

FOOD SECURITY AND POLITICAL STABILITY IN ARAB STATES: READING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PROTEST MOVEMENTS

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Abstract:

This study aims to analyse the relationship between food security and political stability in Arab states, with a particular focus on the reciprocal effects between them in the context of protest movements that have swept the region in recent years. Arab states face considerable challenges in the field of food security as a result of fluctuations in international food prices, which pose a threat to both social and political security. These countries have been affected by several global food crises, including the food price surge in 2006–2007, the climate change crisis in 2010, and the food shortages experienced in 2010 due to declining oil prices, which most severely impacted the oil-exporting states. These crises have contributed to the escalation of widespread protests, whereby citizens demand improvements in economic and social conditions. The forms of protest varied between peaceful demands and acts of violence that emerged in certain states, such as Libya, leading to negative repercussions for state stability. In addition, the impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has aggravated food security in the region. Food prices experienced a dramatic increase of approximately 35 percent in 2021, thereby exacerbating the crisis of food supplies and significantly affecting Arab economies.

Keywords: food security, Arab states, political stability.

Introduction

The Arab region is experiencing complex challenges marked by the intertwinement of food security issues with political stability, underscoring the urgent need to understand the reciprocal relationship between the two, particularly in light of the successive economic and social crises

that have afflicted Arab states in recent years. These states have suffered from sharp fluctuations in global food prices, rendering food security one of the most sensitive issues that directly affects social and political stability. In this context, the repercussions of these crises were not confined to economic dimensions alone but also served as a principal driver behind the protest movements that spread across many Arab states, such as Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Libya, escalating in some cases into violent unrest.

Among the crises that played a pivotal role in exacerbating the economic and social situation were the global food price surge of 2006–2007, the repercussions of climate change in 2010 that curtailed agricultural production in the region, and the impact of falling oil prices on Arab oil-exporting countries, which compounded problems in securing food supplies. The crisis did not stop there; the COVID-19 pandemic also aggravated Arab economies, leading to a sharp increase in food prices of approximately 35% in 2021, thereby intensifying economic hardship and further worsening levels of food security.

This study seeks to analyse the dimensions of the relationship between food security and political stability in Arab states, examine the impact of this relationship on the protest movements witnessed across the region, and attempt to explain the mutual interactions between food crises and political unrest.

First: The Reality of Food Security in the Arab Region

From a security perspective, food security first emerged in its early usage alongside the rise of critical theory in security studies, which expanded security paradigms to include nontraditional perspectives that consider all factors intervening in security processes. Food security is regarded as one of the most prominent new dimensions of security that directly touches the lived reality of individuals. It is linked to the individual, community, state, and the global system as a whole; consequently, it has gained importance according to its security context aimed at preserving human security for individuals, and the potential impact this may have on the state and its position within the global food landscape, especially with the rise of famine and malnutrition in many parts of the world.

Food security is viewed as "the state achieved when self-sufficiency in food is attained locally according to the state's ability to provide the needs of all individuals for goods and foodstuffs through local production." It is also defined as "the ability of the state to provide the necessary dietary level through local production... it is a guarantee of the continuous flow of the usual level of food required for the consumption of society during any period of time. "¹

From the first definition, it is evident that food security is almost entirely related to meeting human dietary needs on the condition that this food is produced locally. Conversely, the second definition argues that food security is linked to the state's capacity, that is, possessing power

¹ Nasser Murad, "Food Security Achievement Policies in Developing Countries: The Case of Algeria," *Journal of New Economics*, (No. 5) (December 2010), pp. 45, 46.

alongside the ability to supply food to its population through local production, provided that this flow is continuous over time.

In this context, some concepts related to food security have emerged, which can be clarified as follows:

Absolute food security: This refers to the production of food within a single state at a level equal to or exceeding local demand. This level is synonymous with complete self-sufficiency and is also known as autonomous food security.

Relative food security: This denotes the ability of a state or a group of states to provide foodstuffs and goods either wholly or partially. It is also defined as the capacity of a country or group of countries to supply their societies or communities with essential food items either entirely or partially, ensuring a minimum regular level of those needs.²

Several definitions of food security have been proposed, including the following:

The state's ability to achieve self-sufficiency in plant and animal food products solely through local production without relying on imports. It also encompasses the capacity to provide basic food needs regularly, either through local production or imports, provided that such imports are financed by the revenues from agricultural exports that the state sends abroad.³

The provision of all inhabitants of a state with the required amounts and different types of food, drink, and necessary foodstuffs to the degree needed by the people. This includes ensuring the availability of various foods and drinks when needed, with no likelihood of future food shortages. In other words, it is a condition in which the nutritional status of citizens in the country or region is free from any food crises or gaps under any circumstances or at any time. This condition is achieved through the economic abundance of essential goods.⁴

Ensuring that all citizens in any society have access to sufficient and readily available food at all times according to economic and social systems, with the food being healthy and appropriate to the physical needs of the individual in terms of quality and detail, thereby contributing to the enhancement of bodily functions and health.⁵

Accordingly, opinions have differed regarding the dimensions of security according to several classifications, as detailed below:

² Yasif Heba, "Deconstructing the Consensus Framework on the Concept of Food Security to Discuss the Strategic Agricultural Situation of Algeria in Media Discourse," *International Journal of Literary and Humanistic Studies Papers*, (Vol. 3) (No. 1) (March 2021), p. 230.

