

Food Insecurity and Unrest in the Arab Spring

Written by Thomas Tree

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THOMAS TREE, SEP 7 2014

Beginning in late 2010, citizens of the Arab world rose up in protest to express their long-held dissatisfactions with their governments. Unstable food security and the recent international food price spikes were certainly one of their many grievances and was likely the factor that sparked the initial unrest, yet the level of unrest greatly varied in intensity throughout the region. Can an analysis of the state of food security in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) be used to explain why the Arab Spring was more vibrant in some countries than in others? To answer this question, I will begin by defining food security and its three “pillars.” I will then describe the food security situation in the MENA and explain food insecurity’s causal relationship with unrest and articulate food insecurity’s contribution to the Arab Spring. Lastly, I will show how variations in the state of food security throughout the region partially align with variations in the intensity of the unrest throughout the region during the Arab Spring, but also show that the reason for the uneven intensity of unrest cannot be attributed to a single factor.

Food Security

The World Food Summit of 1996 determined that food security exists when “all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life.” Food security is divided into three “pillars,” which are availability, access, and use. The availability of food implies adequate amounts of food are consistently available. Availability represents the supply side of the food market. Food access is fulfilled when the available food is both physically and economically attainable. Access represents the demand side of the food market. In addition to these two prerequisites, people must have the nutritional knowledge base to use or consume the available and accessible food in a healthy manner, as well as adequate water and sanitation. Food insecurity results if any of these three pillars are unfulfilled.

Food Security in the Middle East and North Africa

The Middle East and North Africa on the whole is highly vulnerable to food insecurity and its resulting unrest. There are various reasons for this vulnerability, the most prominent being its dependence on the international market for food. “Due to the relative scarcity of both arable land and water, the Middle East and North Africa region imports more than half its food, a higher import dependency than any other region in the world” (Barrett et al. 357). Fluctuations in international food prices therefore have serious implications on the economic accessibility of food in the region. The MENA is also one of the most vulnerable regions to migration induced by climate change, causing many of the rural poor to join the urban poor. This is evident in the region’s recent rates of urbanization. The World Bank notes that in 1980 about 48% of the total population of the region was urbanized. In 2000, this reached 60%, and at the current rate of urbanization, over 70% of the total population will be urban by 2015. This “has enormous potential to generate domestic unrest as cities and towns struggle to accelerate deliveries” (Barrett et al. 19). Rising urbanization put strains on supplying the adequate amount of food necessary to feed the population.

Poverty is a key stressor on food security in the region. According to the World Bank, in 2005, 17% of the region’s population, or about 50 million people, live under \$2 a day. This impacts food security because,

“poorer people spend a far greater share of each additional dollar they earn on food, [so] income growth in low-income countries generates five to eight times the added food demand of similar income growth in high-income

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countries" (Barrett et al. 3).

For these 50 million people, rising food prices could seriously threaten their economic accessibility to adequate food. Other factors that threaten food security in the MENA include growing youth populations, high unemployment for these youth populations, state-dominated economies and weak private sectors, and "rapid and uncertain political changes" (Barrett et al. 358). This difficulty in ensuring both the supply and accessibility of food due to urbanization, poverty, the weak private sector, and bulging and unemployed youth populations make it all the more difficult for states to provide stable food security for their people. These factors have significant ramifications for the stability of the region. A study done by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) shows that "food security, both measured at the macro-level (the ratio of food imports to total exports plus remittances) and at the household level (child stunting), emerges as the main driver of conflicts in the region" (Maystadt, Tan, and Breisinger 14). Food security is consequently a significant determinant for socio political stability in the MENA. This coincides with studies that confirm a causal relationship between food insecurity and unrest.

Food Insecurity and Unrest

There is evidence of causal relationship between food insecurity and unrest, with unrest meaning rioting or any other public display of dissatisfaction. Unrest can lead to sociopolitical instability, which is unrest of such intensity that it threatens the social and political status quo. In his book *Food Security and Sociopolitical Stability*, Chris Barrett defines sociopolitical stability as "the absence of coordinated human activities that cause widespread disruption of daily life for local populations" (Barrett et al. 8). Barrett explains these disrupting coordinated human activities are born from "underlying structural pressures" (Barrett et al. 10). Food insecurity is such an underlying structural pressure, and a powerful one at that. Food is a necessity for survival. If a person's ability to acquire the necessary food to live is impeded, there can be highly detrimental consequences for sociopolitical stability. Barrett explains this in saying,

"disrupt the food economy and one frays the fabric of society. When people struggle to eat as they have grown accustomed, or if they anticipate struggling if current conditions do not change, their distress may be more psychosocial than economic or physiological... When enough people share such distress, individual grievances morph into societal ones" (Barrett et al. 8).

