

Feeding the Arab Uprisings

Introduction: The Food Regime in the Arab World

Since the first oil was struck in the Arabian Gulf, the food economy of the Arab World has suffered from a compounded “oil curse”. For one, the surplus from oil monies and the lure of a service-based economy has driven the regimes to neglect the productive sectors such as agriculture, allowing them to degrade. Secondly, the availability of oil and other essential resources in the region has brought imperial US interests and its Western allies into the game. Control over oil requires a strong military presence in the region, which is achieved through unwavering support to Israel, and by direct military intervention such as in Iraq. It also requires subservient rulers. Thus, the US and its allies have fostered Arab dictatorships since the end of the colonial period in the 20th century.

With the help of a small class of capitalists, Arab dictators have pillaged the Nation’s resources. Most of their regimes have blindly endorsed the recommendations of the Bretton-Woods institutions for economic reforms, adopting a fundamentalist market-oriented approach to the economy. Through a lethal combination of corruption and neo-liberalism enforced through the iron fist of myriad security apparatuses, they facilitated the work of a compradorial business elite. The rich industrial countries of Western Europe and North America encouraged this partnership, which provided invaluable services in both directions: open access to Arab oil and mineral resources, and open Arab markets for imported goods from the US.

Among these goods, food occupies an important share and plays a crucial role. The

ecological limitations on food production prevalent in the Arab World were exacerbated by national policies that deliberately damaged food sovereignty. Against this background, Western Europe and the US readily deployed

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food power, using surpluses originating from the European and American subsidies. Bundled within a nefarious triptych including free trade agreements and accession to WTO, subsidies provided cheap food commodities and animal feed and damaged the local food systems. Free Trade Agreements and the pressure to join the WTO made the Arab World an easy open market for Western-based multinational food corporations. In some countries such as in Iraq, US occupation gave free reign to US-based corporations to control the food and farming sectors¹. Never has the slogan “food for oil” which is how the UN named its “relief” program to Iraq in 1990-1991 carried more meaning.

The role of the subsidies-FTA-WTO triptych in destroying food systems in the countries of the South has been extensively analyzed and documented in a number of publications originating from international non-governmental bodies. For further details, one may refer to OXFAM’s “Make Trade Fair” campaign², which has produced numerous publications on the



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topic. A recent document by the Heinrich Böll Foundation “Slow Trade- Sound Farming”³ expounds the uneven power relation between countries of the North and South and highlights the damaging role of farm subsidies. While none of the publications focuses specifically on the Arab World, evidence from our field studies in Lebanon, Yemen and Jordan indicates that for those Arab countries where there exists a potential for agriculture, dumping of subsidized food has contributed to the demise of the local farming sector. In some of the poorer areas of Lebanon, the cost of harvesting and milling one kilogram of wheat can be equivalent to the price on 1 kg of imported flour. No wonder farmers chose to opt out from agriculture and to migrate to the cities where they become net food buyers.

The impact of the triptych has been the demise of an already frail family farming, but some aspects of capitalist agriculture flourished under this regime. Where the biophysical endowment permitted, export-oriented production draws heavily on non-renewable resources such as soil and water to produce perishable goods destined for the Northern palates. These include organic produce, winter tomatoes, out of season strawberries and cut flowers. The operation of these industrial production sites relies on farm workers who

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were previously small-scale farmers. They are often migrant workers and receive a minimal, if any, compensation package and social security. While they toil during the day to produce quality foods for elite niche markets, they themselves survive on a diet essentially based on imported processed foods, originating from the subsidized Northern surpluses. This

exposes them to the vagaries of the global food prices and increases their vulnerability. We have recently reported on the condition of Syrian female farm workers in the potato fields of Lebanon.⁴ Morocco has witnessed a similar transition, and the plight of Moroccan women farmers-turned farm workers in the tomato fields and orange orchards destined for export to Europe has been amply documented in a recent article by Raimbeau (2009).⁵

What Role Did Rising Food Prices Play in the Current Revolutions?

In this context, it is not surprising that a large number of analysts have quickly placed the sharp rise in global food prices the world is currently witnessing among the prime causes underlying the Arab uprisings. The issue is pertinent: food prices are at their highest since the 2008 food crisis, and food commodities markets are set to continue to be unstable. In spite of the measures taken by the Arab regimes to dampen the impact of the crisis⁶, the real price of wheat has increased by more than 30% in the past 12 months.⁷

It is difficult to isolate food prices from the other drivers of the current uprising. In Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen the increase in the price of food as a significant component of the cost of living has certainly contributed to the initial mobilization of the people, especially in the less favored classes. However, food rapidly disappeared from the list of popular demands, as people expressed their disillusionment with the regime as a whole, rather than their need for cheaper food.

