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Food sovereignty and food security The increasing weaponisation of food

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Ruth Hanau Santini



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Foreword

Pietro De Martin¹

The research gathered in this volume is the product of the ITALIM project — Italy and the International Politics of Food Security — carried out with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. It constitutes, in my view, a contribution of particular significance: not only for its scientific rigour, but for its capacity to translate academic analysis into instruments directly usable by diplomatic practice.

Food security is no longer — if it ever was — an exclusively humanitarian or technical dimension of international politics. It is a structural variable in relations between states, one capable of conditioning the balance of power, the stability of political systems, and the trajectories of conflicts. The blockade of Ukrainian grain exports in the Black Sea in 2022 produced effects that rippled far beyond the European theatre of war: more than fifty countries — many of them in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East — experienced sharp spikes in food prices with direct repercussions on internal political stability. Not a side effect, but a strategic variable.

In this light, the work of ITALIM — which chose to focus on the MENA region, on conflict-affected countries such as Yemen, Syria and Iraq— has operated precisely in the area of greatest tension between these mechanisms. It is there that food interdependencies are most rapidly transformed into political vulnerabilities, and where the choices of decision-makers have the most immediate consequences for populations.

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The analytical contribution perhaps most relevant to diplomatic practice concerns the distinction — rigorously documented by the ITALIM research — between food insecurity as a collateral effect of war and food weaponisation as a deliberate tactic. This distinction is not merely conceptual: it is the dividing line that separates the territory of humanitarian emergency from that of international legal responsibility.

International Humanitarian Law — in particular Article 54 of the First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions — explicitly prohibits attacks on objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, including food resources. UN Security Council Resolution 2417 of 2018 represented a further step, formally linking the use of starvation as a method of warfare to the category of violation of international law. Yet the accountability mechanisms provided for by that Resolution remain largely inadequate. The gap between the norm and its effective application is still very wide. Systematically documenting violations, attributing responsibility to their authors, building the conditions for a political response consistent with the normative framework: this is the work the international community must accomplish, and which Italy can help advance in multilateral settings — beginning with the UN Security Council and the General Assembly.

A second analytical axis of ITALIM deserves particular attention: its refusal to read the food-conflict nexus in a single direction. The prevailing narrative — even in policy debates — tends to examine how conflicts destroy food systems. The ITALIM approach has systematically analysed the reverse direction as well: how acute or chronic food insecurity can trigger or amplify social tensions, political instability, and conflict.

This is not a mechanical nexus; it requires contextualised readings. Food crisis does not automatically produce conflict: it produces fertile ground for escalation, when combined with institutional fragility, inequitable distribution of resources, climate pressures on

water resources, and the inability of the state to respond to shocks. It is in this space — between food crisis and conflict — that armed groups, jihadist organisations and non-state actors operate, exploiting despair as a political resource. This has direct implications for the design of early warning instruments: a system that fails to distinguish between food insecurity as a symptom and food insecurity as a driver risks intervening too late, in the wrong place, with the wrong tools.

There is, however, a third dimension of ITALIM's work that is particularly relevant for the prospects of Italian foreign policy: the concept of food not only as a crisis variable to be managed, but as a proactive instrument for conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

If food insecurity can be a driver of conflict, then interventions that strengthen local food systems, that create economic interdependencies between communities in tension, that build shared agricultural cooperation infrastructure, can serve a function of active prevention. Not humanitarian assistance, but structural investment in the resilience of social systems. Not emergency response, but reduction of vulnerability as a long-term policy. This approach is consistent with the logic of the Mattei Plan for Africa, which Italy has adopted as a strategic framework for its engagement with the continent: non-assistentialist cooperation, investment in local capacities, attention to the structural causes of instability.

Italy is not a neutral bystander in the dynamics of global food security. It bears a specific responsibility, arising from a combination of factors that no other country possesses to the same degree. It hosts in Rome the three principal United Nations agencies on food — the FAO, the World Food Programme and IFAD. This is not a merely symbolic fact: it is a concrete lever of influence over the multilateral system of food governance.

On one of the most critical areas at this time, it is worth recalling the Italian co-chairmanship — with Croatian Foreign and European

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Affairs Minister Gordan Grlić-Radman, in his capacity as rotating President of the MED9 group — to launch in Rome on 7 May 2026 the new “Rome Coalition” on access to fertilisers and food security in the context of the crisis in the Strait of Hormuz. Attended by around forty countries and international organisations, including the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Arab League and UNOPS, the Rome Coalition forms part of the MED9++ framework, aimed at enhancing the role of the wider Mediterranean as a strategic space for dialogue, cooperation and convergence between Europe, the Arab world and the Western Balkans — a format which Minister Tajani has proposed to make permanent.

The findings of ITALIM — the typology of food weaponisation tactics, the critical analysis of the normative gaps in UNSC Resolution 2417, the recommendations for strengthening early warning systems, the foresight scenarios for areas of strategic interest — constitute a concrete instrument used from Italy with clear analytical solidity.

June 2026

Introduction

Ruth Hanau Santini¹

Food security has long occupied a marginal position in international relations scholarship — treated as a humanitarian concern rather than a political one, as an output of development policies rather than an object of geopolitical competition. This collection of policy briefs challenges that framing. It proceeds from the premise that food insecurity in the contemporary Middle East and North Africa is not an unfortunate byproduct of conflict or economic mismanagement, but a structural outcome of specific political, military, and economic arrangements. As Kemmerling, Schetter and Wirkus (2022) put it, there are distinct logics of war and food insecurity that demand analytical attention in their own right — logics that this collection seeks to unpack across a set of cases that together illustrate the multiple faces of the international politics of food security.

Food security is a concept that has evolved considerably since its first formal articulation. Initially, it was understood as resting on four pillars: availability — having sufficient quantities of food; access — sufficient economic resources and market availability; utilization — the capacity to prepare nutritious and healthy diets; and stability in maintaining these three conditions over time (FAO 2002). Over time, additional dimensions were added to these original four, in particular agency and sustainability, and the right to food has been recognized as central to the concept (Clapp et al. 2022). Both the placing of the individual at the centre and the emphasis on sustainability imply that policies and practices in the field of food security must combat structural inequalities,

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injustices, and exclusion from food systems — an approach rooted in human rights that runs through all six dimensions of food security (High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition 2022). This evolution reflects a broader recognition that food security cannot be reduced to the individual impact of the supply-demand dynamics, but must engage with the political and social conditions under which people are able to exercise meaningful control over food systems. Alongside food security, and often in productive tension with it, the concept of food sovereignty — developed by La Via Campesina and brought to global attention at the 1996 World Food Summit — insists on the right of peoples and countries to define their own agricultural and food policies (Islam 2022). The differences with respect to food security are significant: food security has an individual ontology and recognizes food as a fundamental human right, but does not set as its objective the defence of the conditions necessary to produce food, and does not ask who produces food, through what processes, where, and for which buyers. Food sovereignty, by contrast, takes as its starting point not the individual but local communities, considered as primary actors in the struggle against poverty and hunger, with a prescriptive vision that demands agrarian reform, collective land management, and the defence of farmers' rights to use, protect, and exchange seeds (Via Campesina 2021). If food security is concentrated on responding to humanitarian and food emergencies — “saving lives, changing lives”, in the motto of the World Food Programme — food sovereignty shifts attention to the transformation of the economy and the relations between states and citizens, as well as between food-exporting and food-importing states at the international level (Hanau Santini 2024). The ambition of global transformation — economic and social — that underpins the concept of food sovereignty limits its direct applicability on the part of individual governments and international organizations; it is the notion of food security, which starts from an analysis of what

exists and on the basis of data identifies priorities and suggests modes of intervention, that has more successfully lent itself to practical application by international humanitarian actors. Several contributions to this collection engage precisely with this tension, examining cases in which the dominant food security framework has obscured structural dependencies and political choices that a sovereignty lens renders visible. As Jouili and Elloumi (2023) have shown in their analysis of the Maghreb, the result of decades of export-oriented agricultural policy framed in the language of food security has been not greater resilience but deeper structural dependence on international food regimes and their associated power and accumulation structures.

Conflicts, economic crises, and extreme climate events are widely recognized as the principal drivers of food crises — and, crucially, the more they interact with one another, the more severe the crisis. It is important to stress, however, that food crises rarely manifest in the presence of a single shock. They are typically the product of multiple, mutually reinforcing drivers, whose effects interact with one another against a backdrop of pre-existing conditions — poverty, structural weaknesses — that compound their impact. Since at least 2020, conflict and insecurity have been identified as the single largest driver of food crises worldwide (Shemyakina 2022; Delgado and Tschunkert 2022; Anderson et al. 2021). Yet even this finding requires qualification: not all conflicts generate food insecurity, and not all do so in the same way. Much depends on how violence interacts with food systems in a given territory, on the duration of a conflict, on the existence or otherwise of cycles of violence in that territory, and on a range of other factors on which both academic and policy literature continues to work (Hanau Santini 2026). What can be said with confidence is that the main pathways through which armed conflict triggers food insecurity are at least four: the destruction and disruption of food systems, including damage to land, crops,

livestock, infrastructure, markets and transport, which reduces production, access and availability of food resources (Kafando and Sakurai 2024; Muhyie et al. 2025); displacement, which undermines livelihoods and strains host communities' own food security (Brück and d'Errico 2019; George and Adelaja 2022); income and livelihood shocks that reduce household consumption (Weldegiargis et al. 2023); and the weaponization of food assets by state and non-state armed groups (Halmaghi et al. 2023; Messer and Cohen 2024). When it comes to food insecurity as a trigger for rebellion and violent action, the literature has identified increases in food insecurity as a potential source of grievance motivating participation in armed conflict, highlighting however that such effects are context-dependent (Ripamonti et al. 2024), while global spatial analyses have found that price and availability shocks can act as a “threat multiplier” for instability (Delgado and Tschunkert 2022; Agboklou et al. 2025).

The region covered by this collection encompasses, broadly speaking, two categories of vulnerability that it is worth distinguishing at the outset. The first comprises countries in, or emerging from, prolonged and destructive conflicts, where food security depends substantially on external humanitarian assistance, and where any further shock — economic, climatic, or military — can rapidly increase the risk of malnutrition and famine. Yemen is the primary example examined in this volume, alongside Syria, whose post-Assad transition has opened a new and uncertain chapter in which food has emerged as a central arena of governing authority. The second category comprises middle-income countries with limited agricultural sectors, dependent on food imports and lacking sufficient energy resources to offset food inflation. These are countries that, while very rarely at risk of famine, are vulnerable to fluctuations in international markets and may see protests and unrest linked to the erosion of consumers' purchasing power when food prices rise, especially in cases where

food and energy subsidies do not exist or are cut in tandem with inflationary increases (Hanau Santini 2024). The structural dependence of these economies on a concentrated and highly speculative global food market amplifies price volatility and heightens their exposure to food crises and external shocks (Clapp 2023). It is worth recalling in this context that the food price shocks of 2010–2011, when the cost of many basic goods rose sharply, were not incidental to the protest movements that swept the region during the Arab uprisings. In some of these cases the revolts remained peaceful and led to regime change; in others the change came through the intervention of external actors; in others the revolts were co-opted; and in others they generated internationalized civil wars. The political consequences of food price inflation are not, in other words, a marginal concern for the study of international relations in this region — they are constitutive of it. Tunisia and Morocco, both examined in this collection, occupy this second category: both have been repeatedly exposed to the political consequences of food price volatility, and both are navigating the difficult politics of subsidy reform under conditions of constrained fiscal space and heightened social sensitivity. Iraq represents a case that sits between these two categories: a country that has relied on governance-based mechanisms — above all a state-managed food distribution system financed by oil revenues — to maintain a degree of food access in the aftermath of prolonged conflict, but whose model is under mounting structural strain from climate stress, institutional fragmentation, and geopolitical shocks.

The contributions focused on Tunisia and Morocco approach food security from a structural perspective, examining how import dependency and the politics of subsidy shape both domestic political economies and these countries' positioning within the broader international food system. Global agri-food value chains have become increasingly complex in recent decades, organized through just-in-

time distribution systems that depend entirely on functioning transport infrastructure, require enormous quantities of land, water, and fossil energy, and rely on regulatory frameworks to guarantee food safety and quality (Taherzadeh, Bithell and Richards 2021). The vulnerability resides in the fact that if even one of the components of these chains is disrupted, the entire process is negatively impacted. Moreover, the highly context-specific nature of each phase of the chain makes the dynamics of the chain itself difficult to predict when external negative factors intervene. It is also important to stress how the different impact of some of these factors, depending on context, reveals some of the deep inequalities present in the current global food system, as the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (2023) has documented in its report on reducing inequalities for food security and nutrition. Countries that carry high levels of external debt, that have seen their fiscal space reduced by the combination of post-pandemic contraction and the monetary tightening that followed, and that depend on imports for basic staple cereals have found themselves facing not only reduced food supply but also higher costs to finance those imports — with less foreign currency available and higher refinancing costs that further crowd out the social spending needed to protect the most vulnerable segments of their populations. As Riachi and Martiniello (2023) have argued in their analysis of the Middle East and North Africa under global food regimes, what appears as a series of conjunctural crises is better understood as the product of manufactured regional vulnerabilities embedded in the structural subordination of these economies to international food regimes. For the most vulnerable and net food-importing countries, the reduction or absence of cereal imports and the consequent increase in the cost of importing wheat and other basic food commodities of first necessity have brought about rising levels of food insecurity, new social tensions, and an increase in socio-

political instability — a pattern with which, as this collection documents, both Tunisia and Morocco are intimately familiar.

The weaponization of food — the deliberate use of hunger as a tool of political and military coercion — is a dimension that has received growing normative and scholarly attention, crystallized in UN Security Council Resolution 2417, adopted in 2018, on the use of starvation as a weapon of war. The subtraction of food as a tool of war has been documented in many conflict contexts, from Syria to Yemen to South Sudan, and has been examined through the lens of international criminal law in particular by Lander and Richards (2019) and in the broader context of food politics more recently by Messer and Cohen (2024). To qualify as a war crime, starvation must meet key conditions: it must have occurred in the context of armed conflict; the perpetrator must have deprived civilians of objects considered indispensable for survival; and must have done so with the intention of starving them as a method of warfare. This is, deliberately, a restrictive definition — one that does not cover the great majority of violent events that cause food insecurity and whose understanding often requires careful empirical analysis of the individual case. What is certain, however, is that there exists a strong causal relationship between forced displacement and food insecurity. The emptying of entire villages, the flight of millions of people from zones characterized by violent confrontations, the siege of settlements and the inaccessibility of entire areas imposed by armed groups to exercise control over local populations — all of this has entailed the abandonment of agricultural land or, in other cases, severe difficulties of access to that land (ACLED 2023). More broadly, the weaponization of food takes forms that do not always rise to the formal threshold of a war crime but are nonetheless consequential: the manipulation of import controls, the taxation of humanitarian supply chains, the strategic obstruction of aid deliveries, and the

systematic destruction of agricultural infrastructure all constitute forms of what one might call the politics of food in war — practices that shape civilian survival and political authority in ways that persist long after active hostilities have subsided.

The contributions gathered in this collection reflect both the analytical breadth of this field and the diversity of the cases that the MENA region currently presents. Giuliano Martiniello's brief on Morocco examines the political roots of cereal and water insecurity, arguing that vulnerability stems not primarily from ecological scarcity or market disruptions but from longer-term agrarian transformations: specifically the export-oriented agricultural policies embodied in the Green Morocco Plan and the Green Generation strategy, which have progressively reduced the productive space available for cereals, deepened import dependence, and intensified water stress through irrigation subsidies and the expansion of water-intensive monocultures. Mustapha Jouili's contribution on Tunisia traces a structurally analogous trajectory: since the liberalization reforms of the 1980s, agricultural policy has progressively prioritized export crops at the expense of staple food production, deepening the country's exposure to global price volatility, currency depreciation, and rising input costs, while climate change and resource depletion further constrain domestic agricultural resilience (Elloumi 2018; Jouili and Elloumi 2023). Both briefs make the case that food security cannot be addressed without repoliticizing the debate and confronting the structural choices that have produced import dependency in the first place. Moving to the Middle East, Salah's analysis examines the dynamic of the Iraqi relationship between food systems and political power. His Brief on Iraq argues that food security has depended primarily on governance-based responses — above all the Public Distribution System, financed by oil revenues — rather than on agricultural self-sufficiency (Woertz 2017), and

that this model is under mounting structural strain from climate stress, institutional fragmentation between the federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, and the geopolitical shocks generated by ongoing regional conflict, including the disruption of trade routes through the Strait of Hormuz documented by UNCTAD (2026).

Building on the work of de Waal (2024) on famine and humanitarian crisis and of Colombo (2025) on the deregulation of warfare, Martino Tognocchi examines the structural and enabling conditions — legal, political, economic, and institutional — that make the weaponization of food conceivable and operational even in such environments. The remaining Briefs look at food in post-conflict settings -focusing in particular on Yemen and Syria-, inquiring to what extent food can be de-weaponised and go back to being a natural resource for development. Fortuna Finocchito's brief on post-ceasefire Yemen documents how hunger has become embedded in the political and military strategies of the Houthis movement and the Internationally Recognised Government. Both actors have relied on the manipulation of water and agricultural infrastructure, blockades and inspection regimes, and the entrenchment of a dual currency and dual food system, whose effects on purchasing power continue to generate acute food insecurity even in the post-informal ceasefire setting. Finally, Andrea Novellis examines food security as one of the decisive arenas of Syria's post-Assad transition, arguing — in dialogue with Martínez (2020) on the political topology of bread in the Syrian conflict and Jongerden (2022) on autonomous food governance in the northeast — that control over grain procurement, bread distribution, and water infrastructure is a central test of governing capacity and political legitimacy, and that the compounding of climate stress, administrative fragmentation, import dependence, and regional shocks creates a set

of converging vulnerabilities whose management will shape the trajectory of the transition itself.

This collection emerges from the ITALIM research project — Italy and the International Politics of Food Security — funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. Italy's engagement with food security as a dimension of its foreign policy has deepened considerably in recent years. In diplomatic terms, since 2021 Italy has had a Special Envoy for Food Security — a career ambassador whose role encompasses liaison with the Rome-based UN agencies that deal with food security, the organisation of and participation in thematic summits, and more generally a sustained attention dedicated to a theme that cuts across Italy's relations with many countries of the global South. Italy increasingly recognizes food security as a strategic priority — one whose deterioration in the extended Mediterranean neighbourhood has direct consequences for European and Italian stability. Several Italian governments in recent years have recognized a growing importance both to the theme of food security and to the centrality of a region whose demographic growth, current and projected, will have a fundamental bearing on global political and social balances — and the policy briefs gathered here are intended to contribute to that broader effort: to translate research into policy-relevant analysis, and to bring the complexity of food security as a political phenomenon into dialogue with the practical concerns of the policymakers and practitioners who must navigate it.

The cases vary in their geographic scope and in the severity of the conditions they document — from the structural dependencies of food-importing states in North Africa to the conflict-driven food crises of Yemen and Syria and the governance-mediated fragility of Iraq. What unites them is a shared analytical commitment: to treat food not as a background condition of political life, but as a

foreground political issue in its own right, shaped by — and in turn shaping — the distribution of power within and between states in the contemporary Middle East and North Africa.