Ensuring the availability, accessibility, and proper use of food is therefore a matter of national security interest for every country and is a major determinant for the survival of any political regime or social order. The relationship between food insecurity and unrest is more nuanced than one would assume. Interestingly enough, the members of a society that are the most food insecure are not the ones that generate unrest. Instead, it is the members of society that are affected or threatened by acute food insecurity that start food riots (Barrett et al. 10). The connection between unrest and acute food insecurity is strongest when this food insecurity comes in the form of temporary price spikes. This means that of the three pillars of food security, it is the rapid decline in the economic accessibility of food that has the strongest correlation with unrest. Correspondingly, it is not the poorest members of society that generate unrest in response to food insecurity, but instead "it appears that rioters are disproportionately better-off, predominantly urban populations" (Barrett et al. 10). This is because social problems and general dissatisfaction are more evident in urban environments, and because the urban middle-class members of society are more educated "and enjoy better communications infrastructure than the rural poor, so they can organize more easily and quickly" (Barrett et al. 13). So the correlation between food insecurity and unrest is strongest when urban, middle-class populations experience acute food insecurity.

Despite these nuances, empirical data provided by a study from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is "broadly consistent with the often made claim by policy makers and the press that world food price increases put at stake the socio-economic and political stability of the world's poorest countries" (Arezki and Brückner 12). This data was drawn from studying changes in international food prices and their effects on the intra-state stability of 120 countries from 1970-2007. The primary conclusion of the study "was that during times of international food price increases political institutions in Low Income Countries significantly deteriorated" (Arezki and Brückner). The notable rise in "the likelihood of civil conflict and other forms of civil strife, such as anti-government demonstrations and riots," in

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Low Income Countries confirmed this finding (Arezki and Brückner). The study also found that intra-state stability in High Income Countries is not markedly impacted by increases in international food prices (Arezki and Brückner 4). This confirms that there is a direct relationship between food insecurity in the form of international food price spikes and sociopolitical unrest in poorer countries, while these price spikes are not shown to create unrest in wealthier countries.

The food riots of 2008 and of 2011 and the concurrent fluctuations in the Food Price Index provide further evidence for this finding. In 2003, the Food Price Index was at 97.7. In 2008 the Food Price Index jumped to over 200. In the same year, “Angry consumers took to the streets in at least 48 different nations across Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and South America...” (Barrett et al. 4). The Food Price Index dropped to about 160 in 2009, and then began rising again, reaching its peak in 2011 at 230. The price index of cereals in 2011, a commodity of high importance for the MENA region, was particularly high at 241. Needless to say, the jump in the Food Price Index coincided with the infamous Arab Spring, where sociopolitical instability swept across the region. In sum, international food price spikes create acute food insecurity for middle-class urban populations of poorer countries, resulting in at least unrest and possibly even sociopolitical instability.

Food Insecurity and the Arab Spring

If the MENA is vulnerable to food insecurity, and if food insecurity is a proven cause of unrest, and in particular, is correlated to the Arab Spring, then why was the intensity of the unrest uneven throughout the region? To begin, the MENA’s underlying structural pressures that threaten its food security and stability (poverty, urbanization, large population of unemployed youths, reliance on international food market) are not at the same level of concern for every country in the region, so some countries are more vulnerable to food insecurity and its ensuing unrest than others. For example,

“while youth unemployment rates in the region are the highest in the world, there are some significant differences within the region, with the rate ranging from under 10 percent in some of the Gulf States, to above 35 percent in Algeria, Iraq, and Jordan” (Barrett et al. 362, 363).

Food insecurity and unrest are then less likely to occur in states like the Gulf States where youth unemployment is lower. The disparity in the wealth of MENA countries is one of the most noteworthy differences among countries in the region. In 2011, the GDPs of ten Arab countries were well below 20,000 USD. The GDPs of Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia were barely over 20,000 USD. Meanwhile Kuwait was over 40,000 USD, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was over 60,000 USD, and Qatar was over 100,000 USD. The wealth of a country is a huge factor in determining the stability of its food security, especially in the MENA where most of its food is imported. This is because wealthier states can implement more effective social protection policies.

“To buffer the effects of market shocks so that even if the global market price spike does pass through into domestic markets, food assistance, employment guarantee, cash transfer, or other schemes can effectively buffer vulnerable populations...” (Barrett et al. 14).

The most common response to possible food security threats is food subsidies, which are shown to minimize unrest in response to rising food prices by making food more economically accessible (Barrett et al 14, 365). However, social protection policies and food subsidies used in response to rising international food prices “tend to be poorly targeted, inefficient, subject to corruption, and fiscally expensive” (Barrett et al. 365). Moreover, while these policy interventions do temporarily make food more economically accessible, they do not increase the global supply of food. Rather, they merely export stress to a different group (Barrett et al. 23). The result is further “price increases in other, less insulated economies and thin global markets, fueling increased price instability” (Barrett et al. 24). Therefore, the more funds a state has available, the more effectively it can maintain food security by insulating its economy against international food price shocks and by ensuring its citizen’s accessibility to food even if the economy is not insulated well enough against price spikes. The fewer funds a state has available, the more vulnerable its economy will be to food price shocks.

