



Food Insecurity, Conflict, and Stability

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FOOD INSECURITY IS BOTH A CONSEQUENCE AND A CAUSE OF CONFLICT, MAKING IT INEXORABLY LINKED WITH POLITICAL STABILITY AT REGIONAL, NATIONAL, AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS. Lack of access to affordable food has proven to trigger revolutions and spark unrest across the world. The first signs of the Arab Spring were riots in Algeria and Tunisia in 2011 over dramatic increases in the prices of dietary staples such as sugar, oil, and flour. The food-price crisis of 2007–2008 caused dozens of protests across the globe, serving as a wakeup call to the international community and the United States that investments in sustainable agricultural development are critical to political stability and national security.

Food should be considered a political commodity. It is often used as a strategic instrument of war, with evidence spanning from clashing groups in 1990s Sudan to Bashar al-Assad's war-torn Syria today. Agricultural markets sustain and stabilize many economies around the world, as well provide food to the hungry bellies of populations that may already be dissatisfied with high levels of unemployment, government corruption, or violence in their communities. Hungry populations are more likely to express frustration with troubled leadership, perpetuating a cycle of political instability and further undermining long-term economic development.

In 2016, regions within the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa will be most sensitive to food insecurity, and several countries are likely to suffer political unrest and costly humanitarian crises because of their inability to meet their populations' basic food demands.

Syria is the biggest humanitarian crisis of this generation, and the situation continues to deteriorate. Nearly 10 million Syrians are unable to meet their daily food needs. The ongoing conflict has disrupted agricultural production, markets, and critical infrastructure, causing billions of dollars in damage that will take decades to reverse. Syria's GDP, once tied to a thriving agricultural sector, has been significantly compromised. A UN report in March of this year estimated total economic loss since the start of the conflict was more than \$200 billion. Farmers are fleeing their lands indefinitely, and the massive refugee exodus is placing pressure on neighboring countries, from Jordan and Israel to many parts of Europe and the United States.

Evidence of food as a weapon of war is rampant across all factions and dimensions of the Syrian conflict. President Assad is waging a starvation cam-

paign, purposely cutting populations off from humanitarian assistance. The Islamic State is using food as a recruitment tool, luring in weak citizens desperate for food and then folding vulnerable young men into their ranks. Points along the Turkey-Syria border that are used as aid-distribution sites have become violent hot spots controlled by armed men ready to use humanitarian aid as valuable leverage.

Meanwhile, Yemen is facing a possible famine brought on by the perfect storm of severe drought and violent conflict. Civil war threats from numerous rebel groups have exacerbated an already-weak system: before the crisis, 42 percent of the population was food insecure, the country imported over 90 percent of its food, and there was serious water scarcity. Now, a staggering 21 million people out of a population of 24.8 million are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance, including 13 million people who do not have enough to eat. In addition, the conflict escalated this year around the same time as the typical cropping season, from March to June, so the 2015 crop production will be much below average.

South Sudan's current crisis is a reminder of how important a reliable food system is to sustainable state building. Up to 95 percent of the population is dependent on agriculture for their livelihood, yet there is no underlying state infrastructure—roads and irrigation systems, for example—to support the agricultural industry. Today, an estimated 40 percent of the country cannot afford or access enough food to fulfill their daily needs, with populations facing emergency levels of acute food insecurity in conflict-affected areas. The dangerous combination of armed conflict, weak infrastructure, devalued currency, and soaring staple food prices could result in famine conditions in 2016 if South Sudan does not receive sufficient humanitarian aid.

Despite its impressive economic growth rates over the past decade, Nigeria has a delicate hold on food security in the northeastern part of the country due to the Islamic extremist group Boko Haram. Their brutal attacks, the government-led counterinsurgency, and on-going ethnic clashes are responsible for displacing an estimated 1.5 to 2.5 million people, many of whom depend on agriculture for their livelihoods. Refugees who are able to return home often find their land, crops, and livestock destroyed. In a country where more than 60 percent of the massive and growing population lives in extreme poverty, these types of shocks have a deep impact.

Nigeria's import dependency does not help. It is the second-largest sugar, fish, and rice importer in the world, relying on large exporter countries like China to supply the 2 million metric tons of rice its population consumes each year. With food imports growing at an unsustainable rate of 11 percent and below-average staple crop yields three years in a row, Nigeria's food security is not stable enough to handle additional civil strife. Food insecurity will likely remain at emergency levels in northeast Nigeria well into 2016, pushing millions more in dire need of humanitarian aid.

Regional and international security will continue to impact and be fueled by the hunger levels of affected populations. Building food security in countries like Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, and Nigeria is complex and costly. The United States has defined itself as a leader in addressing global food security. Now is the time to sustain that commitment to countries that need it the most. □

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