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Morocco: Cereal and Water Insecurity since the war in Ukraine

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Abstract

This policy brief examines the political roots of food and water insecurity in Morocco, challenging explanations that attribute the crisis mainly to population growth, ecological scarcity, or disruptions in global markets. While acknowledging the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on cereal prices, it argues that Morocco's vulnerability stems primarily from longer-term agrarian transformations, subordinate integration into international food regimes, and export-oriented agricultural policies. The Green Morocco Plan and the Green Generation strategy have promoted high-value and water-intensive crops, reducing the productive space available for cereals and deepening dependence on imports. At the same time, irrigation subsidies and the expansion of monocultures such as watermelons, tomatoes, citrus fruits, avocados, and berries have intensified water stress and generated social conflicts over access to water. The brief therefore shows that food security and water security are mutually reinforcing crises, produced by an agro-extractive model that privileges international competitiveness and private profit over food sovereignty, ecological sustainability, and smallholder farmers. It recommends stronger support for small family farming, restrictions on water-intensive export crops, and investment in agronomic research suited to Morocco's diverse agro-ecological conditions and poorer rural producers. These measures are necessary to reduce import dependence, protect water resources, and repoliticize the debate on food security.

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Introduction

The 2023 Russo/Ukrainian war spearheaded a major global food crisis with prices of cereals particularly affected. The geographical areas surrounding the Black Sea in fact contain 30% of the most fertile lands, and Russia and Ukraine are among the leading producers and exporters of soft wheat, barley, oilseeds, and fertilizers. With spiking food prices, substantially higher than the already peaking 2007/2008 global food prices (see Bush and Martiniello 2017), the conflict ran alarm bells especially for those Arab countries with inadequate levels of internal production of cereals and strong dependence on global markets for the satisfaction of higher-than-average levels of cereals consumption (Riachi and Martiniello 2023).

How these effects play out depends hugely on the specific circumstances of countries. Two main factors make a difference: the staples people eat and their origin. Morocco represents a profoundly relevant case study to explore the character of contemporary food crises: with 288 kg of per capita wheat consumption – more than three times higher than the world average - it is ranked among the world's largest consumers and the sixth-largest importer of wheat with 7.5 million metric tons (USDA 2022; Index Mundi 2024).

The country sits at the heart of two food-politics paradoxes. The first relates to the country's export-oriented and market-based political economy model. While Morocco namely has sufficient and ecologically diversified farmland to feed its population, its current agricultural policies have shifted the patterns of land use away from the food needs of its growing urban populations towards the satisfaction of international market demand. The second has to do with the continuation of the cultivation and production of water-intensive crops despite the country's eighth consecutive year of drought. This accentuates the current hydric stress and negatively affects smallholder's access to water.

The Brief is divided into two parts. The next section focuses on cereal food insecurity. It provides a short historical analysis behind the growing food insecurity triggered by neoliberal agricultural policies embodied in the Green Morocco Plan (2008-2020) and Green Generation (2021-2025). The second section focuses on water insecurity and the agro-extractive character of agricultural growth, particularly in reference to the water-intensive nature of export crops.

Cereal Food Insecurity and Export Agriculture

Apart from the specific economic and political war conjuncture, prevailing analyses on Moroccan food insecurity bring together the Malthusian argument of population growth outstripping food production, an ecologically determinist approach pointing to the water-scarce character of the region dominated by arid or semi-arid environments, and disruptions in agriculture and food value chains complicated by corruption and The COVID-19 pandemic. While these analyses provide some elements of reflection, their cumulative result is a depoliticization of the debates on food security (Ferguson 1994) and a-historicization of the socio-economic dynamics of agrarian change (Martiniello 2024). The solution to the crisis is believed to be found in rising levels of productivity, strengthening a trade-oriented and market-liberalizing approach to food security. In this trope, food security becomes increasingly a function of the maximization of production and the optimization of food circulation at a global level. In this way, the notion of food security is translated into a technical concept, shorn of its political content, increasingly individualized at the level of people's purchasing power and caloric intake. In the harmonic world of neoclassical economists no mention is made of structural aspects of the food crisis. Neither is there mention of the hierarchies within the global food system and the dynamics of incorporation of Morocco in international food regimes.

Following the conclusion of World War II, Moroccans' *khobz*—bread—consumption experienced one fundamental and detrimental change: the homogenization of recipes from an assortment of diverse ingredients, such as barley, winter wheat, durum, and seeds, to almost solely soft wheat. The homogenizing trend towards soft wheat is an outcome of Western influence, trade policies, international markets, economic growth and integration. Specifically, the United States' development initiatives—namely the US Food Aid PL480 and the Green Revolution technology transfers—rendered detrimental effects on Moroccan wheat patterns of production, consumption and import, which were further perpetuated and extended by Moroccan post-independence governance. In the 1960s, Morocco was largely self-sufficient, producing more than 80% of the wheat for domestic consumption. This declined over the years under the push of structural adjustment programs and neoliberal agricultural restructuring, and by the turn of the century, on average, only 60% of the total domestic demand for wheat was met. Despite the doubling of its population during the same period, the per capita supply of wheat increased impressively from 138 kg/person in the 1960s to an average of 255 kg/person in the period 2001–2016. Considering the population increase and changing food habits, wheat, and particularly bread, consumption became an even bigger component of food security.

In Morocco, wheat is an important cereal crop that significantly contributes to the livelihoods of farming communities and the national economy. On average for the period 2010–2016, the country produced 5.7 million tons of wheat grain on about 3.2 million ha of land. In 2013, total cereal production accounted for 47% of the agricultural value added. Wheat production alone was worth about USD 850 million, making it the second most important crop after olives.

Overall, in 2020, wheat and barley production decreased by 40–45% as compared to the previous year. At 3.32 million tons, the 2020

cereal production remained 60 percent short of the five-year average and 38 percent below the 2019 harvest. The 2020 harvest has been the third lowest one on record in the last 20 years.

In parallel, in 2022, wheat imports increased to 10.5 million tons, up one-fifth from the previous agricultural year and 30% above the average. The country purchases its soft wheat from the EU and countries around the Black Sea while Canada provides durum wheat. Morocco has revised its normal protectionist policies regarding food imports. The government commonly protects domestic farmers by limiting imports through tariffs that rise and fall depending on the season. Given the intense droughts of the last two years Morocco has instead opted to issue exemptions on these tariffs to support the local food supply. The government has prevented a rise in food prices with actions ranging from import adjustments to providing subsidies for farmers and consumers. Thanks to this, despite declining purchasing power, food prices have remained stable.

Yet, there is a direct causality nexus between the development of the Green Morocco Plan (GMP) and Generation Green and the growth in cereal food insecurity. Funded prevalently through government spending, along with a combination of development finance and bilateral cooperation, particularly with France, the GMP strategy of highly-intensive and export-oriented agriculture had ambitious goals of increasing GDP between 70 and 100 billion Dirhams, raising agricultural export value to nearly 44 billion Dirhams, creating 1.5 million new jobs and improving rural income for nearly 3 million impoverished people, in the following 15-20 years. It also aimed at improving the conditions of food security by narrowing the land areas under cereal cultivation by 20% while increasing its production of 50% (Government of Morocco, 2008).

The shift towards high-value export-oriented crops particularly towards highly remunerative European markets has expanded the

agro-extractivist logic of capitalist agriculture to new domains, thereby reducing available land surface for cereals. After 15 years of implementation, the GMP has strengthened the country's competitive position in the global agricultural value chains as a key exporter of fruits and vegetables, rather than improving national food security. The already alarmingly high levels of imports of soft wheat, durum wheat, barley, and corn have substantially increased between 2015-2020 (see table below) worsening food dependence on international markets for the satisfaction of the basic food needs of its population.

Morocco				
Cereal Production				
	2015-2019 average	2019	2020 estimate	change 2020/2019
	000 tonnes			percent
Wheat	5 868	4 100	2 560	-37.6
Barley	2 099	1 161	640	-44.9
Maize	101	41	50	22.0
Others	99	95	74	-22.4
Total	8 167	5 397	3 324	-38.4

Note: percentage change calculated from unrounded data.
Source: FAO/GIEWS Country Cereal Balance Sheet.

After close data scrutiny, the amount of total farmland dedicated to the main cereals diminished more than the foreseen 20%. Data show that production has been drastically reduced rather than leading to the 50% increase aimed at in the GMP. Conversely, the price of soft wheat, durum wheat, barley and corn calculated in Dirhams per quintal skyrocketed.

Data from FAOSTAT and the Observatoire for Economic Complexity reveal an even more intricate picture. In fact, if we use the same period of reference, 2008-2023, the pattern of agricultural imports

and exports takes a more definite neo-colonial path. The GMP in fact essentially amplified Morocco's dependence on French soft wheat, from 16% of the share of total soft wheat imports to 51%, while the share of Moroccan agricultural exports to France more than doubled in the same period, making the country increasingly import- and export-dependent on the French cereals and markets. In 2023, the country registered astonishing export growth, becoming the world's No. 1 exporter in the world with a share of global export market at 17,5% in leguminous vegetables, shelled or unshelled, fresh or chilled such as peas, beans, favas. Leguminous crops were the 31st most exported product by value out of 1,122 in Morocco, with major agricultural export growth in crops such as tomatoes and melons (to France), cranberries and avocados (to Spain), strawberries and blackberries (towards the Netherlands), citrus fruits (to Russia), reinforcing its full integration in the international food regime and its associated power and accumulation structures (Martiniello, forthcoming).

Agro-Extractivism and Water Insecurity

A key component of the widening processes of food insecurity is chronic hydric stress. The proliferation of water-intensive crops in the last 15-20 years has massively increased the quantities of water extracted from the subsoil, contributing to the lowering of water tables. A key element of the Green Morocco Plan consists in offering Moroccan farmers subsidies for the installation of water irrigation infrastructures and subsidized water consumption contributing to raising the rates of water extraction from the agricultural sector. Twenty years of intensive water use for agricultural exports have contributed to creating very unfavorable ecological effects with water scarcity experienced across regions and among the most disadvantaged social groups. While the government strategy to provide subsidized

water consumption to farmers contributed to the improvement of the international competitiveness of Moroccan agriculture, this has contributed to the dramatic worsening of water availability not only for the agricultural sector but also for human consumption.

Subsidized water consumption has been a key component of agriculture-led economic growth, with the sector becoming by far the main consumer of water with 87% of water quantities dedicated to agriculture. This has generated contentious debates over unequal access to water irrigation depending on class, power and geography, with more spatially remote regions, poorer and less politically-connected farmers being heavily affected.

In particular, the paradigm of ‘virtual water’ created by Tony Allan (2001) allows us to grapple with the quantities of freshwater used to produce food. Developed in the context of the Middle East and North Africa region, it represents the water embedded in commodities such as grain and meat that water-scarce countries are advised to import in order to avoid water-related social conflicts. The Moroccan paradox of exporting huge quantities of fresh water embedded in its water-intensive agricultural crops, clearly elucidates the paradox mentioned in the introduction, representing an important explanation of the persistence of social conflicts over water. In Zagora, for example, this government-supported strategy -which championed watermelon cultivation using groundwater irrigation- has deepened social disparities in access to water: large-scale commercial farmers benefit from it, while residents and traditional smallholders relying on rainwater and aquifers face marginalization. In 2017, chronic water shortages, enduring hours waiting for water barely sufficient for drinking led to the emergence of the ‘thirst protest’, highlighting a sense of humiliation and injustice for the deprivation of the fundamental water rights (Al-Talbi 2017).

The development of intensive irrigated agriculture shows the persistent appeal of the California agricultural dream as a social imaginary

and its naturalization and routinization in Morocco's agrarian modernization policies, a legacy of colonial entanglements (Kuper et al 2023). The promotion of water-intensive monocrops, such as watermelons, tomatoes, oranges, avocados, horticultural products, and berries, along with the widespread increase in the use of inorganic fertilizers, has led to increased soil exhaustion, water depletion and biodiversity loss. In the semi-arid Draa valley in Southern Morocco known for its biodiverse oases offering rich soil for date palms, vegetables and barley, a project to irrigate 3,500 ha for watermelon cultivation had increased water use from 1 million cubic meters in 2000 to 21 million cubic meters in 2019 (Bossenbrok et al 2019). In a similar vein, the boost of tomatoes monocultures in the region of Agadir led to intensive water-use further straining Morocco's already depleting water resources, with water availability falling below 600 cubic meters per capita, signaling severe water stress (Mathez, 2024), with the country heading towards its eighth consecutive year of drought. With a focus on private investments and large-scale agriculture, and an interest in selected agricultural crops, modes of cultivation, water resources, and agro-ecological regions, the PMV reinforces, and mirrors, long-standing social, spatial and ecological inequalities entrenched in the French-inspired colonial division of land between 'Moroc utile' and 'Moroc inutile'. Most agricultural investments which target coastal, fertile, water-rich, or irrigated lands are concentrated in the north-western regions particularly around the trade and infrastructural axis Tangier-Rabat-Casablanca-Agadir, the same routes first drawn by French and Spanish colonizers, and along which post-colonial land, agricultural and water policies were concentrated.

In a sense, the question of water insecurity helps us explore the social and ecological implications of capital-driven agrarian transformations, highlighting the highly uneven impact of these processes of agrarian modernization on different social classes, environments and genders.

Conclusions

This Policy Brief highlighted the dynamics of global food crises and their impact on the national food insecurity of Morocco. Against dominant narratives that interpret the current food-security crises using neo-Malthusian, ecologically determinist and neo-classical economics paradigms, the Brief tried to re-politicize the debate by situating the current food security crisis against the backdrop of expanding neoliberal market-based and export-oriented agricultural policies and its annexed agro-extractivist logic. The Brief also points to the need to historicize the debate on food security calling for a historical analysis of the agrarian and food transformations that occurred during colonial and post-colonial eras. In doing so, it documented the emergence of two interrelated and mutually reinforcing food and water insecurity crises.

Successive Moroccan governments have all defended the economic benefits of the Green Morocco Plan, sacrificing the growing ecological effects of expanding agrarian modernization such as deforestation, soil erosion, water degradation, and biodiversity loss to the altar of private profits and a market- or trade- based vision of food security. It is highly unlikely that the short- and medium-term future will show us anything different from what is already occurring. Actually, it is highly likely that the social dynamics of exclusion and ecological dynamics of deterioration emanating from unregulated groundwater use will continue unabated. The deterioration of internal production of cereals will have to be compensated with growing purchases of cereals abroad, whose rising prices at global levels may have the effect of tightening the fiscal budget of the Moroccan state taking away financial resources from other investments in social services, social welfare, etc. Despite state subsidies protecting consumers from food-commodity prices, high

and oscillating global food prices will likely impact households' food expenditures in the years to come.

Water stress is also likely to persist, given that the policy of subsidized water consumption for farmers represents a key lever, along with the cheapness of agricultural, particularly women, labour in agriculture, of the competition of Moroccan agriculture on the international scale. In this sense, in a context of shrinking provision of water, water will likely remain at the center of clashes between competitive uses: human consumption and agriculture. The government is trying to offer solutions for water provision by multiplying the number of desalination plants, which are however highly energy-intensive and are straining the already constrained state budget.

Key points

1. The Moroccan government should put in place land tenure security measures, production subsidies, state-led food procurement schemes and agricultural extension services to support small-scale family farmers and put them at the center of a program of food and nutritional sovereignty.
2. The country should put an end to uncontrolled water irrigation subsidies and ban the cultivation of water-intensive export crops that have mostly benefited medium- and large-scale farms contributing to the ecological destabilization and water degradation in vulnerable regions.
3. The Moroccan government should invest in agronomic research toward the promotion of ecologically sustainable modes of management of natural resources that fit the agro-ecologically diverse contexts, different socio-economic conditions and needs of poor labouring peasants.

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Tunisia's Food Security at a Crossroads

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Abstract

Tunisia's food security has become increasingly fragile under the combined pressure of import dependence, climatic stress, resource depletion, and changing consumption patterns. Since the liberalization reforms of the 1980s, agricultural policy has progressively prioritized export-oriented crops, while domestic staple production, especially cereals and fodder, has weakened. This has deepened Tunisia's exposure to global price volatility, geopolitical shocks, currency depreciation, and rising input costs. At the same time, water scarcity, soil degradation, and climate change are reducing agricultural resilience, with serious implications for rainfed cereal production and livestock systems. Food inflation has further eroded household purchasing power, especially among low-income groups, while dietary shifts away from traditional Mediterranean patterns have increased both health risks and dependence on imported foods. The brief argues that short-term subsidies and administrative controls are insufficient unless paired with structural reforms. It recommends reorienting subsidies and investment toward staple production, strengthening family farming through land, credit, extension services, and sustainable practices, and promoting healthier, locally grounded consumption. These measures are necessary to reduce import dependence, protect vulnerable households, and rebuild Tunisia's food system around resilience rather than short-term market integration.

Introduction

Food security has emerged as one of the most pressing policy challenges in Tunisia since the global food crisis of 2007-2008. During this crisis, soaring global prices led to a sharp increase in the food import bill, inflation in local food prices, and a heavier burden of food subsidies

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(Akari et Jouili, 2010). The COVID-19 crisis and the Russia–Ukraine war have once again revealed the vulnerability of the Tunisian food system (Jouili et Elloumi 2023). Since 2021, the food situation in Tunisia has deteriorated significantly. The result is an increase in food prices, supply difficulties, and increased food insecurity among vulnerable populations (Del Panta 2025, Ayebe 2024).

Over recent decades, profound transformations in agricultural systems, economic policies, and consumption patterns have reshaped the country's food landscape, generating both opportunities and vulnerabilities. While Tunisia has achieved notable progress in certain agricultural sectors and improved the availability of some food products, its overall food system remains fragile and highly exposed to external and internal shocks.

Since the 1980s, Tunisia has implemented wide-ranging economic reforms centered on market liberalization, trade integration, and export-oriented agricultural strategies. These reforms, reinforced by structural adjustment programs and international trade agreements, have significantly altered production priorities. Agricultural development has increasingly focused on high-value export crops often at the expense of staple food production. Consequently, the country has become increasingly dependent on food imports, particularly for cereals, exposing domestic markets and public finances to international price volatility and geopolitical disruptions.

At the same time, Tunisia's agricultural sector is facing growing environmental constraints. Accelerated depletion of water resources, widespread soil degradation, and the intensification of extreme climatic events have significantly reduced the resilience of farming systems. These environmental pressures intersect with socioeconomic vulnerabilities, notably high food expenditure among low-income households, rising food prices, and persistent inequalities between regions and social groups.

This policy brief examines the structural determinants of food and nutrition security in Tunisia by analyzing the organization of agricultural production and the underlying vulnerabilities linked to trade dependence, resource depletion, and climate change. The relevance of this analysis is heightened by recent global food crises, which have exposed the fragility of international food supply chains and underscored the strategic importance of food sovereignty and domestic production capacity. In this context, strengthening food security is not only an economic and agricultural objective but also a fundamental issue of social stability, public health, and national resilience. By identifying key vulnerabilities and outlining strategic policy priorities, this brief aims to contribute to evidence-based policymaking and informed academic debate on the future of sustainable food systems in Tunisia.

Overview of the food and agricultural system in Tunisia

Understanding Tunisia's food system requires examining agricultural production, land use patterns, and contributions to national food security. This section presents the current state of agriculture, the distribution of cultivated land, and the role of the sector in meeting domestic food needs. It argues that Tunisia's agricultural system is structurally misaligned with national food security objectives. Unequal land distribution and a long-term shift toward export-oriented production have weakened the country's capacity to ensure stable and sufficient domestic food supply, especially for staple products such as cereals.

Agricultural production

Agricultural land represents about 63% of the total area of the country, yet its distribution is highly unequal. More than half of agricultural producers possess less than 5 hectares on average and collectively

occupy only 11% of the total agricultural area. More broadly, 97% of producers manage less than 50 hectares and control 66% of land, while the top 3% hold 34%, and just 1% of farmers control 22% of farmland (MARH, 2006). This disparity stems from the colonial era but has also been shaped by post-independence land policies (Auzary-Schmaltz 2008). Politically, smallholders have historically been ignored by public plans, which tend to prioritize large-scale commercial agriculture aimed at export (Goetz, Hussein, and Thiel 2023; Jouili 2008). This structural imbalance has important implications for food security. Smallholders, who constitute the majority of producers, often lack access to resources, financing, and support services, limiting their productivity and their contribution to domestic food supply. At the same time, the dominance of larger farms reinforces a production model that is less oriented toward staple foods and more toward commercial and export crops (Jouili and Elloumi 2023).