³ Shawky Hafiani, Abdelkarim Kibeshe, "The Role of Food Security in Reducing Poverty in Algeria," *Algerian Journal of Research and Studies*, (Vol. 4) (No. 3) (July 2021), p. 201.

⁴ Khalid Dhaw, "Ways to Achieve Food Security in Islamic Sharia and the Algerian Constitution," *Journal of Family Research*, (Vol. 2) (No. 1) (2022), p. 58.

⁵ Khoula Rakrouk, Rukia Lakloul, "The Role of Local Radio in Raising Awareness among Rural Women on Food Security Issues," *Algerian Journal of Media Research and Public Opinion*, (Vol. 3) (No. 1) (June 2020), p. 381.

First classification: This classification holds that the dimensions of security are limited to the following:

- The security dimension refers to the notion that food security is a dynamic and active concept that changes over time.
- The economic dimension is based on the premise that achieving food security leads to a reduction in economic burdens.
- The social dimension considers that the availability of sufficient food prevents disturbances in individual behaviour.
- Political dimension: The availability of food security facilitates the spread of stability and security.⁶

Second classification: This classification holds that the dimensions of security are limited to:

- Availability: This dimension refers to the necessity of having sufficient quantities of food for the population, which should be included within the strategic reserves.
- Food safety: This entails guaranteeing the health, safety, and suitability of food for human consumption.
- Accessibility: This means that the prices of goods and products should be within the reach of individuals or that food can be provided to the most impoverished groups in the form of aid.
- Stability: This dimension focuses on the need to maintain food conditions and ensure the simultaneous availability of the previous three dimensions.⁷

The third classification holds that the dimensions of security are limited to the following:

- Physical availability of foodstuffs: This refers to the capacity for production and storage sufficient to meet basic needs.
- Economic and physical access to food: Emphasising individuals' economic and physical ability to obtain food.
- Utilisation of food: The consumption of food safely and healthily.
- Food sustainability and stability: Achieving continuity to preserve and improve the ecosystem.⁸

⁶ Shawky Hafiani, Abdelkarim Kibeshe, "The Role of Food Security in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals," *Journal of Social and Human Sciences*, (Vol. 23) (No. 1) (June 2022), pp. 667, 668.

⁷ Yasif Heba, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

⁸ Khoula Rakrouk, Rukia Lakloulou, *op. cit.*, pp. 381, 382.

Food security in the Arab region is determined, according to Professor Ben Yezza, by a set of factors detailed as follows:

- The proportion of agricultural land to total area: It is well known that the percentage of agricultural land varies from one Arab state to another. This difference is influenced by the nature of the land designated for agriculture and the suitability of the climate for supporting agricultural production.

- Water resources: Variations in water scarcity and abundance also exist among Arab states. Some Arab areas suffer from severe shortages of water, whereas other Arab states are endowed with substantial water resources.⁹

In contrast, Arab food security faces several threats, which include the following:

- Climate change: Food security and its related issues are closely linked to climatic changes, where global warming leads to climate variations characterised mainly by increased CO₂ emissions and elevated maximum and minimum temperatures. These climatic changes result in alterations to the fundamentals of the food system and food production, as well as changes in storage, transportation, marketing, and livestock genetics. This can potentially lead to changes in food consumption patterns, which in turn affect human health by impacting food self-sufficiency rates and nutritional values."

- Demographic imbalance: "The rural population in Arab countries amounted to approximately 151.8 million in 2014, approximately 39 percent of the total population, compared with approximately 43 percent in 2010. The agricultural population was approximately 85.6 million, approximately 22 percent of the total population, compared to approximately 24 percent in 2010."

- Failure of economic policies: Many economists, including experts from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, argue that the economic policies adopted by many developing countries in recent periods have been biased against the agricultural sector and were among the primary causes that contributed to the sector's deterioration and backwardness in most of these countries.