While there is no appropriate empirical method to validate any such proposition, an cursory perusal of the slogans chanted by Egyptian protestors, as compiled on the Angry Arab website⁸ on January 27, 2011, reveals that out of 40 popular slogans, none addressed food or cost of living or services. 20 were aimed personally at Hosni Mubarak, his son Gamal or the regime, 6 expressed the rejection of the normalization with Israel and the subsidized sale of natural gas, 6 were nationalistic and

praised Egypt, 5 were expressions of the need for freedom, 5 expressed steadfastness and 2 were anti-sectarian⁹. A similar survey of some of the slogans chanted by the Yemeni protestors dated February 17, 2011 revealed that out of 38, 24 were directed against the regime and Ali Abdullah Saleh, 6 were in support of the Egyptian uprising, 2 were calls

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for steadfastness, 2 were calls for freedom, 1 was in praise of Yemen, 1 was a call for peace, 1 referred to bread and food being a common demand of protestors, army and police, and 1 was a thank you to Al-Jazeera.¹⁰

In spite of the imperfection of the approach, it provides an insight into the expressed demands of the protestors. The millions who took to the streets or who took arms as in Libya, are demanding the end of regimes which have exploited them for decades, and made them dependent and subservient and poor. They are not demanding cheaper food as aid; they are demanding the right for dignity, freedom, state services such as education, and employment so that they can afford the price of food. Rather than focusing on the micro-dimension of food prices, it is the systemic policy of control through dictators and a business elite that controls food and other basic needs that is being opposed. One of the outcomes of this systemic control is the loss of food security and food sovereignty.

Some witness and expert reports appear to confirm this analysis. A Wall Street Journal article covering the Egyptian uprising¹¹ reported from both an international NGO worker in Egypt and a senior FAO economist their conviction

that the protests were unrelated to soaring food prices. The FAO economist confirmed that Egypt had absorbed the rising costs of wheat imports at an estimated cost of US\$678 millions prior to the toppling of Mubarak.

Are These Uprisings of the Poor?

Except for a few privileged elites closely connected to the regimes, all classes of society in the Arab World are yearning for their basic rights: the right to health, the right to food, the right to education, the right to decent housing and the right for dignity and freedom. It can be safely stated that the Arab uprisings involved all segments of society. Observations and reports by eyewitnesses and participants confirm that middle class youth was closely involved in the leadership of the protests. The “Facebook” and “Twitter” youth, as they came to be known, played an important role in organization and communication. But in places such as Egypt, where poverty is rampant and 40% of the population lives on less than US\$2 a day,¹² there is no doubt that poor people were amply represented among the protestors.

There is, however, a strong element of class struggle in the protests, as has been perceptively argued by SOAS academic Adam Hanieh. In an extensive article, Hanieh analyzes the context of the Egyptian uprising and convincingly demonstrates that it cannot be understood without a full comprehension of the economic context in which it is deployed. Hanieh dissects the policies of privatization hailed by the IMF and underscores their implications on the impoverishment of a large segment of the workers population. He is one of the few analysts who have linked global food inflation with the systematic policy of inflating money supply practiced by the US federal reserve and other core countries. On the other side of the political spectrum, George Melloan, writing in the Wall Street Journal, makes a similar assertion, and accuses the Federal Reserve of fuelling the “turmoil” in the Arab World” through pumping cash into the system.¹³

In Egypt, the protests also brought together the middle class and the workers, who had been on strike for many years prior to the uprising. Egyptian journalist and activist Hossam El-Hamalawy echoed Hanieh's analysis in one of his articles published on February 12, 2011,¹⁴ covering the role of the workers in the Egyptian uprising:

"All classes in Egypt took part in the uprising. In Tahrir Square you found sons and daughters of the Egyptian elite, together with the workers, middle class citizens, and the urban poor. Mubarak has managed to alienate all social classes in society including wide section of the bourgeoisie.

But remember that it's only when the mass strikes started three days ago that's when the regime started crumbling and the army had to force Mubarak to resign because the system was about to collapse.

Some have been surprised that the workers started striking. I really don't know what to say. This is completely idiotic. The workers have been staging the longest and most sustained strike wave in Egypt's history since 1946, triggered by the Mahalla strike in December 2006. It's not the workers' fault that you were not paying attention to their news. Every single day over the past three years there was a strike in some factory whether it's in Cairo or the provinces. These strikes were not just economic, they were also political in nature."