Over the past two decades, the distribution of cultivated land among various crops has changed significantly, with cereal production decreasing from 37% to 28%, while the area dedicated to tree cultivation (arboriculture) increased from 49% to 56%. Legumes declined slightly in importance and the area devoted to animal feed increased. Finally, vegetable production did not change significantly, stabilizing at 4% of the total cultivated area. These shifts reflect a broader reorientation of agricultural policies, since the 1980s, toward export-led growth and high-value crops at the expense of staple food production (Jouili & Elloumi, 2023; Tanchum, 2022). At the same time, cereals have become less attractive to farmers due to price regulation, rising input costs, currency depreciation and high sensitivity to climatic variability, particularly rainfall (Thabet et al. 2024). In contrast, arboriculture offers more stable and often higher returns and is better adapted to semi-arid conditions, making it a preferred strategy for both commercial producers and risk

management. The expansion of fodder crops also reflects the growing role of livestock systems, while the stability of vegetable production is largely constrained by limited irrigation resources (Elloumi, 2018). Overall, these changes illustrate a structural shift away from staple-oriented agriculture toward more commercial and export-oriented production systems, with important implications for Tunisia's food security. While this strategy has generated income opportunities, it has also reduced the relative importance of staple food production, particularly cereals, which are central to the Tunisian diet.

Agriculture currently contributes about 10% of Tunisia's GDP, compared to around 14% in 1990, reflecting a gradual decline in its relative economic weight despite its continued importance for employment and rural livelihoods. The sector is increasingly dominated by livestock (37% of agricultural value) and fruit trees (34%), while cereals account for only 9% over the 2016–2024 period.

Animal production remains a key pillar of the agricultural economy, with meat production averaging around 300,000 tons annually. However, the livestock sector has shown signs of decline in recent years due to rising production costs, particularly the sharp increase in animal feed prices, much of which is imported and therefore sensitive to global price fluctuations and exchange rate depreciation (FAO, 2024; World Bank, 2023). This growing dependence on imported inputs has made the sector more vulnerable to external shocks and has reduced profitability for farmers.

At the same time, cereals—despite representing only 9% of agricultural value—remain central to Tunisia's food system, forming the basis of the national diet. Durum wheat accounts for about 60% of production, followed by barley at around 30%. Yet, cereal production has declined in recent years due to a combination of climatic and policy factors. As a predominantly rainfed activity, cereal production is highly sensitive to rainfall variability, with

frequent droughts leading to sharp fluctuations in yields. In parallel, the gradual withdrawal or weakening of state support to cereal producers, including input subsidies and price incentives, has reduced the attractiveness of cereal cultivation (Elloumi, 2018).

Importantly, the reduction in cereal-cultivated areas has not been offset by significant improvements in productivity. Yield gains have remained limited due to structural constraints such as soil degradation, and water scarcity. As a result, overall cereal production has declined, contributing to a widening gap between domestic supply and demand and reinforcing Tunisia's dependence on imports, particularly for soft wheat and animal feed (Jouili & Elloumi 2023; Tanchum, 2022). This evolution underscores a growing structural imbalance in the agricultural sector, where the declining role of cereals contrasts sharply with their strategic importance for food security.

Food and nutrition security

According to the Global Food Security Index (GFSI), Tunisia is ranked 55th out of 113 countries and 15th out of 57 middle-income countries in 2021 in terms of overall food and nutrition security. This is confirmed by official data and studies that indicate an improvement in the availability levels of most food products since 1985 (ITES 2017). However, these datasets hide the fragility of the country's food and nutrition security which is at risk due to several factors.

National agricultural production covers about 70% of Tunisians' food needs, with this percentage varying depending on the product and exceeding 100% for vegetables and fruits, which has allowed some producers to export surpluses (ITES 2023). However, this depends on the actual quantities consumed, which have begun to decline in recent years due to rising prices and the trend towards increased exports.

Since the mid-1990s, the milk production sector has developed rapidly, with a self-sufficiency rate of over 100 percent. However, this

fragile self-sufficiency, which depends mainly on imported inputs (cows, fodder, etc.), has declined in recent years due to rising production costs resulting from higher import prices and the devaluation of the dinar. Regarding cereals, Tunisia has become increasingly reliant on imports. During the 2016-2024 period, domestic production of cereals covered only 36% of food needs, with the self-sufficiency rate stabilizing at 58% for durum wheat, 8% for soft wheat and 40% for barley.

National agricultural production, in addition to the abandonment of most support and development programs by the state, is gradually threatened by the deterioration of fertility and soil erosion and the decrease in water resources resulting from the exploitation of these resources (Elloumi 2018). The policy of subsidizing exports to the detriment of basic necessities has also accentuated dependence on imports, particularly of cereals, in a context marked by instability, unbridled speculation due to the domination of monopolies and their growing link with financial markets (Jouili et Elloumi 2023)

Despite falling, the percentage of food expenditure in the total expenditure of the Tunisian family remains high, representing on average 30% of (annual) family expenditure and nearly 40% for the lowest income groups. Thus, the cost of food is critical for low-income families. For these families, inflation makes it more difficult to access an adequate and balanced diet. Under the effect of rising world prices and the devaluation of the dinar, the food price index saw cumulative growth of 108.3% between 2015 and the end of 2025. This sharp increase has considerably eroded purchasing power, particularly among poorer households. Beyond its economic impact, this trend carries important social implications: as food becomes less affordable, existing inequalities are exacerbated, increasing social vulnerability and heightening the risk of social tensions. This is particularly significant in Tunisia, where food prices have historically been a sensitive political issue and a key factor in maintaining social stability.

The Tunisian diet (Mediterranean diet) is traditionally based on the consumption of cereals, fresh or dried fruits and vegetables, olive oil, and some animal protein. In the context of globalization, this has undergone changes in recent decades, notably the introduction of more animal products and vegetable oils, especially among urban dwellers. These changes have been accompanied by a deterioration in the health status of the population with the spread of diseases related to an unbalanced diet. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) data, non-communicable diseases account for 82% of deaths in Tunisia. These data reveal that among Tunisians aged over 15 years, 19% have diabetes, 44% have high cholesterol and 36% have high blood pressure, while about 46% of Tunisians are overweight and 10% obese (WHO 2017).

Structural Vulnerabilities of Food Security

Despite Tunisia's achievements in agriculture, structural factors make its food system fragile. This section explores dependence on food imports, natural resource depletion, and climate change risks, demonstrating how these vulnerabilities threaten both food security and nutrition.

Dependence on Food Imports and Global Market Volatility

Until the early 1970s, Tunisia maintained a balanced agricultural trade, occasionally even achieving a surplus. This stability was not sustainable, as deficits emerged, particularly pronounced following the neoliberal shift in the early 1980s. Under pressure from international institutions, Tunisia implemented a Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) in 1986. This program's agricultural component mandated the liberalization of agricultural policies and trade and encouraged specialization based on "comparative advantages." This trajectory was further solidified by ratifying the

WTO agreements in 1994 and signing an association agreement with the European Union in 1995. Within this context, specialization and reliance on the international market have fostered production aimed at export, leading to the neglect of agricultural products primarily consumed locally. Consequently, this policy has promoted the production of specific crops such as olives, dates, citrus fruits, and tomatoes to capitalize on export revenues, often at the expense of essential products like wheat, dairy products, meat, and vegetables (Jouili et Elloumi, 2023).

Although trade liberalization contributed to a certain expansion of agricultural and agri-food exports, this growth remained relatively limited in scale (Jouili, 2023). By contrast, imports increased much more rapidly, recording an average annual growth rate of 11% between 2000 and 2024. As a result, the food trade balance deteriorated significantly: over the period 2008–2024, exports covered only 76% of food imports on average, generating an annual deficit estimated at approximately 781 million dinars—equivalent to 16% of the added value of Tunisia’s agricultural and agri-food sector. This structural imbalance reflects the country’s persistent dependence on external markets, particularly for cereals, with around 50% of cereals for human consumption and 60% of those used for livestock feed being imported (Tanchum, 2022).

Overall, Tunisia remains structurally dependent on a concentrated and highly speculative global food market (Clapp, 2023), amplifying price volatility and heightening exposure to food crises and external shocks. During the 2007–2008 global food crisis, soaring international prices led to a sharp increase in Tunisia’s food import bill, which more than doubled from US\$1.1 billion in 2005 to US\$2.5 billion in 2008—equivalent to about 6% of GDP—driven largely by rising cereal imports (Jouili & Elloumi, 2023). More

recently, the COVID-19 crisis exposed again the fragility of the food system, as supply chain disruptions, economic slowdown, and job losses eroded household purchasing power, especially among low-income groups (Elloumi, 2020). The war between Russia and Ukraine has further intensified these vulnerabilities. With around 53% of its wheat imports sourced from these two countries (Arab Reform Initiative, 2022), Tunisia has faced rising import costs as well as significant disruptions in cereal supply.

Recent geopolitical developments further highlight Tunisia's vulnerability to external shocks. Tensions involving Iran and disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz—a key global trade corridor—have driven up energy prices and disrupted commodity flows, with cascading effects on food systems. Rising energy costs increase transport and production expenses, pushing up global food prices (UNCTAD 2026). For import-dependent countries such as Tunisia, this translates into higher domestic prices, fiscal pressure, and greater food security risks, underscoring the urgency of strengthening domestic resilience.

Natural resources depletion

In the mid-1960s, Tunisia initiated an agricultural modernization policy influenced by the Green Revolution model and aimed to enhance cereal and field crop production. This included intensifying crop rotation, promoting high-yield varieties, and extensively applying industrial inputs such as chemical fertilizers and crop protection products. Additionally, adopting mechanized farming and expanding irrigation systems were integral to this modernization effort. The push for increased agricultural production, based on the Green Revolution model, appears to have reached its limits due to the depletion of the natural resources it relies on, and the negative externalities it causes on the environment.

Water resources have been systematically mobilized since the early years of independence. In the early 1970s, Tunisia embarked on an agro-export strategy, which was reinforced by adopting a structural adjustment programme in 1986 that included the state's retreat and the liberalization of access to water resources. Irrigated land has increased significantly, increasing pressure on water resources. The mobilization rate of water resources rose from 59% in 1990 to 98% in 2015 (Elloumi, 2016). Currently, this rate is 117% for surface water and 120% for groundwater (MAPRH, 2023). This may cause deterioration of water quality because of increased salinity in situ or through seawater intrusion (MARHP, 2023: p. 37). Agriculture, the primary user of mobilized water resources, is therefore increasingly facing resource scarcity and growing competition from other sectors, which, although small, is expanding rapidly and is difficult to curb.

Moreover, with its limited agricultural potential, Tunisia is heavily impacted by land degradation, which affects about 75% of the country's territory (OTEDD, 2020). Water erosion is the primary form of land degradation. Furthermore, 46% of crops are grown on land with limited fertility, and 1.1 million hectares are cultivated on land susceptible to erosion (ITES, 2017). Besides harsh natural conditions, land degradation is also linked to anthropogenic factors, such as unsuitable agricultural practices, expanding certain crops onto inappropriate land, monoculture, overgrazing, and poor irrigation techniques using poor-quality water (Schütze et al., 2025; Elloumi, 2018).

Climate Change risk

Tunisia is increasingly facing risks related to climate change, characterized by rising temperatures, decreasing and increasingly irregular rainfall, and more frequent extreme weather events. Projections by the National Institute of Meteorology (INM),

published in 2018, predicted an increase in average temperatures for Tunisia ranging from 2.1°C to 2.4°C by 2050, and from 4.2°C to 5.2°C by the end of 2100. The same projections expect a decrease in annual precipitation reserves ranging from -1% to -14% in 2050 and from -18% to -27% in 2100.

Compared to 1980-2010, climate change will have a negative impact on yields. For cereals, projections indicate a decline in yield, by 2100, between 14% and 26% for durum wheat, 18% and 33% for soft wheat, and 14% and 32% for barley. For oil olives, projections reveal a decline in yield of between 17% and 61%. Finally, projections for forage production from pastureland show a general downward trend in the future, which will be more pronounced towards the end of the century, with a decline of around 40% (AFD 2021).

Other expected impacts of climate change include a northward shift in bioclimatic zones, an expansion of the Saharan zone, and the near disappearance of the humid zone by 2100. These impacts will result in a significant decrease in the profitability of livestock production and crop yields, particularly in production systems that depend on rainfall (Mhiri 2022). The area devoted to cereals will decrease, with soft wheat being the most affected, with an average decrease of 26%. In turn, areas suitable for olive cultivation are expected to decrease by an average of 14% (AFD 2021). Through its negative impact on yields and production of major crops, climate change can only increase vulnerability to food insecurity and reinforce the country's dependence on the global food market.

Conclusions

Food security in Tunisia stands at a critical crossroads. From less than 15% in 2011, the prevalence rate of severe or moderate food insecurity rose to 18.2% in 2014 and 25.4% in 2023, amounting to about 3

million people (FAO et al. 2024). Furthermore, structural dependence on imports, natural resource depletion and climate vulnerability have combined to create a highly exposed food system. Short-term stabilization efforts through subsidies and administrative controls have preserved social peace but have failed to address underlying vulnerabilities.

Looking ahead to the 2026–2028 period, and assuming current trends persist, Tunisia is likely to remain highly dependent on international markets for staple foods, particularly cereals. Continued exposure to global price volatility, combined with currency depreciation and rising input costs, is expected to maintain pressure on both public finances and household purchasing power. Climate variability is likely to further constrain domestic production, limiting the scope for reducing import dependence in the short term. In this context, food insecurity risks may intensify, particularly among vulnerable populations, while periodic supply disruptions and price spikes could contribute to renewed social tensions. Without significant policy reorientation, the structural vulnerabilities of Tunisia's food system are likely to persist or deepen. This scenario underscores the urgency of structural reforms aimed at strengthening domestic production, reducing import dependence, and enhancing the resilience of Tunisia's food system.

The rehabilitation of family farming is essential to ensuring food security in Tunisia. It requires an overhaul of agricultural policies, increased mobilization of public and private investment, and technical support tailored to local realities. This sector, which accounts for most farms, plays a key role in local production and social stability. Public action should ensure adequate access for family farms to land, inputs, sources of financing, and various agricultural services, and strengthen their technical support, the promotion of sustainable agricultural practices, and the development of short

supply chains. These actions would increase production, strengthen climate resilience, and reduce the country's food dependence.

In Tunisia, the priority given to export crops increases food dependency, as local staple foods are neglected, leading to an increase in imports. Since 1986, agricultural policy has favored “comparative advantages” at the expense of food security and sustainable water use. Climate change and the volatility of global markets exacerbate these vulnerabilities. To build resilience, there is an urgent need to shift production towards cereals and fodder, optimize irrigation, limit imports, and stabilize livestock herds, while reducing dependence on exports. However political constraints, farmer lobbying and interest groups pressure from export crop producers, reliance on export revenues, social risks, and trade agreements and international pressure, hinder any shift toward more resilient agriculture.

The Tunisian diet has shifted toward more animal products, soft wheat, sugar, and pastries, to the detriment of traditional foods. This transition increases dependence on international markets and undermines health and food security, especially in the face of climate change. A return to a local, balanced Mediterranean diet is essential. This requires strong public policies, nutrition education, subsidy reorientation, and adaptation of the agri-food sector to restore health, sustainability, and links with Tunisian food traditions.

Key points

1. Reprioritize staple production by redirecting subsidies and investment toward cereals and fodder, led by the Ministry of Agriculture, accepting reduced short-term export revenues for long-term resilience.
2. Support family farming through improved access to land, credit, extension services, and sustainable practices, involving public

authorities, cooperatives, and local banks, balancing fiscal costs with rural stability.

3. Promote sustainable consumption via nutrition education, subsidy reform, and incentives for local Mediterranean products, engaging health ministries, schools, and agri-food firms, despite resistance from import-dependent sectors.

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Iraq: governare la sicurezza alimentare tra economia politica, stress climatico e frammentazione istituzionale

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Abstract

This policy brief analyses the political economy of food security in Iraq, arguing that food access is shaped primarily by governance structures rather than domestic agricultural production. Since 2014, Iraq has relied on state-led mechanisms, particularly the Public Distribution System (PDS), supported by oil-financed welfare and import-dependent supply chains to stabilise food access during conflict, economic crises, and global disruptions. While these systems have mitigated immediate risks, they are increasingly strained. Structural dependence on food imports exposes Iraq to global market volatility, while institutional fragmentation between the federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government weakens policy coordination and implementation. At the same time, climate change, water scarcity, and environmental degradation are constraining agricultural production and undermining rural livelihoods. These pressures are compounded by emerging geopolitical risks, including disruptions to maritime trade routes, which threaten both fiscal stability and food supply chains. Under current conditions, Iraq's food security is likely to remain functional in the short term but increasingly fragile over time, as reliance on oil revenues and external markets persists. Strengthening water governance, improving institutional coordination, and investing in climate-resilient agriculture are essential to enhance long-term resilience and reduce structural vulnerability.

Introduction

Food security is a fundamental component of national stability and economic resilience, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected states

¹ Middle East and North Africa Platform for Religious Freedom and Peacebuilding (MENAP).

such as Iraq. In this context, food security, understood as consistent access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food across the dimensions of availability, access, utilisation, and stability, depends less on agricultural resource endowments than on the effectiveness of governance mechanisms (WFP, 2024). Political instability, conflict, and institutional challenges, further exacerbated by international sanctions and regime changes, have undermined access to food, making food security governance a central pillar of Iraq's stability and recovery (FAO et al., 2023; IFPRI, 2023; Woertz, 2017).

Despite substantial natural and economic resources, Iraq has not achieved food self-sufficiency. Prolonged conflict, sanctions, restrictive agricultural policies, and declining irrigation capacity have weakened domestic production and increased dependence on food imports (Jongerden et al., 2019; Nadheer, 2024). Recent global shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia–Ukraine war, have further exposed the vulnerabilities of import-dependent food systems by disrupting supply chains and increasing food prices. These pressures have coincided with macroeconomic fragility; in 2020, Iraq's economy contracted by 10.4 per cent due to the combined effects of the pandemic and declining oil prices (World Bank, 2021).

In this context, food security outcomes in Iraq are shaped more by governance structures regulating distribution, financing, and access than by agricultural production alone. Over the past three decades, Iraq has developed a governance framework centred on state-managed food distribution, oil-financed welfare systems, and regulated food imports. The Public Distribution System (PDS), one of the largest food subsidy programmes globally, remains central to ensuring national food access (FEWS NET Targeted Analysis, 2025).

The ISIS conflict (2014–2017) marked a critical turning point for Iraq's food security system. Large-scale displacement, infrastructure

destruction, and supply chain disruptions placed significant strain on governance mechanisms. During this period, the PDS, alongside humanitarian assistance, played a vital role in maintaining food access in affected regions. In the post-conflict period, reconstruction has continued to rely on these systems to address ongoing challenges, including fiscal instability and climate-related shocks such as recurrent drought.

This policy brief argues that Iraq's food security between 2014 and 2024 has depended primarily on governance-based responses to major shocks, including conflict, economic crises, and environmental stress, rather than on agricultural self-sufficiency alone. The analysis is based on qualitative policy assessment, drawing on secondary data from international organisations such as FAO, WFP, FEWS NET, and the World Bank, and focuses on the period from 2014 to 2024, encompassing conflict, recovery, and climate-related disruptions.

