments on supporting the flow of fruit to destinations on a long-term basis,” Ntshabele commented.

Floods in the north of South Africa delayed the start of the citrus season as it impacted fruit picking and packing.

Further flooding a few months later in the south led to loss of fruit, reducing the initial estimates, especially for oranges and mandarins.

“In response to the Middle East war that broke out in February, we setup a Middle East crisis committee which meets on a fortnightly basis,” he explained.

“Again, the events of the season reaffirm our view that quality of arrivals in destination markets will be a differentiator this season and into the future.

”Growers are reminded to ensure that only correctly graded fruit is packed, as marginal counts are not favoured in the market under current conditions,” Ntshabele added.