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Indeed, when the Food Price Index rose to 230 in 2011, “many governments increased food and other subsidies in an attempt to calm the urban unrest,” even though such subsidies are fiscally expensive (Barrett et al. 365). The successful subsidies were the ones implemented in the wealthier states, hence the presence of minimal unrest and the absence of sociopolitical instability in those countries.

“As the tempo of uprisings escalated, the Gulf states indulged in a massive distribution of direct subsidies to their populations and other large-scale social spending...” (Pollack et al. 69, 70).

In specific, Saudi Arabia offered its citizens “over \$30 billion in new bonuses, mosque building, and other payoffs” (Pollack et al. 163). Kuwait gave each of its citizens “approximately \$3,500, as well as free food rations for fourteen months” (Pollack et al. 184). In Oman, the Sultan “promised to create 50,000 public sector jobs,” raised the minimum wage for private sector workers, and “unveiled a \$2.6 billion spending package” (Pollack et al. 184). The Qatari government “expanded zero-interest housing loans and has set aside funds for wage hikes for public employees” (Pollack et al. 184). And lastly, the UAE “pledged \$1.6 billion to develop infrastructure within its oil-poor northern emirates, raised military pensions by a whopping 70 percent, and introduced bread and rice subsidies” (Pollack et al. 184). These policies clearly worked because according to the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE remained at low risk of food insecurity. The wealth of these countries therefore allowed them to implement policies that reduce food insecurity and avoid “the full frontal onslaught of unrest and popular mobilization that has engulfed other parts of the Arab world” (Pollack et al. 180).

Counter-Argument

Despite this evidence, one could point out that unrest has occurred in Bahrain, which is one of the region’s wealthier states with a low risk of food insecurity, and that sociopolitical instability has not occurred in all of the states where food insecurity is greater. While there is evidence that food insecurity causes unrest, it is not the only cause of unrest and it does not necessarily lead to sociopolitical instability. The Arab Spring was not exclusively in response to decreases in the accessibility of food. Rather, the Arab Spring was more about expressing dissatisfaction with poor governance, lack of political and civil liberties, and a sense of moral outrage and injustice targeted at the ruling regimes. Indeed, food riots in general “are commonly a manifestation not just of high food prices, but perhaps more importantly, of weak states against which the population harbors a broader set of grievances to which food price spikes become a potent rallying point” (Barrett et al. 15). In the case of Bahrain the unrest was in response to,

“the culmination of economic, social, and political grievances. Like the people of Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere in the Arab world, they took to the streets to demand greater equality, justice, and political representation” (Pollack et al. 188).

Food price spikes were simply not necessary for its Shia citizens to unite and express aggravation over its oppressive Sunni ruling regime. What can be concluded then, is that while wealthier Arab countries are more food secure and thus only received a small taste of the Arab Spring within their borders, the particular intensity of other underlying structural pressures aside from food insecurity caused Bahrain to experience sociopolitical instability as well. In addition to Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, and Syria were hit hardest by the unrest of the Arab Spring. The IFPRI ranks Libya and Tunisia as moderately food insecure, Egypt and Syria as seriously food insecure, and Yemen’s food insecurity as extremely alarming. However, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Algeria, and Morocco were also deemed seriously food insecure, yet the Arab Spring uprisings were not vibrant enough to cause sociopolitical instability to the same degree as in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, and Syria. Once again this is because while food insecurity in the form of high food prices “can temporarily unite and mobilize aggrieved subpopulations against the state” (Barrett et al. 15), this unrest usually only results in combination with other grievances against the state, and this unrest only turns into sociopolitical instability when there is “a political opposition ready to foment, organize, and sustain social unrest,” and when this political opposition senses the state is not strong enough to successfully maintain the status quo. So even though food price shocks did lead to unrest in all of these poor and food insecure Arab countries, not all of the necessary factors were in place for sustained sociopolitical instability in the same way as in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, and Yemen.

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Conclusion

The Arab Spring was primarily a protest against governments calling for more political and civil liberties, and was fueled by long-held resentment stemming from a sense of moral outrage and injustice. However, the unrest came in various levels of intensity—in some countries there was hardly any unrest (the Gulf states) while in others the sociopolitical instability led to outright rebellion (Libya and Syria). While the Arab Spring was not about food insecurity, it is likely that the rapid rise in international food prices caused the middle class urban populations to experience acute food insecurity, which provided the necessary motivation for the people to generate unrest. The wealthier states in the region (excluding Bahrain) were able to use their wealth to maintain a low risk of food insecurity, and to avoid the acute food insecurity caused by the rise in international food prices. The poorer states lacked the funds to defend against these food price shocks, causing their largely urban middle class populations to experience acute food insecurity and generate unrest in retaliation. In conclusion, while wealthier Arab countries were able to significantly minimize the unrest caused by the Arab Spring by maintaining stable food security, levels of food security cannot explain why some countries experienced minimal unrest while others experienced sociopolitical instability.

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Written by: Thomas J. Tree
Written at: Syracuse University
Written for: Mehrzad Boroujerdi
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