Governing Food Access: Institutions, Markets, and Political Incentives

Food security is seen as both a humanitarian concern and a foundation for social and political stability in fragile contexts. In post-ISIS Iraq, rebuilding food governance and restoring supply chains are key elements of recovery. Institutional strength is directly linked to food access. When institutions are weak and food is scarce, risks of displacement, economic vulnerability, and instability grow (WFP, 2024).

Iraq's food security is structurally shaped by persistent dependence on imports, reflecting long-term underperformance in domestic agricultural production relative to national demand. This has created a sustained misalignment between domestic supply and consumption needs. Wheat remains the most critical staple, with annual requirements estimated at 4.5-5 million metric tons, underscoring its centrality to both dietary consumption and the

Public Distribution System (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, FAO GIEWS, 2025). Import dependence is reflected in trade patterns, with food imports rising from US\$10.9 billion in 2018 to US\$14.7 billion in 2023, indicating a compound annual growth rate of approximately 6.2%, based on WTO-derived data reported by Food Iraq (2024). This reliance increases exposure to global market dynamics. Macroeconomic volatility, particularly exchange rate fluctuations, transmits external price shocks into domestic food markets, amplifying inflationary pressures and reducing real purchasing power. Imports accounted for 30.9% of GDP in 2019, reflecting broader structural dependence (World Bank, 2024). Domestic producers remain disadvantaged, facing competition from lower-cost imports, including supply channels from neighbouring economies such as Türkiye and Iran.

These governance mechanisms shape the political economy of food distribution in Iraq. State intervention in grain procurement, food subsidies, and import management reflects the government's interest in maintaining social stability through reliable access to basic commodities. Therefore, food access functions not only as a welfare policy but also as a mechanism of political legitimacy, mitigating risks of social unrest associated with price volatility and economic hardship. In this context, food governance is closely linked to broader fiscal and political priorities within Iraq's oil-financed welfare system.

The key institutional mechanism for ensuring food access is the PDS. Established during the 1990s, the PDS distributes subsidised staples, including wheat flour, rice, sugar, and oil, through nationwide networks. As one of the world's largest food subsidy systems, it serves tens of millions of Iraqis and relies on both domestic production and imports, highlighting the central role of state capacity in ensuring food access.

While the PDS has stabilised food consumption, it faces significant challenges. Economic crises have pressured state budgets

and reduced social protection coverage. This led to an 8-percentage-point drop in the number of households receiving PDS transfers during recent downturns (World Bank, 2021). Households without PDS access, especially those displaced by ISIS or lacking documentation, face higher risks of food insecurity. They must rely more on markets or aid. Beyond food distribution, the government backs local agriculture through procurement and subsidies. The state buys wheat from farmers at guaranteed prices above market rates. Cabinet Decision 249/2016 established procurement prices at 420,000 to 560,000 Iraqi dinars per ton. Farmers participating in national programs receive subsidized inputs, including lower-cost seeds and fertilizer. Broader initiatives also provide loans and subsidies for pesticides, machinery, and irrigation to enhance productivity. Price support policies strongly influence wheat output. In southern provinces, growing one dunam (2,500 m²) of wheat costs 250,000-435,000 dinars. The top government procurement price is about 850,000 dinars per ton. With good conditions, farmers can earn substantial margins. However, these incentives do not always increase productivity and may lead to inefficient use of land and water. This intersection of state and market involvement extends into Iraq's milling sector. In 2019, the government authorised nine private flour mills to import up to 735,000 metric tons of wheat for the production of 72 per cent extraction flour for domestic markets. Imported wheat must meet Iraqi quality standards and enter through the Umm Qasr port. While this policy introduced some private-sector participation in the grain supply chain, wheat imports for the Public Distribution System are still managed by the Ministry of Trade through the Grain Board of Iraq (USDA, 2019).

Complicating these interconnected systems, food governance in Iraq is further challenged by institutional fragmentation between the Iraqi Federal Government (IFG) and the Kurdistan Regional

Government (KRG). Fiscal disputes between Baghdad and Erbil have disrupted coordination on agricultural policy, procurement, and subsidies. Wheat procurement exemplifies how these dynamics affect markets and rural livelihoods.

Northern Iraqi farmers deliver wheat to state silos under the national program managed by the Ministry of Trade. But payment delays and procurement issues have sometimes created tensions between federal and regional authorities. For example, Kirkuk farmers protested payment delays, warning that this could harm their next season (Kurdistan24, 2026). In the Kurdistan Region, large sums meant for wheat deliveries were overdue (Channel8, 2025; Shafaq News, 2024). The Iraqi Prime Minister then ordered 284 billion dinars to be paid to farmers in the Kurdistan Region for delivered wheat (Shafaq News, 2024). Later, negotiations between IFG and the KRG produced new federal funds to resolve payment disputes (Rudaw, 2023).

These events illustrate broader coordination challenges within Iraq's federal system. While federal ministries oversee procurement, the Kurdistan Region administers its own production and rural policies. Consequently, disputes over budgets and timing can disrupt markets and undermine farmer incentives across jurisdictions.

Iraq's food system functions within an oil-dependent political economy, where the interplay among oil revenues, public-sector employment, and welfare systems shapes both institutional and market mechanisms for food access. Oil revenues finance public employment and welfare, thereby enhancing household purchasing power and stabilising food security through institutional mechanisms such as the PDS. However, this reliance exposes food access to fiscal shocks stemming from global oil price fluctuations, underscoring the direct relationship between political incentives, fiscal capacity, and food system stability (World Bank, 2019; Central Bank of Iraq, 2023).

The COVID-19 crisis highlighted this vulnerability, as declining oil revenues led to economic contraction and threatened food welfare mechanisms (World Bank, 2021). As of 2026, escalating regional conflict involving Iran and disruption of maritime traffic through the Strait of Hormuz pose immediate risks to Iraq's food security system. Since early 2026, shipping flows through the strait have been constrained amid military operations (UNCTAD, 2026). Given that around one-fifth of globally traded oil transits this corridor, disruption has contributed to rising oil prices and reduced export flows (Reuters, 2026a). For Iraq, whose fiscal system depends on oil revenues to finance the PDS, these shocks threaten the sustainability of food subsidies (World Bank, 2023; Central Bank of Iraq, 2023). Instability in Gulf shipping routes also risks disrupting grain imports through Umm Qasr Port, Iraq's main gateway for bulk food commodities (USDA, 2024; FAO, 2025). Rising energy and transport costs are increasing import costs and domestic price volatility (UNCTAD, 2026), potentially intensifying pressures on state legitimacy.

Taken together, these governance arrangements demonstrate that food access in Iraq is facilitated by a hybrid system integrating state-managed distribution, agricultural procurement policies, and import-dependent markets, all financed through oil-based fiscal redistribution. The integration of these systems, as discussed above, underscores the complexity and interdependence that shape food security outcomes in Iraq.

Climate Stress, Environmental Degradation, and Agricultural Vulnerability

Climate change and environmental degradation represent critical structural pressures on Iraq's food system. Rising temperatures, desertification, soil degradation, and recurrent drought cycles

increasingly constrain agricultural productivity. Iraq is widely recognised as one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the Middle East, facing intensifying drought, erratic rainfall, and more frequent extreme weather events (World Bank, 2023; Food and Agriculture Organization, 2025). Warming trends have increased evaporation and reduced soil moisture, amplifying agricultural stress (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022). These pressures are compounded by land degradation and unsustainable land use, which continue to undermine ecosystem capacity and rural livelihoods (Albana, 2023).

Water scarcity presents a particularly significant constraint. Iraq's agriculture depends heavily on the Tigris and Euphrates River systems, with most water flows originating outside national borders. Upstream dam construction in Türkiye, Syria, and Iran, combined with declining rainfall, has significantly reduced water availability (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2024; Nadheer, 2024). Water inflows have declined by up to 40 per cent, with projections of further reductions of up to 60 per cent, placing severe pressure on agricultural production. In response, authorities have restricted irrigation and prioritised essential water use (FEWS NET, 2025). Consequently, Iraq's food security is closely tied to water governance and transboundary hydropolitics, underscoring the need for improved water management and regional cooperation.

In recent years, Iraq has faced a severe multi-year hydrological drought. National water reserves declined from approximately 60 billion cubic meters in 2020 to around 10 billion cubic meters in recent years, placing significant pressure on irrigation systems and agricultural production (FEWS NET Targeted Analysis, 2025). In response, authorities implemented restrictions on water-intensive crops in several regions. For example, rice cultivation was temporarily banned in Najaf province to prioritise drinking water supplies and

crops with lower water requirements (FAO GIEWS, 2025). These measures illustrate the increasing pressure that water scarcity places on agricultural planning and food production. Reduced water availability has required authorities to limit irrigation for water-intensive crops and decrease cultivated areas to preserve drinking water supplies. This situation highlights the tensions between agricultural production and water resource management (FAO GIEWS, 2025; World Bank). These environmental pressures have substantial socio-economic impacts on rural livelihoods. Approximately 30 per cent of Iraq's population lives in rural areas, where farming and agricultural labour are primary sources of income and food access (FEWS NET, 2025). Although agriculture contributes only 3-5 per cent of national GDP, it provides employment for a significant portion of the workforce and is essential for supporting rural households (World Bank, 2019; World Bank, 2020).

Beyond immediate impacts on agricultural output, water scarcity is reshaping long-term land use patterns and rural economic structures across Iraq. Reduced irrigation has forced many farmers to abandon water-intensive crops or leave land uncultivated. In some regions, declining water tables have increased the cost of groundwater extraction, requiring deeper drilling and higher energy use. These rising costs weaken the viability of smallholder agriculture and may accelerate shifts toward less water-intensive livelihoods or greater dependence on urban employment, gradually altering demographic and economic patterns in rural areas. In many agricultural regions, households rely on farming, livestock production, and seasonal labour, heightening vulnerability to climatic variability and economic shocks (WFP, 2024). In northern Iraq, particularly in the Kurdistan Region, agriculture remains a key source of food and income, with smallholders dependent on rain-fed systems vulnerable to drought. Reliance on

government wheat procurement further ties livelihoods to state policy. Declining productivity, driven by drought, soil salinity, and reduced irrigation, has lowered yields (Nadheer, 2024). As incomes fall, households increasingly seek urban livelihoods, putting pressure on labour markets and services (FEWS NET, 2025; World Bank, 2023).

Environmental stress interacts with the legacy of conflict and displacement, particularly among communities affected by the ISIS conflict and subsequent return processes. In many areas, the destruction of agricultural infrastructure and disruption of livelihoods during the conflict have reduced rural communities' capacity to adapt to worsening drought and declining water availability. Many internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees continue to face administrative and documentation barriers that impede access to food entitlements and social protection programmes. Registration requirements for the PDS, including civil identification and residency documentation, can delay or restrict access for households relocating across governorates or lacking updated records. Consequently, displaced populations may face heightened risks of food insecurity despite the existence of nationwide food subsidy programmes (NRC, 2024; Phadera et al., 2020; WFP, 2024).

Trends in Iraq's agricultural production reflect the combined influence of environmental stressors and policy incentives, though outcomes vary across spatial and temporal scales. At the sub-national level, evidence from Dhi Qar province indicates a structural shift in cropping patterns over time. Barley production declined from 104,533 tons in 2008 to 6,084 tons in 2023, while wheat production increased over the same period, reflecting state procurement policies and prioritisation of wheat cultivation (Mishbak, 2025; IRIS-AUIS). This illustrates how agricultural policy can reshape local production incentives. At the national level, cereal production remains highly sensitive to climatic variability, particularly fluctuations in rainfall and

water scarcity. FAO and FEWS NET assessments highlight that drought conditions reduce cereal output, especially wheat and barley, while favourable rainfall supports partial recovery. This underscores dependence on interannual climate variability and water availability (FAO GIEWS, 2025; FEWS NET, 2025). Wheat production estimates further show the importance of distinguishing between realised output and projections. The 2024/25 season yielded approximately 6.3 million metric tons, while projections for 2025/26 estimate around 4.5 million metric tons, indicating a potential decline linked to environmental constraints. Differentiating observed and forecasted data is essential for accurate interpretation. Despite fluctuations, domestic production remains below consumption needs, sustaining import dependence. This gap reflects environmental constraints and institutional limitations in productivity and resilience. Increasing climate volatility, declining water availability, and soil degradation are expected to further constrain production and reinforce food security vulnerabilities in Iraq.

Decades of conflict, environmental degradation, policy mismanagement, and market distortions have made it increasingly difficult for farmers to maintain stable production and supply domestic markets (Jongerden et al., 2019). This situation has resulted in continued reliance on imported food commodities. Agricultural imports increased from about US\$2 billion in 1985 to nearly US\$11 billion by 2017. Imported products now constitute a substantial share of domestic food consumption (World Bank, 2020). Additional social factors also influence food security outcomes. For instance, gender inequalities in the labour market affect household income stability and food access. Female labour force participation remains among the world's lowest, and employed women are much more likely to experience unemployment than men (World Bank, 2021). These disparities increase household vulnerability to poverty and food insecurity.

Climate stress does not operate in isolation within Iraq's food system. Environmental pressures interact with economic vulnerabilities, governance constraints, and structural import dependence to shape food security outcomes. Without sustained investment in climate-resilient agricultural systems, improved water governance, and increased support for rural livelihoods, environmental degradation is likely to further weaken Iraq's domestic food production capacity in the coming decades.

Conclusion

Food security in Iraq is shaped primarily by governance structures rather than by agricultural production alone. The PDS, supported by oil-financed fiscal mechanisms, remains the central pillar of national food access. Through subsidised distribution and public-sector income support, these institutions have enabled Iraq to maintain relatively stable food access despite prolonged conflict, economic shocks, and global supply disruptions. However, this governance model is under mounting structural strain. Climate change, water scarcity, and environmental degradation are increasingly constraining domestic agricultural production. Declining river flows, recurrent drought cycles, and reduced irrigation capacity are intensifying pressure on rural livelihoods and weakening the food system's productive base. These environmental challenges are compounded by policy inefficiencies, including distortions in crop incentives and limited investment in modern irrigation infrastructure.

Institutional fragmentation further complicates food governance. Persistent coordination challenges between the IFG and the KRG continue to disrupt procurement systems, agricultural policy implementation, and subsidy distribution. These tensions reduce the coherence and effectiveness of national food security strategies, particularly in regions where governance responsibilities overlap.

Looking ahead, Iraq's food system is likely to remain functional in the short term, supported by continued oil revenues and the PDS. However, this model is becoming increasingly fragile. Sustained import dependence, combined with declining water availability and rising climate variability, is expected to deepen structural vulnerabilities in domestic production. At the same time, exposure to external shocks, including fluctuations in global food and energy markets and regional geopolitical instability, may place additional pressure on fiscal resources and import capacity. In this trajectory, food security outcomes will remain closely tied to the resilience of state institutions and the stability of oil revenues, rather than improvements in agricultural self-sufficiency. Addressing these challenges requires a shift from reactive crisis management to long-term structural reform. Strengthening water governance and advancing regional water diplomacy will be critical to stabilising irrigation systems and safeguarding agricultural production. At the same time, investment in climate-resilient agriculture, including efficient irrigation technologies, drought-resistant crops, and sustainable land management, is essential to support rural livelihoods. Finally, enhancing coordination between federal and regional authorities is necessary to ensure coherent policy implementation and to maintain stable access to food across the country.

Key Points

1. Safeguard and modernise the Public Distribution System (PDS) to ensure universal food access while improving targeting efficiency, logistics management, and fiscal sustainability within Iraq's oil-financed welfare system.
2. Prioritise water governance and regional water diplomacy, while investing in modern irrigation infrastructure to protect agricultural production from intensifying climate stress and declining river flows.

3. Strengthen coordination between the Iraqi Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government to stabilise wheat procurement systems, harmonise agricultural subsidies, and ensure coherent national food-security policy implementation.

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The Weaponization of Food and the Changing Face of Contemporary Warfare: Fractures and Opportunities

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Abstract

Once a key resource for humanitarian assistance and a pillar of so-called *soft power*, food has increasingly become an offensive and coercive tool. Recent developments – from Russian embargo in the Black Sea and the targeting of Ukrainian agricultural infrastructure, to restrictions on food supplies in Sudan and Gaza – highlight a growing trend toward the weaponization of food. In a context where global food production would be sufficient to feed the entire world's population, the use of food as a weapon reflects specific strategic logics. To better understand these dynamics, this policy brief identifies the enabling conditions that make such practices conceivable, operational, and, at times, even justifiable. It examines five key elements shaping the contemporary international environment to explain how and why food has become an established strategic tool. Building on this analysis, the brief outlines three priority lines of action for policymakers.

Introduction

A defining feature of contemporary international politics is the growing use of food as a tool of coercion. While it is widely recognized that war generates scarcity and often correlates with food crises, there is an increasing tendency – across both high- and low-intensity conflicts – to exploit the vulnerability of adversaries by turning food into a weapon. In this sense, the ever-spreading phenomenon of the weaponization of food (WoF) entails extending the logics of armed

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conflict to the production, circulation, and consumption patterns of a resource that is essential to life and belonging inherently to the civilian sphere. This dynamic is evident across a wide spectrum of contexts: from internal conflicts such as those in Syria, Ethiopia, and Sudan—where food aid itself has become a contested asset – to highly asymmetric conflicts such as Yemen and Gaza, where mighty states and coalitions have imposed total food blockades affecting large segments of civilian populations, up to trade wars among major powers, including the recent ones involving Russia, China, and the United States. According to data from the WFP (2023) in 2023 more than 280 million people experienced acute food insecurity as a result of the instrumental use of food, which has hindered or prevented adequate access to it.

If defining it a “return” would be historically inaccurate – given that, since the 1990s, the militarization of food has been recurrently employed as a complementary tool – it is nonetheless evident that, following the shocks that triggered the 2022 protean crisis, this practice has both expanded and consolidated, becoming increasingly intertwined with contemporary ways of warfare. Once a complementary tactic, the use of food as a weapon is progressively assuming a central strategic role within the arsenals of war’s parties, evolving into an autonomous, systematic, and entrenched instrument of war (de Waal 2024).

To fully grasp this phenomenon and its growing spread across highly heterogeneous contexts, it is not sufficient to focus only on individual actors or types of conflict; it is also necessary to examine the relationship between this strategy and its conditions of possibility. This policy brief therefore analyses the interplay between the international context in which this practice emerges and the underlying logics that sustain it, adopting a structural perspective

that situates the WoF within the broader transformations of warfare, which, despite its many ambiguities, remains the revealing expression of international politics.

The use of food as a weapon should thus be understood primarily as a process of interaction and overlap between warfare and other domains of international life and cannot be reduced to its immediate effects alone. This analytical starting point allows us to shed light on the drivers that lead certain actors to adopt this practice and to more clearly identify potential constraints and tools for intervention.

The Weaponization of Food and Contemporary Ways of Warfare

The conditions that enable the weaponization of food can be analyzed across five key dimensions of contemporary warfare: the effectiveness of constraints on the escalation of war; the level of conflict between the parties, namely how vital the stakes are; the distribution of power among actors in international politics, which determines who can resort to such strategies and which instruments they can deploy; the relationship between warfare and economic relations; and, finally, the role of third parties, particularly international organizations and diplomacy.

1. The erosion of political constraints on the escalation of war and the overall deregulation of warfare. The use of food as a weapon both reflects and contributes to one of the most significant transformations of warfare in the current demise of the liberal international order: the progressive deregulation and de-institutionalization of war (Colombo 2025). Throughout modernity, the presence of both implicit and explicit constraints has been a defining feature of a model of war distinct from other forms of political violence. War is distinguished from both peace and other forms of violence by the presence of constraints that

regulate its conduct and outcomes, most notably legal, political, and moral constraints.