- Political instability: Political stability plays a significant role in achieving and sustaining agricultural development by providing suitable conditions for governments, their institutions, and farmers, both individuals and organisations, to carry out their developmental activities positively, whereas conflicts affect food security directly and indirectly.¹⁰

Contextual Interrelations between Food Security and Political Stability in the Arab Region

⁹ Yousef Ben Yezza, "Determinants and Threats to Food Security in the Arab Region," *Journal of Social and Human Sciences*, (Vol. 19) (No. 1) (June 2018), pp. 20–22.

¹⁰ Yousef Ben Yezza, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–26.

From the above discussion, which established a conceptual foundation elucidating the contents of food security and political stability in the Arab region, it becomes evident that there are strong degrees of interrelation between political stability and food security. Political stability is considered one of the main pillars that support the achievement of local food security, reinforcing the hypothesis that insufficient or absent food supplies might cause political instability.

Accordingly, the Arab revolutions had a profound impact on the level of production and projects included within the food security programmes of these states.¹¹ This occurs through two fundamental relationships. The first relationship links malnutrition and insufficient food availability as one of the reasons that individuals demand improved nutritional conditions. The degree of security response to these protests may result in cases of political instability due to failure in political handling. The second relationship emerges from the recognition of malnutrition as a reaction or consequence of escalating political instability, which leads to the deterioration of individuals' security and food conditions.¹²

In Libya, one of the Arab countries suffering from significant instability, the Food and Agriculture Organisation reported that conflict and instability have been major factors contributing to food insecurity. This situation has led to large-scale displacement from areas experiencing intense armed violence to less violent regions. The security crisis has exacerbated challenges in the agricultural sector, including water scarcity, animal and plant diseases, desertification, and labour shortages. It has also disrupted transportation networks, market movements, and access to water and electricity. Although households favour agriculture and consider crops and livestock vital sources of food security, these efforts and contributions remain limited in the agricultural field. Libya's agricultural GDP accounted for no more than 3 percent in 2012, whereas 22 percent of the population engaged in farming, while approximately 7.5 percent of the population abandoned agricultural activities in 2014.¹³

Accordingly, the state of the Arab world can be assessed via specific indicators that consider the region's natural and human resources, as well as agricultural and livestock production. The Arab world possesses an estimated cultivated land area of 140 million hectares in 2014, representing 11% of the total area, 70.1 million hectares of which were cultivated. The pasture area amounts to 425 million hectares, approximately 32 percent of the Arab region's total area, whereas forested areas cover approximately 48.8 million hectares, or 3.6 percent of the total area. In terms of human resources, the total labour force in 2015 was approximately 128 million people, with 29 million employed in agriculture, accounting for 22% of the total labour force. Agricultural output in Arab states was estimated at approximately 138.3 billion US dollars in 2017, representing a 2.8% decrease from 2016. Given the significant role of livestock wealth in

¹¹ Wasila Waer, Doufi Qarmiya, "An Analytical Study of the Situation of Arab Food Security in light of Global Food Security Indicators during the Period 2009–2018," *Journal of Economic Studies and Research on Renewable Energies*, (Vol. 8) (No. 2) (2021), p. 82.

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¹³ Italy, Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, *Report 2018 Multi-Sector Needs: Libya—The Impact of the Crisis on Agriculture*, (Rome, 2019), p. 1.

Arab food security levels, the livestock population reached approximately 352.3 million head in 2017, a 0.3 percent decline compared with 2016.¹⁴

Despite the abundance of human, natural, animal, and plant resources in the Arab region, the exploited portion remains limited and insufficient to improve the food situation. This insufficiency may be one of the reasons driving individuals towards more aggressive behaviours against their states, which have failed to utilise adequate resources to achieve food security. In some countries, decision-makers deliberately fail to exploit sufficient resources despite the positive role these agricultural assets could play in enhancing political stability across the Arab region's territories. This situation deepens the gap between the state and its people, who seek an adequate amount of food to fulfil their vital needs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sought to analyse the nature of the relationship between food security and political stability in the Arab region, especially given the many contexts that strongly support interdisciplinary hypotheses. The study reached several conclusions, which can be summarised as follows:

- Food security is among the most important dimensions of human security, especially with the emergence of critical security studies that establish new security knowledge fields while considering all new security contexts.
- Political stability has gained significant importance since all political, security, and economic processes have become contingent upon the presence or absence of political stability.
- Despite the Arab region's richness in terms of vast resources, the states of the region have utilised only a small fraction of them, primarily due to decision-makers' failure to recognise the critical role of food in security and political contexts.
- The hypothesis that low food levels correspond to rising demands from individuals, which, when met with negative political responses, transform into more violent cases, significantly affecting political stability.

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¹⁴ Rim Boush, "The Position of Food Security in Light of Agricultural Development in the Arab World," *Ma'ālim Journal for Media and Communication Studies*, (Vol. 2) (No. 1) (December 2019), pp. 17–33.

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