- a. Legal constraints and the WoF. Despite significant efforts to expand and adapt legal frameworks throughout the second half of the 20th century, legal constraints remain insufficient to exert effective pressure in the face of violations such as the use of food as a weapon. Articles 54 of Additional Protocol I and 14 of Additional Protocol II to the Fourth Geneva Convention prohibit attacks on food-related infrastructure and the starvation of civilians, while Article 70 regulates the obstruction of humanitarian assistance. The 1998 Rome Statute, as amended in 2019, criminalizes the use of starvation as a method of warfare in both international and non-international conflicts. However, the requirement to demonstrate specific intent to induce famine (*dolus specialis*), together with the difficulty of clearly defining the scope of “starvation,” leaves significant room for manoeuvre and impunity (Marcus 2003). In 2018, the UN Security Council recognized “starvation” as a crime against humanity even outside active conflict settings. Yet weak enforcement mechanisms and the fragmentation of international institutions enable actors to circumvent these norms by framing food deprivation as an unintended side effect of war or as part of so-called “military necessity”. As a result, despite the formal existence of legal constraints, the combination of hard probatory challenges, institutional weakness, and political opportunism transforms international law into a space of strategic manoeuvre.
- b. Political constraints and the WoF. Traditional political constraints on the escalation of war also appear increasingly ineffective. The structural weakness of many actors involved – such as fragile or failed states, occupied territories, and states torn by civil war dynamics – significantly reduces the relevance of political

constraints typical of symmetrical warfare. In such contexts, the use of food as a weapon becomes a credible option even for policymakers in highly institutionalized systems, including democracies (Messer and Cohen 2024). Limited evidence, the possibility of presenting it as a simple consequence of warfare and its relatively low costs compared to other weapons, make the WoF a politically convenient strategy, enabling actors to obscure their intentions before public opinions and, thus, minimize reputational costs. Its ambiguous and hybrid nature – being partly economic and partly military - allows states and coalitions to deploy the WoF without falling under the full transparency typically required by institutional (or democratic) bodies such as parliaments, oversight cabinets, and specialized agencies.

- c. Moral constraints and the WoF. The use of food as a weapon also appears to circumvent the most established moral constraints governing warfare, particularly the distinction between civilians and combatants and the principle of minimizing suffering and destruction. What once served as a moral compass for the conduct of war is now frequently bypassed or manipulated, in part due to the gradual erosion and expansion of the category of “combatant” under international humanitarian law, chiefly due to the challenges posed by forms of non-conventional warfare such as terrorism and armed resistance. This moral ambiguity becomes both a tactical and strategic resource, enabling practices that maximize operational advantage at the expense of distinction and harm minimization of suffering as a constrain to warfare. The WoF fits squarely within this logic, allowing to affect large portions of population and using fear and threat as instruments to yield civilian population.
2. Conflict intensity and the stakes of war. The level of conflict between the parties and the importance of what is at stake –

ranging from limited objectives, such as economic control or balancing strategies, to vital ones, such as regime survival or territorial control – are decisive factors for understanding the logics behind the recourse to the WoF. In contexts where hostility takes on deep, existential, or dehumanizing characteristics, the operational distinction between civilians and combatants tends to erode, sometimes disappearing altogether. Under such conditions, the use of non-discriminatory strategies does not represent a deviation but becomes an integral component of warfare, shaped by the perceived nature of the enemy and the intensity of hostility that springs from this. The WoF is embedded in this shift: targeting access to food resources means targeting the population as a whole, affecting both material conditions of survival and the reproduction of social life. The targeting of civilians is not always explicitly declared but emerges as a consistent outcome of strategies aimed at exerting political pressure, weakening domestic support, or enforcing territorial control, disregarding completely the distinction between military and social-civil spheres. Territorial control dynamics, in particular, appear to have regained central importance – contrary to post-Cold War *globalization* narratives – and now constitute a key dimension in many conflicts. The higher the stakes of a conflict – whether in terms of security, regime survival, or strategic territorial control – the broader the range of instruments deemed acceptable, including those formally prohibited, in pursuit of “total victory” or the “complete annihilation of the enemy” (Hathaway and Shapiro 2025). This contributes to shaping an international arena marked by increasingly deep conflict fault lines, in which practices such as the WoF tend to be normalized. The very problem with such practices as the WoF is that a further consequence is that their radical character can easily engender mimetic dynamics of revenge,

retaliation, and punishment, which reduce the space for diplomacy and prolong conflicts with spiral of indiscriminate forms of violence.

3. Distribution of power. The distribution of power within the international system plays a crucial role in determining who can resort to the WoF, through which means, and who is able to mitigate its effects through prevention or humanitarian assistance. Contrary to intuitive assumptions, this practice is not associated with backwardness or low levels of technological development. Rather, it is increasingly employed by the most powerful actors, who possess the capabilities required to intervene in the infrastructures and trade flows that regulate food availability. WoF is not an alternative to complex destructive strategies such as aerial bombardment or ballistic missiles; it is a parallel and coordinated strategy that operates diffusely on the existential conditions of a political space. Military, economic, and technological asymmetries shape the capacity to act upon value chains, disrupt trade flows, impose blockades, or target productive infrastructures, from the *macro* to the *micro* level. Some actors are thus able to turn food into a coercive lever, while others remain structurally exposed to the consequences. At the systemic level, the absence or weakening process of a hegemonic actor capable of effectively sanctioning violations and mitigating effects, reduces the political costs of such strategies (Clementi 2025). Moreover, the nature of relationships between states and other actors – multinational corporations, international organizations, and NGOs – can either mitigate or amplify these dynamics. Notable examples include the control of aid distribution by Israel through the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation since 2024, or by the actions of Ethiopian central government in Tigray through the deployment of militias devoted to alter and obstruct aid distribution (Hassoun 2026).

4. Economic systems and interdependence. Economic relations are not necessarily antithetical to warfare; rather, they can be readily hybridized with its logics and imperatives. The structure of the international economic system and the degree of interdependence within food supply chains constitute another key factor in enabling the use of food as a weapon. In a context of highly integrated markets, states' vulnerability depends less on domestic resource availability than on their position within global value chains. Belligerents may exploit mechanisms and interdependencies – distribution networks, strategic reserves, financial instruments, seed and fertilizer exports – often without the awareness of the stakeholders involved. Urban areas are particularly exposed, given their reliance on continuous supply flows. Dependence on basic goods and industrial supply chains makes these contexts especially vulnerable to shocks and deliberate disruptions. In this sense, interdependence, in a conflict setting, can shift from a source of efficiency to a vector of vulnerability. The concentration of control over the global food system in the hands of a limited number of actors with significant influence but limited accountability – such as corporations and financial funds – further reinforces these dynamics, enabling powerful actors to generate systemic effects on access to food. The result is a hybrid dimension in which economic logics and military strategies overlap and mutually reinforce one another.
5. The role of third parties and international organizations has been traditionally – at least since the second part of the 20th century – key to prevent civilian victimization due to the aftereffects of war. The presence of third-party institutions theoretically represents a fundamental mechanism for regulating and containing escalations patterns in warfare and often plays a crucial role in conflict resolution. However, in the context of contemporary warfare, the influence of third-party actors and international organizations in

moderating violence and mitigating its effects appears increasingly limited. The delegitimization of international organizations, combined with progressive underfunding and political weakening, reduces their capacity to intervene, particularly in the most complex contexts. This is compounded by a shift in their operational focus: institutions are increasingly oriented toward emergency responses rather than preventive and structural interventions, contributing to the normalization of crisis conditions and seeing increasingly paralyzed their long-term prevention programs. As a result, in the face of the weakening of international organizations, a growing reliance on private actors in the management of food systems in conflict and crisis settings appears likely. This trend carries the risk of a gradual privatization of governance and a selective redefinition of priorities.

Policy Recommendations

The use of food as a weapon carries profound implications for international politics, affecting not only the conduct of warfare, but also the prospects for peace and post-conflict stability. For this reason, it should be understood as a troubling resurgence of past logics, to be countered and mitigated through available policy instruments. WoF's implications can be assessed along two main axes: a spatial and a temporal one. Along the spatial axis, with WoF practices conflict extends beyond the battlefield, generating cascading effects that propagate through regional and global economies, affecting not only directly involved populations but also civilians in third countries seeing their diet levels decreasing. Along the temporal axis, the effects of WoF persist well beyond the formal end of hostilities: even in the presence of peace agreements, deteriorating nutritional conditions produce long-term consequences, including chronic diseases,

underdevelopment, and impaired cognitive capacities, particularly among vulnerable populations. This boosts generational deficits in development and health (ICRC 2022). By directly targeting conditions of need and affecting health, the WoF generates deep and often irreversible damage, contributing to the radicalization of the lived experience of war to an extent comparable to kinetic violence. In this sense, food deprivation constitutes one of the most severe forms of coercion and is often regarded as contrary to the fundamental principles of the international coexistence. Within this framework, particular importance attaches to the effective respect of international law – even when perceived to be in tension with national interests –, the active role of legal subjects, and the reactivation of global interdependence, such as value chains, as potential levers of pressure and diplomatic tools. In particular, the following policy actions are highly recommended:

1. Protection and promotion of the international legal framework and preservation of the existing international normative fabric. First, it is essential to defend and promote international norms against the WoF, particularly recent developments in international humanitarian law concerning starvation (UNGA Resolution 2417, 2018) should foster this path. This should be pursued while avoiding the conception of law as a selective constraint imposed on others and instead reaffirming its original function as a shared limit capable of binding even the interests of those who invoke it. It is therefore recommended to develop analytical tools and monitoring systems capable of ensuring comprehensive oversight of food supply chains and of export mechanisms affecting the production, circulation, and consumption of food. At the same time, efforts should be sustained – and, where possible, strengthened – to support the role of international organizations in conflict settings, given their importance as third-party actors in

mediation and monitoring. It is further recommended to actively support, in multilateral *fora*, the recognition of “intentional starvation” as a serious violation of international law, and to promote stronger mandates for United Nations agencies, particularly in the Middle East–Mediterranean (MEM) region, with specific reference to monitoring and reporting activities, including the attribution of responsibility to individuals where evidence allows it. At the European level, Italy’s position should be aligned so that food security is structurally integrated into security and defence policies. In this perspective, careful consideration should also be given to the long-term impact of economic measures – such as tariffs and other forms of trade restriction – which may affect the stability of food markets in terms of prices and availability, indirectly contributing to conditions of vulnerability.

2. Food diplomacy. It is recommended to promote the provision of food resources – through official diplomatic channels as well as through mechanisms such as competitive pricing arrangements or targeted assistance – to strengthen partnerships with institutions in MEM countries exposed to the instrumental use of food, including in non-emergency phases. At the same time, efforts should be made to promote a narrative of food as a shared and redistributable resource, reinforcing approaches based on cooperation and shared responsibility. In this perspective, greater attention should be paid to food waste in highly developed and industrialized countries, which represents the paradoxical counterpart of the WoF and highlights deep asymmetries in access to and use of food resources. This commitment should be supported in particular by countries endowed with consolidated and resilient agri-food supply chains, capable of contributing to the development of alternative value chains. In this regard, Italy

holds a significant comparative advantage, given its robust and relatively autonomous agri-food systems, capable of ensuring supply even in protracted crisis contexts. It is also recommended to move beyond an exclusively emergency-driven approach to food security, redirecting part of external action toward prevention and regional resilience programmes – such as support for sustainable agriculture, water management, storage systems, and the development of local supply chains – to reduce the scope for the WoF in conflict. In this perspective, food security should be integrated into strategic partnerships with countries in the region – including development cooperation, energy agreements, and migration management – while strengthening coordination among the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAECI), the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Defence, in order to ensure a coherent strategy linking access to food, social security, and political stability.

3. Engagement in regional institutions. It is recommended to strengthen Italy's role in regional institutions, leveraging the still crucial function these bodies perform despite the broader crisis affecting international organizations. A significant institutional fabric remains embedded at the local level, particularly in more vulnerable and dependent countries, where it continues to represent an essential channel for cooperation and stabilization. There remains considerable scope to better leverage and coordinate with European Union initiatives and programmes already active in the region, such as the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and instruments like the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI – Global Europe), to enhance synergies, avoid duplication, and consolidate an integrated approach to regional food security. In this context,

alongside food diplomacy efforts, it is recommended to intensify negotiation activities and the promotion of technologies, expertise, and sustainable production models through existing fora, including regional organizations and local branches of international institutions in the MEM area. It is also advisable to strengthen Italy's role as a food security mediator in the region, building on its geographic position, its diplomatic capital in the wider Mediterranean, and the presence of major multilateral institutions headquartered in Italy – such as FAO, IFAD, and WFP – which constitute a significant comparative advantage. In this perspective, the promotion of technical-political dialogue platforms among producing and importing countries, as well as international organizations, is recommended to reduce the risk of WoF and its seismic aftereffects.

Conclusion

This policy brief has shown that the use of food as a weapon is not an isolated or contingent phenomenon, but rather a practice increasingly embedded in the contemporary form of warfare. Far from being linked only to specific actors or particular types of conflict, it is shaped by a set of structural conditions and dysfunctionalities – legal, political, economic, and institutional – that enable its emergence and consolidation. Within this framework, the progressive erosion of the constraints that have traditionally regulated warfare, combined with shifting power dynamics and the vulnerability of *global food regime(s)*, expands the scope for the WoF in different forms: from sanctions and military blockades to the manipulation of humanitarian aid. The fact that food can be manipulated demonstrates, on the one hand, that it remains a crucial resource through which power is exercised, contested, and articulated in the

international arena; on the other, it highlights how far from guaranteed this resource is, and how deeply international politics is shaped by fractures related to access to and control over food resources. The WoF thus represents a key indicator of both the link between the transformation of warfare and food politics, and the structural vulnerabilities characterizing contemporary systems of food production, circulation, and distribution. From this perspective, the phenomenon should not be interpreted as a primary cause of the crisis of the liberal international order, but rather as its epiphenomenon: it becomes conceivable and feasible to use food as a weapon exactly within a context marked by a multifaceted crisis affecting simultaneously the economic, legal, and moral dimensions of international politics. Precisely for this reason, countering its use requires not only targeted interventions, but also a broader effort to reconstruct the constraints, institutions, and practices that underpin international coexistence and a more equitable access to vital resources such as food.

Key points

1. Protection of international law and civilians' basic rights. Uphold international humanitarian law as a priority area under pressure and reaffirm its role as a shared constraint binding all actors, including one's own.
2. Food diplomacy. Reframe food as a cooperative and redistributive resource, countering extractive and competitive narratives and engaging both states and non-state actors in coordinated action.
3. Regional engagement. Promote initiatives in neighbouring regions by leveraging established agri-food supply chains to strengthen cooperation, resilience, and local capacity.

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Yemen: Food Security and Power Dynamics

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Abstract

Food security in Yemen is closely tied to conflict dynamics. Both the Houthis and the Internationally Recognised Government (IRG) have increasingly used food and related resources as weapons of war. In the north-west, Houthi control over both the governance of humanitarian aid and water and agricultural infrastructure has enabled the manipulation of food resources and their selective distribution. In government-controlled areas, by contrast, institutional fragility, fragmented authority, and policies regulating the inflow of commercial goods and aid have constrained access to essential resources. Although the 2022 truce reduced the intensity of violence, it did not significantly alter practices of food manipulation. In the short term, the persistence of these dynamics is likely to further exacerbate food insecurity, making improved humanitarian access and stronger protections for humanitarian workers key priorities.

Introduction

In its eleventh year of conflict, Yemen continues to face one of the world's most severe food insecurity crises (OCHA 2018). As of early 2026, around 23.1 million people require protection and humanitarian assistance, marking an 18.5% increase compared to the previous year (WHO 2026; OCHA 2025). The civil war – erupted in September 2014 and then internationalised in March 2015 – alongside a deepening economic crisis has exacerbated pre-existing conditions of food insecurity and malnutrition. Even before the escalation of hostilities,

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Yemen was already facing a rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation involving 335,000 internally displaced people (OCHA 2014). Despite some access constraints, particularly in remote areas, humanitarian agencies and non-governmental organisations began delivering cash-based transfers and implementing project-based agricultural inputs (Demurtas and Agbeko 2025). The four dimensions of food security (access, availability, stability and utilisation) identified by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) now appear severely compromised. These challenges are further intensified by extreme climatic conditions, including droughts, heavy rainfall and floodings, which have deepened the country's water crisis while simultaneously reducing agricultural productivity and increasing reliance on imported essential goods. In Yemen, hunger cannot solely be understood as a humanitarian emergency. It has increasingly become embedded in political and military strategies of both the Houthi movement and the IRG. Over the past fifteen years, academic scholarship has paid growing attention to the linkages between food and conflict. It has often examined the role of food as a weapon of war, as both a coercive tool and a direct target of violence. This strand of literature refers to such a phenomenon as 'politicisation and weaponisation of food' (Messer and Cohen 2024; Shesterinina 2023). Within the Yemeni setting, three factors are particularly relevant, which, in turn, enable the emergence of weaponisation practices: 1) the country's territorial and economic fragmentation; 2) its dependence on imports and humanitarian aid; and 3) the governance and management of aid itself.

Hunger as a Weapon of War under Non-State Control: The Houthi Case

Territorial and infrastructural control in north-western Yemen

The weaponisation of food by the Houthis – officially known as Ansar Allah – has been primarily enabled by their territorial control

over much of north-western Yemen. Despite internal instability, the Houthis have consolidated their authority over areas where around 70% of the population lives (Carboni 2021). This occurred through a combination of factors: a close circle of loyalists and allies, as well as a supervisory system embedded within Houthi administrative structures, which oversaw the conduct of officials across governorates, districts, and villages, thereby guaranteeing the implementation of central directives and operating as a direct line of communication with the movement's leadership (ACAPS 2020). On the other hand, these dynamics have been reinforced through repression, arrest campaigns, and growing recruitment (S/2024/731). Houthi control extends beyond Sana'a-based central institutions – such as the General Authority for Zakat, Central Bank of Yemen and telecommunication sector – that, while essential, represent only part of their wider war economy (S/2024/731). It also includes infrastructure directly linked to food and water security, including food warehouse, irrigation systems and entry points for humanitarian aid. In a country that imports about 70% of its food (ACAPS 2024b) and relies upon humanitarian assistance, control over these infrastructures enable the regulation and distribution of essential resources. The case of Taiz illustrates these dynamics. Blockades on water pumping systems have been used to exert pressure on IRG-controlled areas. Managing only 21 out of 91 wells, the IRG is unable to meet daily water needs in territories under its authority and is thus forced to rely on costly water trucking (S/2025/650). More broadly, however, the manipulation of infrastructure and the obstruction of relief organisations indiscriminately affected civilian population across both sides of the conflict. For example, laying of mines around wells, reservoirs, and agricultural land, particularly in frontline areas such as the village of al-Shaqb, further undermines livelihoods. Among other things, limited access to water, reduced agricultural

productivity, and damaged sanitation systems have contributed to the spread of water-related diseases, such as cholera epidemics. Control over key entry points for humanitarian aid has also become strategic. In addition to As Salif port and Ras Issa oil terminal, the port of Hodeida, which serves as the main entry point for 70% of commercial and humanitarian goods (OCHA 2018), enables the Houthis to generate revenue through taxation, while regulating the distribution of humanitarian aid.

Institutionalising hunger: the Houthis' humanitarian governance

Control over infrastructure and entry points is part of a larger process through which the Houthis have gradually institutionalised the management of food in north-western Yemen. The establishment of the Supreme Council for Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation (SCMCHA) in November 2019 played a key role in this regard. It indeed regulated and oversaw the distribution of humanitarian aid and the implementation of projects. The presence of political and financial figures, along with intelligence officials, all coming from the Houthi movement's inner circle, quickly turned the SCMCHA into "one of the most powerful and influential entities in Houthi-controlled areas" (S/2021/79, 78). Through such a body, the Houthis have taxed humanitarian aid to generate revenue and sustain their war efforts, redirected portions of food to pay loyalists and fighters, and manipulated the beneficiary lists to exclude or punish opponents (S/2020/70; S/2025/650). Food assistance has also been used both as a coercive tool to recruit new members, including children, and as political leverage to secure tribal leaders' support (S/2025/650). These practices show how the administration of food has become part of a broader governance strategy aimed at consolidating power

and sustaining patronage networks which is partially built on selective food distribution. Additional constraints, including delays in issuing visas and approving projects, interference in humanitarian activities, and the imposition of a *mabram* (male guardian) requirement for female aid workers (S/2020/70; S/2022/50), have further restrained access and undermined aid delivery. At the same time, cases of arbitrary arrests, kidnappings and expulsions of aid personnel indicate a growing reliance on violence against international organisations, often used by the Houthis to bolster their leverage in negotiations. The dissolution of SCMCHA in October 2024 did not, however, result in any meaningful changes in these practices, similar to what occurred with the earlier National Authority for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Recovery. Indeed, interference in humanitarian projects and arrest campaignss have continued, while the institutional body responsible for regulating humanitarian affairs has shifted, and is now represented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates.

Ceasefire and its aftermath

Although the truce, which came into force in April 2022, reduced the intensity of violence and internal displacement (OSESFY 2022), it did not generate structural improvements in food security. On the humanitarian side, two main dynamics have emerged in the north-western part of Yemen. First, declining fighting has been accompanied by increased restrictions on freedom of movement, particularly for women, which have affected the ability of humanitarian organisations to identify and address gender-specific needs (ACAPS 2022). More broadly, these restrictions reflect the Houthis' strategy aimed at indoctrinating people living under their authority, and at consolidating domestic control through the suppression of dissent

and restriction of public space (S/2025/650). Second, the partial reopening of Sana'a airport and the resumption of oil imports through Hodeida have produced only marginal improvements in food security. Despite an informal truce has largely held since its official end in October 2022, humanitarian access remains restricted in north-western areas due to bureaucratic obstacles and the continued closure of main roads in Taiz. Since 7 October 2023, renewed Houthi attacks in the Red Sea on Israeli and Israeli-linked commercial vessels (the latest recorded in September 2025) have significantly disrupted fishing activities along the Hodeida coast, with 60% of fishermen losing their livelihoods (ACAPS 2024b). At the same time, violence against humanitarian personnel has also persisted, with numerous incidents recorded in 2024, including attacks on facilities and the detention of 73 UN staff (S/2024/731; UNSC Report 2026). In several cases, operational constraints and the looting of storage warehouses have forced some agencies to suspend food distribution, including the WFP, which halted operations on 29 January 2026. Food security conditions have consequently continued to deteriorate. Despite increased import volumes through the Red Sea ports in January 2026, around 61% of the population in Houthi-controlled territories still experiences inadequate food consumption, with peaks in the governorates of al-Jawf and al-Bayda (ReliefWeb 2026). Additionally, the war in Iran risks exacerbating Yemen's food insecurity, particularly if the Houthis choose to deepen or expand their involvement in support of Tehran – as threatened by their military spokesman, Brigadier-General Yahya Saree. Such a development could provoke retaliatory attacks by either the United States or Israel further increasing insecurity, damaging the already fragile infrastructure and generating additional operational constraints for aid agencies (ACAPS 2026). Even though

a closure of the Bab Al Mandab Strait remains unlikely, the Houthis may resume attacks on vessels passing through this corridor, which, in turn, could reduce the flow of both humanitarian assistance and commercial goods entering the country.

Hunger as a Weapon of War under State Control

Territorial and economic-institutional control in southern Yemen

Territorial and economic fragmentation between Houthi- and IRG-controlled territories has resulted in parallel monetary systems and trade barriers that directly impact food access. From an economic perspective, the Houthi ban on newly issued IRG banknotes created a dual currency system with different exchange rates, which has been less favourable in government-controlled areas. The exchange rate has reached approximately 1,540 rials per US dollar in IRG areas, compared with around 531 rials in Houthi-held territories, further reducing household purchasing power and contributing to rising food prices (ACAPS n.d.). Fuel price volatility and fuel supply shortages have then aggravated economic conditions. In addition to contributing to the outbreak of mass protests, these dynamics have caused frequent electricity blackouts, which in turn reduce mobility and disrupt essential services. At the commercial level, Houthi taxation on goods coming from the IRG-controlled areas, combined with increased customs exchange rates imposed by the IRG on non-essential food items, has encouraged several companies to reroute their imports through Hodeida (ACAPS 2024a). This shift in commercial traffic, together with the blockade of oil exports, has driven a sharp decline in IRG public income, thereby reducing the state's capacity to pay public salaries (ACAPS 2024a). Under these circumstances, local resource exploitation has emerged as a means of economic survival. In some cases, government-aligned forces have

cut off water supplies to public networks and profited from controlling access to water (HRW 2023). More broadly, competition over water infrastructure has localised clashes in several areas, including Taiz, while Houthi manipulation of infrastructure and its poor maintenance have accelerated the depletion of groundwater levels, and further amplified food insecurity in a context already marked by severe water scarcity (OCHA 2025).

Inspections and humanitarian aid governance

The main ways in which the IRG and Saudi-led coalition have weaponised food include airstrikes on infrastructure and control policies regulating the flow of commercial goods and humanitarian aid. Specifically, airstrikes on fishing equipment in Hodeida governorate, on water infrastructure in Saada governorate, where two main water facilities of al-Nushoor and al-Hamazat are located, and on farms and agricultural infrastructure in Hajjah governorate have deteriorated or destroyed local production capacity and access to essential services, forcing communities to flee (Mwatana for Human Rights 2021). These attacks have contributed not only to rising levels of internal displacement, but also to some of the highest levels of food insecurity in the country. For instance, the Houthi-held governorate of Hajja, which already experienced some levels of pre-existing poverty, has been particularly affected. In 2019, around 66% of its population was classified in IPC Phase 3 (crisis) or higher, with approximately 19,000 people in Phase 5 (catastrophe) (ACAPS 2019). The direct targeting of infrastructure in north-western areas suggests the integration of military operations into a broader strategy of war aimed at eroding food security in Houthi-held zones. According to Sowers and Weinthal (2021, 168), 94 out of 105 incidents recorded up to the end of 2020 involved Saudi-led coalition attacks on water

infrastructure, including water storage facilities and humanitarian water supply projects. Within this context, the enforcement of air and naval blockades and inspection procedures – which often applied to vessels already authorised by the UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen – have delayed the inflow of goods and humanitarian aid (HRW 2020). Control over inspections, authorisations, and aerial and naval restrictions operates as a tool of pressure against the Houthis. While the coalition largely controls incoming flows, the management of humanitarian aid in IRG-controlled territories is shaped by weak institutional capacity. Compared to the Houthis, the IRG has been relatively more open to implementing certain humanitarian projects in the south, such as WFP data collection and biometric registration programmes (Fakirah 2025). However, a closer look at what may appear to be a sign of openness towards relief agencies reveals structural weaknesses in governance. Internal fragmentation among state institutions as well as the presence of actors with growing contrasting interests limit the IRG's ability to exercise control and administer humanitarian aid coherently (Fakirah 2025). State fragility and fragmented control over the use of force among different actors, such as the Southern Transitional Council (STC), have created operational difficulties and often unclear procedures for international organisations (S/2024/731). As in Houthi-controlled areas, incidents targeting humanitarian personnel, interference in projects, and bureaucratic obstacles have hindered aid delivery and the effectiveness of humanitarian services (S/2021/79). Tensions between Saudi Arabia and the STC, culminating in Saudi airstrikes on some STC positions in December 2025 and a subsequent weakening of its institutional role, could help reduce government fragmentation. However, this outcome remains uncertain. It will depend on the IRG's ability to

consolidate its authority over areas previously controlled by the STC and to manage pro-STC demonstrations through peaceful means – something that has so far proven difficult. These protests also highlight the STC’s continued local relevance. At the same time, the IRG’s capacity to incorporate southern demands into its agenda will be crucial for building intra-Yemeni consensus, although such consensus is likely to remain fragile.

Post-truce economic vulnerabilities and rising tensions

Although primarily enforced in Houthi-controlled areas, the *mabram* requirement was also adopted by some tribal leaders in the IRG-controlled governorates of Abyan and Lahj (ACAPS 2022). During the truce, these restrictions on the movement of female aid workers limited overall humanitarian access and partially offset improvements in services for internally displaced persons, particularly in Marib governorate (ACAPS 2022). In parallel, social media campaign accusing humanitarian agencies of failing to respect local cultural and religious norms had huge implications for both women’s participation in humanitarian programmes, mostly in Aden and Taiz, and organisations’ ability to rent offices (OCHA 2022). Violent incidents targeting aid personnel increased in IRG-controlled territories. In the first three months of the truce alone, 45 cases were recorded marking a higher percentage than in Houthi-held areas (OCHA 2022). From an economic perspective, the IRG’s most recent efforts to stabilise the exchange rate and strengthen control over imports and foreign currency transactions have failed to enhance economic conditions, which remain rather fragile. This occurred despite a 90-million-dollar Saudi deposit intended to help the government pay public salaries (WFP 2026). The latest, however slight, decline in oil and basic food prices has not improved either household purchasing power or access

to food. By January 2026, around 66% of people in IRG-controlled areas still experienced inadequate food consumption, with severe deteriorations in Aden and Marib (WFP 2026). Rising political tensions have further compounded these vulnerabilities. The escalation between the IRG and the STC in December 2025 has placed additional pressure on an already unstable environment shaped by ongoing, though sporadic, military competition with the Houthis and declining humanitarian funding in 2025. The WFP's reduction in beneficiaries, from 3.4 million to 1.7 million in its first distribution cycle of 2026 is, for instance, one of the immediate consequences of funding shortages already observable in Yemen (WFP 2026). Even though agencies such as FAO and WFP have shifted towards more targeted interventions in high-risk areas (WFP 2025), these efforts have so far failed to mitigate what has become a structural food vulnerability in Yemen.

Conclusion

The use of food as a method of warfare has emerged as a defining feature of the Yemeni civil conflict. Hunger results from the interaction between the deliberate manipulation of food resources and structural conditions, some of which date back to the outbreak of the war. Food and water resources serve multiple purposes in Yemen: they are used as coercive tools to recruit new fighters, as means to strengthen networks of supporters and loyalists, and as ways to sustain war efforts through taxes, tariffs and the sale of food baskets and portions of water. The manipulation of pumping systems, and attacks on agricultural land strongly suggest a deliberate attempt to destroy productive capacity. Not only do these actions weaken actors' ability to meet civilian needs, but they also constrain the self-reliance of populations already struggling with pre-existing food insecurity, particularly in some districts. Laying mines around

wells and agricultural land has a twofold purpose as well: restricting access to essential resources while halting or slowing opposition advances. As often observed in conflict-prone settings and humanitarian emergencies, obstructing aid delivery and targeting humanitarian personnel not only harm and terrorise civilians, but also serve to strengthen political leverage over opposing actors and in negotiations with the international community. Overall, the weaponisation of food in Yemen is far from being an isolated event; it rather represents a recurring form of warfare. On the Houthi side, it appears more centralised and institutionalised, relying on regulatory control over resources, selective distribution of humanitarian aid and extensive territorial control. By contrast, on the IRG side, it is more fragmented across diverse actors and relies upon inspections and targeted attacks, combined with weak central institutions and divisions within the anti-Houthi front. In the short-term, the persistence of such dynamics is likely to further deteriorate food security, with potentially more severe consequences. Whereas localised programmes can offer immediate, however temporary, relief, increased humanitarian funding and better access on the ground remain the most effective avenues for addressing food insecurity in the country.

Key points

1. Conflict remains the primary driver of food insecurity in Yemen, with hunger operating as a coercive tool used by both state and non-state actors;
2. The protection of humanitarian personnel and guarantees of stable access remain crucial for improving food security levels;
3. The 2022 truce has reduced the intensity of violence but has not significantly altered practices of resource control and manipulation.

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Syria: Food Security and stability in post-Assad's transition

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Abstract

Food security is one of the decisive arenas of Syria's transition after Assad's fall in December 2024. This policy brief argues that, in post-Assad Syria, control over food is not only a matter of material welfare, but a central issue of governing capacity, political legitimacy, and stability. The analysis focuses on three interrelated dynamics: drought and the erosion of institutional capacity to manage scarcity; competition over cereal production and bread distribution as instruments of authority; and the role of water infrastructure, especially in the northeast, as both an internal and cross-border strategic lever. The brief shows that the main risk does not stem from climate alone, but from the interaction between environmental stress, administrative fragmentation, incomplete subsidy restructuring, and regional shocks. In this context, the Iran war and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz intensify Syria's dependence on imported wheat and fertilizer. For Italy, the key priorities are to support continuity of the bread programme, prevent administrative integration from creating procurement gaps, and strengthen water-management capacity in the northeast.

Introduction

Syria's post-Assad transition, opened in December 2024, remains uncertain. Al-Sharaa's government is trying to build national authority across a territory of competing claims, while security arrangements, constitutional design, administrative integration, and reconstruction remain unsettled. This brief examines one dimension of that contest, food security. Food tests governing capacity daily: access, price, and

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distributive authority shape legitimacy faster than institutional reform. During the conflict, the regime, opposition administrations, and ISIS each built bakery and distribution systems, making bread the daily medium through which populations recognised governing power (Martínez 2020). In the northeast, the AANES formalised this through guaranteed purchase prices, local milling cooperatives replacing regime-era external processing, and basic-commodity price regulation (Jongerden 2022). The transition has preserved the underlying logic: whoever procures grain and distributes bread holds the most visible instrument of governing authority. Much of Syria's wheat is produced in the country's northeastern regions, where authority is contested between the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and the central government. Türkiye's upstream control over the Euphrates gives it significant influence over irrigation and electricity across these agricultural areas. At the same time, Syria faces a national food crisis. Although the share of population in acute food insecurity decreased from 39 to 29 per cent between 2024 and 2025 (GRFC 2026), agricultural output has fallen roughly 60 percent from pre-conflict levels (WFP 2026). Some 9.1 million people are food insecure, including 3 million severely so; 80 per cent live below the poverty line; child acute malnutrition has nearly tripled since 2019; and the minimum wage covers only one-fifth of basic food needs (WFP 2026a). Since late February 2026, the Hormuz crisis has compounded these dynamics. The sustained closure of the strait has halted an estimated one-third of globally traded fertiliser and raised wheat prices at the moment when Syria's import dependence is at its highest.

Analysis

A prominent narrative attributed Syria's 2011 uprising to the 2007-2009 drought, arguing that climate-induced crop failures drove mass migration that destabilised Syrian cities. Satellite analysis finds little

drought-related land abandonment and high cropland activity in 2010, the year before the uprising; pre-war migration was largely short-term and adaptive, and forced displacement was rather driven by the conflict (von der Kammer, Dinc, and Eklund 2025). Syria's agricultural vulnerability was governance-created: state-led water-intensive farming, subsidy dependence, and groundwater mining produced fragilities that policy choices amplified beyond rainfall deficits (von der Kammer, Dinc, and Eklund 2025). Food price increases cause social unrest (Bellemare 2015). During the Arab Spring, countries whose governments managed bread supply contained protest; those that did not saw escalation (Soffiantini 2020). The Ba'athist agricultural model created the vulnerability that drought later exposed. State-planned expansion of irrigation-dependent farming, subsidy structures that fostered dependence rather than resilience, and over-exploitation of groundwater accumulated fragilities over decades. The regime's abrupt removal of fuel subsidies in 2008 and fertiliser subsidies in 2009, producing price shocks of 350 and 200-to-450 percent, destroyed the adaptive capacity of already-weakened rural households (Jongerden 2022; De Schutter 2011). Vulnerability, armed conflict, and climate stress can form mutually reinforcing loops, but only when institutional conditions activate them: poverty, governance failure, and the erosion of coping capacity are the transmission channels (Buhaug and von Uexkull 2021). The uprising therefore had political, not climate-induced, origins. Policy choices can buffer or multiply climate effects on food security; the issue is whether transitional authorities can rebuild capacity before systemic shocks arrive.

Drought, water, and institutional capacity

The 2024–2025 drought, Syria's worst in 36 years, cut wheat output by about 40 percent and left only 40 percent of farmland cultivated in key producing areas, weakening the regions on which national

recovery depends (FAO 2025). In rural Damascus, over 95 percent of households suffered crop losses, with wheat and barley yields down by up to 75 percent (Syria Community Consortium 2025-2026). The drought produced reduced food production, livelihood compression, and rising community tensions over water (37 percent of households reported disputes, 72 percent over water access) (Abdulrahman 2025). The same dynamic operates in the northeast: agricultural fields in Raqqa and Hasakah are drying out, fuel costs for water pumping are rising, and local authorities began restricting extraction out of concern for aquifer sustainability (PAX 2025b). The 2025-2026 winter rains temporarily provided relief: rainfall surpassed half the annual average by early February 2026, reviving rivers and restoring water supply to Damascus (SyriaUntold 2026; Levant24 2026). However, climate projections forecast a general decline of Syria's precipitations by about 11 percent over the next three decades (Red Cross 2024). The emerging pattern is one of "climate whiplash," intense bursts following prolonged drought, and aquifer recovery requires three to five consecutive adequate rainy seasons (SyriaUntold 2026). Northeastern irrigated agriculture also depends on Euphrates flows, 90 percent of which Turkey controls through the Southeastern Anatolia Project, which has reduced water reaching Syria by an estimated 40 percent since inception (Fanack Water 2025). In 2021, reduced Euphrates flows intersecting with local drought collapsed wheat production in Jazira, forcing the AANES to cut procurement purchases precisely when farmers needed price support most (von der Kammer, Dinc, and Eklund 2025). Although Syria-Turkey rapprochement since late 2024 has reduced the risk of flows being used as political leverage, it has not resolved the structural exposure, as Turkey faces the same regional trend of precipitations decline. The risk is that one good season

creates a false sense of resolution, and any programme built on the assumption that the drought is over will be exposed when the next dry cycle arrives. This also affects refugees' return: since returnees mainly report needs for food, housing, and employment, drought-damaged rural economies have limited capacity to absorb and sustain reintegration outside major urban corridors (UNHCR 2026).

Cereals as governance

Wheat and barley account for 95 percent of Syria's agricultural output and form the basis of a state-subsidised bread programme that has historically served as the most tangible social contract between governing authorities and populations (Syria Report 2025).

Before 2010, Syria produced up to 4.1 million tons of wheat annually, maintained strategic reserves, and exported surplus (al-Estiklal 2025). Domestic production fell to approximately 1.2 million tons in 2025 against annual consumption of roughly 4 million tons. The 2026 season projects a recovery to around 2.3 million tons (Syrian Ministry of Agriculture 2026), but the remaining gap of 1.7 million tons still leaves Syria dependent on imports it may lack the foreign currency reserves to finance (FEWS NET 2026). Since December 2024, the price of a bread bundle has risen from 400 to 4,000 Syrian pounds (Enab Baladi 2025), following the transitional authorities' removal of the bread subsidy in early 2025 (Karam Shaar Advisory 2025). Production is geographically concentrated in the northeast: the provinces of al-Hasakah, ar-Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor produce Syria's highest-quality wheat and barley and account for approximately 37 percent of the national harvest (al-Estiklal 2025). After Ba'athist control collapsed in 2012, the AANES built a food-governance system in Syria's main grain belt: guaranteed-price purchasing, subsidised bread, cooperatives, and regional processing

capacity (Jongerden 2022). During the conflict, this system made food supply one of the foundations of the AANES's political legitimacy. Since 2025, Damascus has re-entered this arena through wheat procurement incentives and the expanded government-led subsidised bread programme (SANA 2025; Enab Baladi 2025; WFP 2025). The AANES's military setbacks in January 2026 and the subsequent negotiations with Damascus have altered the balance: the AANES now controls a narrower territorial area, the transfer of its oil fields to the Syrian Petroleum Company has severed the revenue that funded AANES procurement price premiums (FEWS NET 2026), and Damascus's integration agreements with the SDF do not cover food governance. Syria's food system is therefore no longer organised through two clearly separate centres of authority, but neither has it been reintegrated into a coherent national framework.

Within this context, the transitional authorities have begun to restructure the subsidy system. Support for agricultural producers has narrowed, with diesel subsidies removed and input support shifting toward reduced-price seeds and in-kind or credit-based assistance under a "smart support" approach (Enab Baladi 2025; Enab Baladi 2026). At the same time, the state has maintained and, in some areas, expanded intervention in wheat procurement and bread provision. Decree No. 78 introduced a \$130-per-ton bonus on wheat delivered to the Syrian Grain Establishment, raising effective procurement prices above market levels (SANA 2025; Enab Baladi 2025). In parallel, the government-led subsidised bread programme, supported and scaled by WFP in selected areas, expanded from more than 100 bakeries serving 2 million people in mid-2025 to over 300 bakeries and more than 4 million beneficiaries by early 2026 (WFP 2025). This redistributes risk. As input costs rise and producer support narrows, farmers absorb more volatility while state intervention remains concentrated on procurement and bread distribution. The system stabilises consumption politically without

stabilising production structurally, increasing the likelihood that external shocks translate into supply shortfalls even when downstream prices are partially contained. At the same time the Iran war is set to increase global fertilizer and wheat prices, disrupt shipping, and inflate the entire supply chain (Werz 2026). The Strait of Hormuz closure has driven fertilizer prices up roughly 40 percent at the moment when Syrian farmers were already unable to afford inputs (Glauber and Laborde 2026). The Iran shock raises the risk that authorities cannot protect bread consumption without weakening domestic production, turning a fragile subsidy reconfiguration into a broader food-security and political-stability problem. Syria's foreign currency reserves further limit actual wheat purchases regardless of price or routing conditions (FEWS NET 2026). At household level, the bread programme addresses only one layer of collapse: \$75–150 salaries cover roughly half the minimum expenditure basket, utility and telecommunications costs have risen by up to 6,000 percent, and formalisation has eliminated informal self-employment (FEWS NET 2026). Households that access subsidised bread still cannot cover health, fuel, or transport, and are selling assets and accumulating debt. The Hormuz closure's effects extend past the current harvest, which was planted before the crisis. Global nitrogen stocks are depleted, Gulf production facilities damaged, Chinese fertiliser exports restricted through August 2026. FAO warned on 7 May that reduced application will depress yields into 2027 (FAO 2026). Syria's 2027 harvest risks reversing the 2026 recovery.

Scenarios

Syria's food system in April 2026 sits on a changed political map. The al-Sharaa government's January 2026 military offensive and the 30 January agreement with the SDF transferred formal authority over Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, two of the three northeastern wheat provinces,

to Damascus (Genc 2026). Hasakah, the third and largest, remains in phased integration: Damascus Interior Ministry security units entered Qamishli and Hasakah city on 3 February, an SDF-nominated governor took office on 13 February, but as of late March AANES institutions still administer salaries, public services, and the oil sector, with implementation committees beginning provincial-level negotiations only in April (Syria Direct 2026b). The question is whether Damascus's formal control produces functioning grain procurement before the 2026 harvest arrives, and whether Hasakah's contested integration adds capacity or opens a gap in Syria's most productive wheat province. Three variables determine which trajectory Syria's food system follows. First is northeastern procurement: whether Damascus can establish grain-buying operations in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor before the summer harvest, and whether Hasakah's integration proceeds without dismantling the procurement infrastructure the AANES built there over a decade before a replacement operates. The second is the Iran war's duration, which determines how deeply the fertiliser shock reaches Syria's autumn 2026 planting decisions. The third is Turkey's Euphrates management, since summer irrigation depends on flows that upstream dams can reduce when domestic demand or political pressure rises.

A. Damascus absorbs procurement, harvest improves: uneven recovery

In this scenario, Damascus deploys functioning grain procurement in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor before the summer harvest. In Hasakah, administrative integration proceeds slowly enough that AANES procurement infrastructure stays operational through the harvest season, averting the gap that opens when an old system is dismantled before a new one functions. The improved 2025–2026 winter rains produce a better harvest because Turkey sustains Euphrates flows above the irrigation threshold through summer. The Iran war raises

costs across the supply chain but does not break it in this scenario. Global food commodity stocks entering 2026 were relatively high, providing a short-term buffer on staple grain prices (Bloomberg 2026). The Turkey–Syria overland corridor, developed after the June 2025 road transport agreement, partially offsets maritime disruption by opening an alternative import channel for grain and inputs at higher but manageable cost (CFR 2026; Enab Baladi 2025b). WFP sustains operations at its bakeries absorbing the shipping cost increase. Even under this optimist pathway, food-system stabilisation is uneven. Farmers absorbing higher input costs without compensatory support see margins compress further. The food system stabilises at the distribution level while remaining fragile at the farm level, and one bad season could trigger the same cycle of livelihood compression and land abandonment that the 2024–2025 drought produced.

Indicators to monitor: Damascus-appointed procurement officials operating in Raqqqa and Deir ez-Zor cities by May or June. Decree 78 bonus prices applied in the northeast, not only in government-controlled west Syria. WFP operations continuing at stated scale, with no reduction in bakery numbers. Euphrates flows at the Deir ez-Zor monitoring point sustained through June to August. Bread prices in Qamishli and Deir ez-Zor city tracking Damascus levels rather than diverging upward.

(De-)Escalation triggers: If Damascus fails to stand up procurement in Raqqqa and Deir ez-Zor before the harvest, or renewed AANES–Damascus fighting disrupts procurement, the scenario moves toward B. If the Strait of Hormuz remains closed through summer and fertiliser prices drive a sharp reduction in autumn planting area, the scenario moves toward C for the next harvest cycle.

B. Procurement gap persists, Iran war compounds: chronic food insecurity

Damascus holds formal authority over Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor but cannot convert it into functioning grain procurement before the July–August harvest. Farmers in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor face a choice between selling at whatever local rate emerges and storing grain they cannot afford to hold. The procurement gap that produced a domestic purchase of only 373,500 tons in 2025, roughly half the prior year, widens (Reuters 2025). In Hasakah, integration talks stall on the salary and oil revenue questions still unresolved as of late March (Syria Direct 2026b). AANES institutions nominally continue operating, but without the oil revenue that funded the procurement price premium, the AANES can no longer offer farmers the prices its purchasing system required. Damascus procurement does not yet reach the province at scale. The result is a province where two administrations nominally operate and no functioning buyer covers a substantial share of its wheat.

First, rise in nitrogen fertilisers since the start of the Iran war lands on farmers who had already absorbed diesel subsidy removal. Nitrogen is essential to cereal yields and prolonged disruption in nitrogen fertilizer markets can raise production costs, reduce fertilizer use, depress yields, and push food prices higher (Curtis, Virzi, and Welsh 2026). Farmers who cannot buy inputs produce less per hectare even when rainfall is adequate. Second, if the Strait closure persists through to autumn 2026, disrupting both spring planting in major Southern Hemisphere exporters such as Australia and autumn planting in Syria and the wider region, Syria would enter that window with neither domestic production capacity nor the fiscal buffer to absorb sustained global price increases.

WFP may sustain only a reduced bread programme. Donor competition for humanitarian funding intensifies as the Iran war generates new emergency demands elsewhere. The programme

contracts. Food security becomes spatially uneven and administratively conditioned. Bread access in Damascus and Aleppo remains relatively stable; prices in Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Hasakah diverge upward. Populations at the edge of Damascus's administrative reach, rural northeast and eastern Deir ez-Zor, carry the cost. Without a state buyer, grain moves through informal channels at unregulated prices, without the Decree 78 premium for producers or the subsidy pipeline for customers. Damascus holds formal sovereignty over the wheat zones without the procurement infrastructure to convert it into bread-supply legitimacy, increasing the risk of popular protests over food prices. The Turkey–Syria overland corridor partially offsets maritime import disruption but Syria's import financing constraint limits how much cheaper routing translates into actual grain imports.

Indicators to monitor: No Decree 78 price announcements covering Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor by June. Reports of grain moving informally across provincial boundaries rather than through official collection centres. Bread price divergence between Damascus and northeast cities. WFP operational updates showing bakery numbers contracting or beneficiary counts falling. Hasakah salary transfer negotiations unresolved into July.

(De-)Escalation triggers: A verified Damascus procurement operation covering Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor moves toward A. Strait of Hormuz closure persisting through summer, combined with a dry season and Euphrates flow reductions, moves toward C.

C. Multiple shocks: acute crisis

The acute scenario requires at least two simultaneous shocks.

1. Turkey reduces Euphrates flows below irrigation thresholds during summer 2026 due to its own regional precipitation decline and domestic agricultural demand. The northeast, now under Damascus administrators without established farmer or water-

authority relationships, cannot coordinate emergency groundwater extraction as the AANES previously did, however imperfectly (PAX 2025b).

2. The Strait of Hormuz closure persists through the spring planting window and into autumn 2026. Prolonged disruption raises nitrogen fertiliser prices, forcing farmers to reduce use or exit production and depressing yields in the following season. Analysts described a year-long closure as having a catastrophic effect on crop yields (Foreign Policy 2026). Syria enters that window with a procurement system in transition, removal of subsidies, and an import financing constraint that predates the Iran war.
3. ISIS attacks are slowly increasing in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor and other provinces in 2025-2026 (CRS 2026). Both provinces now operate under Damascus's formal authority, administered by newly deployed officials with no established local presence and no security infrastructure covering agricultural zones. If ISIS attacks manage to disrupt local governance, the agricultural procurement-supply chain may be affected as well.

If two or more shocks coincide, Damascus faces harvest shortfalls in provinces it controls formally but not administratively, a bread programme under cost pressure from the supply and funding sides simultaneously, and a population in the northeast that lost the AANES governance model without receiving a functional replacement. WFP estimates that 45 million more people could face food insecurity if the Iran war continues; Syria's bread programme absorbs that global pressure in a context where the domestic supply buffer is near zero. Displacement concentrates in rural northeast Syria and eastern Deir ez-Zor, where ISIS recruitment previously benefited from governance vacuums. Turkey, Lebanon, and Mediterranean routes face pressure at a moment when regional absorptive capacity is already strained by the Iran war's broader displacement effects.

Early-warning indicators: Euphrates flows at the Syrian border monitoring point falling below 300 cubic metres per second by June. No functioning Damascus grain-collection system operating in Raqqa or Deir ez-Zor governorates by the start of the harvest window. WFP scaling down Syria operations due to funding shortfall. ISIS attacks targeting agricultural supply routes or grain collection infrastructure in Raqqa or Deir ez-Zor. Urea prices sustainedly high through June.

Recommendations

Italy allocated €68 million to Syria's transition in March 2025, including food-supply-chain support, participates in the EU's €620 million 2026–2027 package, and sits on the FAO, WFP, and IFAD boards. Three problems identified above fall within this reach.

The first is bread programme continuity under the Iran war. WFP's Syria operations require \$473.6 million for 2026 (WFP 2026b). The WFP supplies fortified flour to over 300 bakeries reaching 4 million people (Enab Baladi 2026b). The government's own bread programme, however, is contracting: the Economy Ministry cut the standard bundle from 1,200 to 1,100 grams at fixed price and reduced bakeries' flour allocations (Enab Baladi 2026b). The Iran war has simultaneously raised WFP's operational costs through shipping disruptions and generated competing humanitarian demands that draw donor attention away from Syria (WFP 2026c; UN News 2026). Italy can use its WFP Executive Board seat and bilateral contribution to close part of this gap and press other EU member states to frontload food-security contributions for Syria before the summer harvest, when the bread programme's political function is most critical.

The second concerns the institutional terms of the northeast's integration. The AANES's procurement and bread distribution

infrastructure covers Syria's most productive wheat province. The scenarios identify two crisis paths: administrative replacement that dismantles existing procurement before a functional substitute operates (Scenario B), and military action that disrupts the harvest (the trigger that shifts any scenario toward a worse outcome). Italy can promote a sequencing principle in EU reconstruction and Rome-agency frameworks: existing food governance functions in the northeast should not be withdrawn until replacement capacity is verified as operational, regardless of which authority administers them. In EU reconstruction programming, Italy can press for conditionality requiring that agriculture and bread programme funding in the northeast remain accessible to functioning local institutions during the integration period. In bilateral and EU-Türkiye channels, Italy can make the food security case that military action against AANES-administered areas threatens Syria's food supply and the EU's reconstruction investment.

The third is water management capacity in the northeast. The analysis shows that when Euphrates flows drop, northeastern farmers depend on groundwater extraction that requires fuel, coordination, and functioning local authority. The AANES managed this during previous stress periods; Damascus has not yet built equivalent relationships with farmers and water authorities in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. Italy can direct bilateral funds and EU programming influence toward irrigation efficiency, groundwater monitoring, and coordination mechanisms between Damascus's new administrators and the local water management structures that currently operate in the northeast. FAO's ERPA covers irrigation rehabilitation but not water governance capacity; Italy can press for that extension. Italian bilateral programming should include fertiliser access before the 2026/27 planting season, without which input costs will undermine production recovery.

Key points

1. Food security is a central test of Syria's transition: grain procurement, bread access, and price stability shape governing authority and political legitimacy.
2. Syria's main risk lies in compounding shocks: drought, subsidy restructuring, import dependence, and fertiliser disruption can turn food stress into political instability.
3. Italy should prioritise bread-programme continuity, procurement capacity, and water-management support through EU funding and Rome-based food-security agencies.

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Humanitarian Action and War Economies

Ronan MacNamara*

A changing Global Context

In January of this year, UN OCHA launched its annual *Global Humanitarian Overview* (GHO) – a critical sector-wide document where the estimated humanitarian needs, funding requirements and response plans for the upcoming year are laid out (OCHA 2026). OCHA is calling for US\$ 33 billion to assist 135 million people in 2026. Acknowledging the realpolitik of the moment, the GHO revised its target down from the 239 million people who are actually estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance this year – but for whom there is no funding available.¹ This catastrophic collapse in humanitarian funding over the last eighteen months is a consequence of a plethora of factors, including a rise in nationalism, populism, distrust of the public sector and a general eroding of the international order that has prevailed since WW II.

21st century food security crises are characterized by interconnected and overlapping socio-political, economic and military dynamics; shrinking humanitarian space; contempt for international humanitarian law; the use of food as a weapon of war; the proliferation of state and non-state armed groups; the targeting of humanitarians; a general weakening of the international multilateral system; and a growing funding crisis. Against this backdrop, humanitarians operate in some of the world's most complex, fragile and challenging environments where they frequently face humanitarian dilemmas.

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¹ Ibid.

In this “post truth” era characterised by the fragmentation of the traditional media and the rise of social media, sensationalism and “alternative facts”, humanitarians are facing unprecedented scrutiny and criticism from parties eager to portray the sector as incompetent, wasteful or corrupt – or possibly all three. One of the criticisms levelled at humanitarian organisations revolves around complicity in the diversion of aid by state and non-state armed actors fuelling conflicts and war economies.

In a spirit of reflection and transparency, this paper examines these allegations and the ways in which humanitarian aid, despite the best of intentions, can feed into the war economies that perpetuate the very crises that are driving needs in the first place.

Defining Concepts

For the sake of clarity, it is necessary to introduce and define some of the key concepts that appear throughout this Brief. To begin with, “humanitarianism” (also known as “foreign aid/relief” or “humanitarian assistance/aid/action”) is increasingly a contested concept. As scholar Hugo Slim (1997) points out: “The precise meaning of words (...) has evaporated in recent years... in the same emergency a Red Cross nurse can use the term [humanitarian] to describe her medical programme and a UN commander can use the same word to describe airstrikes.” Peter Gill, meanwhile, opens his 2016 book on humanitarianism with a series of anecdotes relating how both a top US General and Russian President Vladimir Putin, referred to their respective military campaigns in Syria and Ukraine as “humanitarian”(Gill 2016, p.1). As Gill explains, “Everyone is a humanitarian now. A word once used to describe principled civilian assistance to people suffering in natural or manmade disasters now provides a reassuring gloss for the actions of politicians and the

military. This has both compromised and endangered the work of aid workers...”² Such misuses of the term highlight the importance of a definition from the outset.

Here, the term “humanitarian” is defined by four critical pillars: It refers to the work of *professional* organisations (1), engaged in the provision of *life-saving assistance* (2) in *emergency contexts* (3), and in accordance with the “*Humanitarian Principles*” (4).³ In struggling to define a term that is so widely used - even among lay people - but so poorly understood, it may be simpler to define humanitarian action by what it is not. For this definition, the term excludes all forms of military action, development assistance, International Humanitarian Law (IHL - the “rules of war”), human rights, peacekeeping/building, democratisation and the treatment of Prisoners of War (PoWs).

The Humanitarian Principles refer to the core ethical and operational guidelines of the humanitarian sector: *Humanity*; *Neutrality*; *Impartiality* and *Independence*. The concept of a set of core ethical standards underpinning humanitarian action was first codified in the “Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement” in 1965 (ICRC 1965). Born out of their real-world experiences of losing humanitarian access and space in Korea, Vietnam and Algeria due to their real and perceived biases, the new Red Cross model demonstrated that consistent adherence to a set of core values could pay significant, long-term, humanitarian dividends. Eventually, the UN General Assembly followed suit and enshrined *humanity*, *neutrality* and *impartiality* as the UN’s “Humanitarian Principles” in UNGA resolution 46/182 in 1991

² Ibid.

³ This definition is similar to OCHA’s in the Glossary of Humanitarian Terms in relation to the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, Geneva (2003, p.13).

((UN General Assembly 1991). Recognising a critical gap over the subsequent decade, a fourth Principle, “independence,” was added in UNGA 58/114 in 2004 (UN General Assembly 2004). Every major humanitarian organisation, as well as donor agencies, in the world has made formal, normative commitments to the humanitarian principles.

While the humanitarian principles are the ethical framework for humanitarian action, each is also a critical *operational posture* for humanitarians. Visible and consistent adherence to each of the humanitarian principles enables humanitarians to build trust, manage political risks and ultimately gain sustainable access to people in need. While adhering to the humanitarian principles might require trade-offs and flexible approaches based on different operating contexts, they are essential to support humanitarian work, particularly in complex emergencies, where the overwhelming majority of humanitarian and food security needs arise.

Finally, Conflict Sensitivity - a relatively recent policy concept that relates directly to humanitarians’ impact on war economies - refers to the ability of a humanitarian agency to 1) understand the context it operates in; 2) understand *all* of the interactions between its interventions and that context – including any unintended impacts; 3) use this knowledge to minimise negative impacts on conflict dynamics and maximise positive impacts on peace and social cohesion. Just as the humanitarian principles were born out of hard-earned experiences *during* the cold war - Conflict sensitivity was born out of the ‘do no harm’ principle following a series of controversial humanitarian operations in the 1990s, *in the wake* of the cold war (Anderson 1999).

Humanitarian Action in Complex Emergencies

Conflict is, by far, the single largest driver of global hunger and its impact is only growing. In 2024, 84% of all people facing acute food

insecurity (IPC phase 3 or above) were living in conflict-affected contexts. This amounted to over 246 million people, including almost 90% of people facing IPC 4 and all of the nearly 2 million people facing IPC 5 (famine) ((FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises 2025). Notably, the number of people facing catastrophic food insecurity more than doubled in 2024 - from 728,500 to nearly 2 million – due to conflict.⁴ Additionally, the number of countries experiencing conflict and acute food insecurity increased from 30 in 2023 to 33 in 2024. With devastating escalations and new conflicts in Gaza, Sudan and Lebanon in the last 18 months – these figures have only increased.

Humanitarian action does not take place in a vacuum; the contexts in which humanitarians operate are infused with unique social, political, economic, ethnic, sectarian, linguistic and historical dynamics. These dynamics not only influence humanitarians' ability to deliver principled and quality assistance – but are also impacted *by* humanitarian operations. Therefore, *even if there is no political or military intent to humanitarian operations; that does not mean there are no such impacts* – this is the crux of conflict sensitivity. In many complex emergencies, governments, non-state actors and armed groups seek to manipulate both hunger and humanitarian responses to their advantage. This creates an enormous risk that humanitarian action can feed into “war economies”, or even become a weapon of war or punishment to control people/territory, to foster legitimacy, to force displacement or even to ethnically cleanse whole areas.

Profits derived from the manipulation or diversion of humanitarian assistance may also become an important resource for parties to conflicts, who are otherwise starved of revenue streams, allowing

⁴ Ibid.

them to sustain their war efforts. This critique has long been developed in work on the unintended political effects of humanitarian action and emergency relief (Terry 2002; Anderson 1999; Keen 2008; De Waal 1997). Poorly planned and conflict in-sensitive humanitarian action can therefore inadvertently exacerbate social tensions or even prolong conflicts (Elayah and Fenttiman 2021). This paper explores how humanitarian assistance can inadvertently support warring parties; as well as how the sector is becoming increasingly aware of this dynamic and attempting to mitigate these risks in order to deliver in effective, principled and conflict sensitive ways.

War Economies

A “war economy” refers to the systems for producing, mobilising and allocating the resources needed to sustain large scale and organised violence (Le Billon 2005). While states mobilising for conflict can capitalise on a country’s regular economy, non-state actors must frequently rely on illicit trade, particularly of so-called “conflict resources” to fund their war efforts. The most infamous examples of conflict resources include: minerals (oil, natural gas, rare earth minerals etc.), gems, drugs, weapons, hard woods, antiquities etc. In many contexts where humanitarians operate, various state and non-state actors compete, not only for power and territory but also for the economic means to sustain their military capacities. As a source of valuable and scarce commodities in unstable contexts, humanitarian operations can easily become caught up in war economies (Elayah and Fenttiman 2021). In-kind and cash assistance, as well as money spent on services to deliver these programmes, can feed into economic dynamics during conflicts in ways that can be hard to predict. Both historical as well as recent evidence from across the sector suggests that humanitarian assistance is frequently seen by

parties to conflicts as a viable source of funding (Le Billon 2000; Mercy Corps 2023; Schouten, Matthysen, and Muller 2021). Ultimately the intertwining of humanitarian assistance and war economies is an inevitable reality in complex emergencies. Understanding and managing the unintended impacts of humanitarian programming on war economies is crucial for effective and principled humanitarian action, as well as to shield the sector from (often legitimate) criticism. This is a dynamic that many humanitarian agencies have long been aware of and an area in which several agencies are finally making significant progress in addressing.⁵

How Humanitarian Action can Feed into War Economies

While all contexts and complex emergencies are unique, decades of experience, as well as the latest evidence from across the sector, demonstrate that humanitarians can inadvertently contribute to war economies in four main ways: 1) through their procurement and spending practices; 2) through their payment of “taxes” or “fees” at unofficial checkpoints; 3) through their hiring of private security services (protection rackets); 4) through the theft or diversion of the stock and/or humanitarian cash that they bring into unstable and impoverished contexts. It is therefore worth examining each of these to understand how agencies can better mitigate such negative impacts of their operations.

Procurement/Operational Spending

Humanitarian agencies, particularly those working on food assistance, bring significant resources into impoverished and unstable contexts, not only in the form of stock or humanitarian cash, but

⁵ See the section on WFP’s Response below.

also in the form of contracts for procurement, transport/logistics, security, rent etc. Where vendors and suppliers have links to parties to conflicts, this can lead to “leakage” into war economies. The financial clout of large humanitarian agencies can bring significant commercial opportunities into contexts otherwise experiencing economic devastation, including for parties engaged in conflict, or with links to belligerents. Landlords (for office space, warehousing, accommodation, land etc.), financial service providers, transporters, suppliers etc. can all make significant amounts of money from humanitarian operations. Where they are linked to the conflict, this money can ultimately help to fuel the very conflicts that these agencies are responding to. Worryingly, the frequency with which we see this phenomenon appearing seems to be in direct proportion to the frequency with which we closely examine humanitarian supply chains and procurement procedures in complex emergencies: *The more we look – the more we find.*

Recent commitments by major agencies to sourcing locally – as part of their commitments to the so-called “localisation” agenda – can provide a welcome boost to the local economy and benefit small farmers, producers, retailers or other vulnerable sectors. However, this approach also raises the risk of humanitarians inadvertently contributing to conflict dynamics and war economies. Careful due diligence is required to vet various contractors for links to conflicts. Humanitarians must carefully select service providers for all of its activities, from massive Cash Based Transfers (CBT) projects down to the provision of office catering and cleaning services. Embedding a Conflict Sensitivity dimension in humanitarian due diligence processes for vendor selection is essential to ensure that agencies do not accidentally procure the services of groups or individuals known to be engaged in the conflict and jeopardise their neutrality, impartiality and/or operational independence.

The hiring practices of humanitarian agencies can also feed into war economies via locally competitive wages in areas with few opportunities to generate much-needed cash. Hiring practices may also reinforce divisions by inadvertently recruiting disproportionately from certain groups over others in areas where employment opportunities are a major political and social currency. Unbalanced workforces in unstable contexts can raise significant conflict sensitivity risks, including around community acceptance, perceived biased influences over strategic decisions and the failure to hear, and account for, different perspectives.

Example: In 2024, at the height of the war in **Sudan**, one leading UN aid agency initiated several internal risk scoping exercises on both their largest suppliers of grain, as well as the small and medium enterprises who supply the organisation with seed. The analyses, which were supplementary to regular due diligence processes, mapped out key suppliers and examined any links to parties to conflict, the war economy, the military industrial complex and illicit economies. The results of these risk scoping exercises were used to inform decision-making around procurement and to minimise risks of leakage into war economies.⁶

Taxes and “Checkpoint Economies”

In many complex emergencies, humanitarians are charged “fees” by host governments and/or de facto authorities in exchange for the required permission, security guarantees and access to operate in certain areas, as well as for logistic support and for the use of critical infrastructure. These fees can not only enrich corrupt officials but can also feed directly into war economies, resourcing belligerents and possibly even prolonging conflicts.

⁶ From interview with participants in the exercise (Feb 2026).

Checkpoints have become one of the primary points of contact between humanitarian operations and war economies. State security services, non-state armed groups and criminal elements frequently maintain a presence on the transport routes used by humanitarians in order to extract fees through a system of roadblocks and checkpoints - a major concern for the entire humanitarian sector. One recent study estimated that there was one illegal checkpoint approximately every 16 kms in South Sudan and that fees to various armed groups accounted for over 50% of transport costs for humanitarian actors (Schouten, Matthysen, and Muller 2021). In many cases, these “taxes” on humanitarians go directly to the very armed groups who are driving humanitarian needs in the first place. In other lawless and protracted contexts, the soldiers/fighters of various state and non-state armed groups view the extortion of traffic as an important supplement to their low incomes (Schouten, Matthysen, and Muller 2021; Latif 2023; Elayah and Fenttiman 2021). Agencies’ acceptance of checkpoint economies, informal taxation and the structured diversion of assistance can be perceived by local people and groups as implicit, or even explicit, support to one side of the conflict. At the same time, a refusal to pay at checkpoints can result in a lack of access and diminish agencies’ ability to address the humanitarian imperative.

Breaking cycles of dependency that emerge from the prolonged toleration of checkpoint economies is a major challenge for humanitarians and requires significant investment in both Civil-Military Coordination (CMCoord) as well as negotiation at different levels – from the checkpoints themselves all the way to the highest levels of humanitarian diplomacy where supportive states can provide much-needed leverage over belligerents. In a promising development (before recent layoffs) several leading agencies began increasing investments to cultivate and retain talent and expertise in

functional areas to mitigate checkpointism including in CMCoord, access negotiation and the humanitarian principles.

Example: In South Sudan, where checkpoints are major operational, security and conflict sensitivity risks, WFP has created a bespoke Conflict, Security and Access Team (CSAT) which monitors the political and security context to ensure the Country Office (CO) is constantly aware of the latest military, political and social developments. This knowledge is then used to inform extensive access negotiations with various factions, sensitising interlocutors to WFP purpose, ways of working and commitment to the humanitarian principles. In this way the CO is able to keep its informal “tax bill” to an absolute minimum across the country.

Security & Protection

As with procurement from other vendors, the employment of private security providers is another way in which humanitarians can inadvertently feed into war economies. In contexts where instability reigns and the rule of law has broken down; humanitarians can become dependent on confusing combinations of armed actors for the security and protection needed to deliver life-saving assistance. The contracts for providing such security can be very lucrative and in unstable contexts, there is a very high likelihood that the actors capable of providing such services have strong links to the ongoing conflict. Humanitarians can therefore not only end up compromising their neutrality and independence by relying on such actors – but also sink into a vicious cycle of dependency on private security providers.

Interestingly, one of the most commonly used solutions to checkpoints is the use of private armed escorts, who can drive off bandits or different armed groups, or negotiate their way past government forces etc. While this is a tempting, and frequently used, option to disrupt checkpoint economies it can also create dependencies

of its own. In many contexts, such private security arrangements quickly devolves into clear protection rackets than can become a major revenue source for warring factions – including those who might otherwise actually run the checkpoints. In essence, *agencies can end up paying not so much for the protection of these groups, so much as for their agreement not to attack humanitarians or steal their stock*. Without careful consideration, humanitarians can find themselves paying for security provided by the armed groups that are actually causing the humanitarian crisis (Orbinski 2008). A strange balance can emerge whereby humanitarians are allowed to work solely so that they can be taxed, their stock stolen and their programmes manipulated.⁷

Example: In Somalia, protracted insecurity has forced many agencies (including from the UN) to pay local private security providers to escort staff to and from their secure offices and accommodation and various other “safe zones”. This firmly established relationship between humanitarian agencies and private security providers has persisted since the 1990s and continues to this day (Stoddard, Harmer, and DiDomenico 2009; Norman 2020). However, it is widely understood that many of the groups providing these services have strong ties to the Somali government who themselves are a party to the conflict – creating a dangerous perception that agencies are partnering with the government. Similar dynamics are playing out across the Western Sahel and elsewhere in recent years. To mitigate this impression – agencies attempt to keep their use of such services to a minimum.

Diversion

Of all the ways that humanitarian agencies can inadvertently feed into war economies, the diversion of aid is often the most impactful. This is in large part due to a combination of the scale of humanitarian

⁷ Ibid 81.

assistance (due to severe humanitarian needs) and the ease with which it can be diverted in unstable and lawless contexts. The history of the humanitarian sector is filled with examples of humanitarian aid being diverted to support the war efforts of belligerents – from Vietnam and Biafra in the 1960s to Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Somalia and Rwanda/DRC in the 1980s and 1990s. This is a trend that continues to this day with humanitarian assistance regularly viewed as a viable and reliable source of funding and supplies by belligerents. While non-state armed groups may steal stock (either enroute or from storage) for resale, or confiscate assistance post-distribution - government forces may attempt to manipulate beneficiary lists to ensure that their supporters, or even troops, receive assistance. In some instances, armed groups may deliberately obscure the line between civilians and combatants in order to benefit from humanitarian assistance.

The impact of diverted assistance on the capacities of parties to conflicts to pursue their war aims is extremely context specific. In some historical and more recent cases, non-state armed groups were able to successfully convert diverted or manipulated aid into a significant source of income to pursue their war efforts. This is often seen in displacement crises, for example, where non-state actors who flee across borders with refugees, can steal the assistance provided to those refugees to continue their comrades fighting at home. This has been seen many times, from Afghanistan-Pakistan in the 1980s and DRC-Rwanda in the 1990s to Syria-Lebanon/Jordan/Turkey in recent years. In some cases, clearly branded humanitarian food aid has even appeared on battlefields as part of combat rations.

Example: During the Tigray war in 2020-2022, large amounts of WFP aid was diverted by the Ethiopian government. WFP was inadvertently feeding into the war economy and facilitating government forces' capacity to pursue their war goals. While the full scale of the

diversion – which ranged from doctored and inflated beneficiary lists; to aid seized post-distribution; to armed groups physically seizing entire warehouses of food – is not fully known, it seems clear that it was one of the biggest and most systematic thefts of humanitarian aid in history. In response, WFP implemented a comprehensive, corporate-wide Global Assurance Plan to ensure that its operations will not be as susceptible to manipulation leading to the weaponisation of diverted aid.⁸

Elsewhere – one major humanitarian cash & voucher programme in Lebanon at the height of the Syrian war – was estimated to be inadvertently pumping between US\$ 600,000 - 800,000 per month in diverted humanitarian cash into an illicit war economy dominated by Syrian non state armed groups who were actively engaged in fighting across the border.

A Way Forward – The WFP Response

The risks of becoming embroiled in war economies, some of which have been highlighted here, are a constant challenge for humanitarian agencies. Addressing the humanitarian imperative while adhering to the humanitarian principles is always a balancing act. In recent years, several of the world's leading agencies have made significant progress in both understanding how they interact with war economies as well as in identifying and mitigating humanitarian dilemmas.

The UN's WFP provides one recent example of such progress that is worth examining in more detail. Their evolving approach to managing the inevitable dilemmas that arise in complex emergencies is based on hard-won past experiences, an emphasis on the importance of a nuanced understanding of contexts and a conflict sensitive approach to programming and operations. Since 2020, WFP has invested in its capacities for context analysis and conflict sensitivity

⁸ See below.

risk assessments – a critical step to understand how operations interact with war economies. This ensures that food security interventions do not inadvertently trigger or exacerbate tensions and instead build on opportunities to contribute to social cohesion and peace, particularly at the local level (WFP 2023). It also allows for solutions to be tailored to the exact risks country offices faces in different contexts and avoids corporate, one-size-fits all approaches that many be inappropriate in different operating environments.

COs in complex emergencies are increasingly and conscientiously making programme choices based on the risks of diversion and/or leakage and other conflict sensitivity risks. For example, in some contexts, delivering through school feeding may present less risks, while in others, COs may opt for cash, in-kind assistance or even warm meals to minimise diversion, depending on local circumstances. WFP's 2024 Global Assurance Project (GAP) was created specifically to respond to the risks of the large-scale diversion of assistance, as had been witnessed in several major complex emergencies, notably Ethiopia in 2020-2022.⁹ WFP has also amended some of its key business processes in various functional areas (procurement; supply chain; partnerships; HR; programme; CBT etc.) specifically to ensure that diversion and leakage into war economies are kept to an absolute minimum. For example, WFP has created a robust commodity

⁹ WFP's 2023 GAP identified six areas requiring corporate focus in order to minimise leakage and diversion and to ensure that aid *goes to the right people always, everywhere*: Targeting; IDM; Monitoring; CFMs; Supply Chain; and CP management. The GAP resulted in WFP's four **Global Assurance Standards** which are the pillars of WFP's corporate approach to limiting diversion: 1) WFP consults with and listens to the people it assists and respects their privacy; 2) WFP knows who is being assisted and, at the end of every cycle, who did and did not receive their assistance; 3) WFP knows that its in-kind assistance is safe and where it is – from origin to distribution; 4) WFP maintains operational independence.

tracking system (Commodity Tracking and FTC Management) which includes GPS trackers on trucks to monitor deliveries (WFP 2025). WFP has also implemented Last Mile Solutions that allow smartphones to collect real-time data on the delivery of stock to Cooperating Partners, ensuring that leakage is identified early.

To counter the risk of diversion, particularly in conflict-affected contexts, WFP operations follow a series of important prescribed steps in its *Corporate Assurance Framework*. Cash assistance, for example, is accompanied by robust safeguards that monitor every dollar from the time it leaves the WFP bank account to the moment it reaches the hands of the people being assisted. In this way, WFP can account for every dollar through its reconciliation and tracking processes. WFP also uses digital transfers directly to beneficiary accounts, rather than physical cash, whenever possible. When physical cash is the only option, WFP takes different measures to ensure that funds are not stolen (e.g. use of safes and armed escorts to store and transport cash) and works closely with partners and local authorities to ensure that the distribution sites are safe from the threat of armed groups, theft or extortion.

As with other leading agencies, WFP's sophisticated targeting processes, including comprehensive Identify Management tools (IDM), helps to ensure that while some diversion is inevitable, assistance is not *systematically* diverted. In many important operations, WFP's comprehensive Post Distribution Monitoring (PDM) has been adjusted to specifically seek out data directly from beneficiaries on diversion and/or leakage – including post-delivery. Overall, such PDMs confirm that the vast majority of people who receive humanitarian assistance around the world (cash or in-kind) use it to meet their basic needs. WFP implements other programmatic steps to counter the risk of assistance leaking into war economies, including: keeping funds in the WFP bank account as long as possible

before transferring to the Financial Service Providers (who are carefully vetted) for distribution; reconciling each transfer, every month; ensuring funds that aren't successfully transferred are immediately sent back to WFP; maintaining close and regular contact with communities who can alert WFP to leakage and diversion through user-friendly Community Feedback Mechanisms (CFM); and carefully selecting international and local partners with the skills and experience to recognise and prevent diversion wherever possible.

Despite these increasingly robust measures, any system for the distribution of humanitarian aid is inevitably subject to manipulation, corruption, fraud and theft with the risks only increasing in highly unstable contexts. Humanitarians provide life-saving social safety nets in deeply unstable contexts where the rule of law has often broken down entirely. Recognising and confronting this reality, WFP – among others - has put in place strong measures to ensure that the unintended negative impacts of humanitarian assistance are kept to a minimum. The 2013 Policy on WFP's Role in Peacebuilding in Transition Settings states that *conflict sensitivity should be a foundational minimum standard for any activity that WFP undertakes*, acknowledging that “The manner in which food assistance is delivered can exacerbate or lessen tensions in a community” (WFP 2013). The 2026-2029 WFP strategic plan, meanwhile, makes both conflict sensitivity and the humanitarian principles “core cross-cutting priorities” for *all* programmes and operations (WFP 2025). The 2024 GAP and WFP's more recent assurance efforts, meanwhile, help to ensure that WFP remains alert to the diverse risks facing its COs including by feeding into local war economies in different, context-specific ways. In this way, WFP has been among the leaders in recognising the reality that humanitarian assistance can feed into war economies and provides a viable model for other agencies facing the same risks.

Progress Halted?

While WFP and other agencies' recent progress is indeed heartening, the reality of the sector-wide funding catastrophe that has affected the international humanitarian sector in the last eighteen months has meant that this progress has not only stalled but may even be reversed as capacities are ruthlessly drained. The violent downsizing that has eviscerated most leading aid agencies was so sudden and severe that many decisions on which staff should be retained were simply made based on bureaucratic and HR considerations (particularly on contract type) rather than the profiles needed for any long term strategic priorities. Having shed so much expertise and experience, precisely when it is most needed, there is a real danger that even if the humanitarian sector manages to rebuild itself in the coming years – it will “rebuild” to a 2010 version of itself, instead of the conflict sensitive and principled 2030 version that is needed. There is a high probability that not only will there be less humanitarian action in the coming years – but there will also be worse humanitarian action. It is therefore incumbent on those with any influence to drive messaging not only with donors, but also with the publics who elect them. “*Aggressive transparency*” must be the mantra to proactively counter attempts to sideline, undermine and manipulate the humanitarian sector when it is needed most. War economies, meanwhile, will continue to prey on a sector that is losing its capacities to understand and mitigate the risks it faces in complex emergencies.

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