There is little doubt that a similar process took place in the other Arab countries that are witnessing uprisings or a fully-fledged liberation war as in Libya.

What Next?

The Arab uprisings are rapidly turning into revolutions that may do away with the current political systems and their symbols. The recent developments in Egypt and in Tunisia, where the uprisings have achieved their initial goal of overthrowing the tyrant rulers, provide an indication of the shape of things to come.

Characteristic features seem to be a reorganization of the leadership and a raising of the bar when it comes to focusing and radicalizing demands. Little is known of the dynamics that have facilitated the spread of the protests. There were no clear leadership, and some groups, such as Islamist actors, which were expected to play an important role, had a low visibility. But the process itself appeared to be akin to a self-assembling dynamic network. Following the demise of the rulers, a new leadership is emerging, which appears now to

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be organized and aware of its negotiating power. It also became clear that the uprisings would not stop there. The protestors flatly rejected the regime's attempt at self-preservation by retaining some of its core administration. Instead, they called for judiciary enquiries into the workings of the repression apparatuses, stormed into the state security building and, in Egypt, were able to pressure the temporary military command to appoint a prime minister that received his credentials from Tahrir square.

Returning to the topic of this article, class polarization seems inevitable. As the uprisings evolve and mutate into revolutions, the demands of the people may start to evolve and even conflict. It is expected that the more affluent segments of society will seek to retain their privileges, while agreeing to a change in the oppressive nature of the dictatorial one-man rule. Those fighting for social justice

alongside freedom and dignity will develop an agenda requiring more radical changes. There are reports¹⁵ of such polarization occurring in Tunisia, where the middle class was opposed to the stepping down of Ben Ali's Prime Minister Ghannouchi and accused the trade unions and the left of blocking the way to "normalcy". It is expected that similar class-based confrontations will take place in Egypt where inequality is more pronounced than in Tunisia.

Where is Arab Civil Society in All This?

Civil society is neither the state, nor the market; rather, it is the space between these spheres where people can freely debate and take action to improve their condition. I use here the term "Arab Civil Society" to refer today to a highly heterogeneous assemblage with blurred, negotiable boundaries, and which may include entities with diametrically opposed ethos and goals. It is a space that is wide enough to include religious fundamentalist charity organizations and anarchist artist collectives.

Arab civil society organizations (CSO) date back to the end of the 19th century but their number has escalated in the past 20 years, especially in Bahrain where it increased 400 times and in Yemen where it increased 100 times. In Egypt their number is in the tens of

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thousands. In 2002, the total number of Arab NGOs was estimated at 130,000 (Nasr, 2005). An important characteristic of Arab CSOs is that many were founded by former leftists of trade union leaders disillusioned by Arab politics. A number of them also serve as the social outreach network of religious groups.

The Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings were instigated by civil society. This was their principal element of success. Through spontaneous individual acts or organized activism, civil society rose up to the challenge and prevailed.

The social networking was facilitated by modern communication technologies, and satellite TV channels, especially Al-Jazeera, was very helpful in conveying information and keeping the spirits high.

CSOs (as opposed to civil "society" which includes them) did not play as prominent a role during the uprisings as in preparation for them. For instance, the Kifaya (Enough!) group in Egypt was crucial in mobilizing people around the agenda of rejection of corruption and nepotism and demanding political change. Trade unions also played a similar role, but were more organized during the uprisings, and their demands were focused and deeply political. In Bahrain, civil society organizations, which critics of the regime have traditionally used as an organizing space, are leading the protests.

Notoriously missing from the formal uprising scene were Western-styled NGOs. These have been nurtured for many years by the West, and have been receiving lavish financial and technical support from aid organization, especially from USAID under the general headings of "democracy", "peace building", "gender" and "environment". Their lack of visibility may be due to the image they conveyed of being surrogate to the donors. This image undermines their credibility during a uprising directed specifically against an oppressive regime that was supported by the NGOs donor countries.

Aware of the potential importance of civil society, and of the limited role played by the US minions in the uprisings, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton rushed to organize a "Strategic Dialogue" with civil society groups on February 16, 2011, in the wake of the Egyptian uprising.¹⁶ It was symbolic that the only two non-US speakers in the opening ceremony were from Egypt and Afghanistan. The Egyptian participant, who was introduced by Clinton as a "prominent activist", described Egyptian civil society as "the permanent partner for the US in the long run". His speech makes fascinating reading, and provides ample justification for why the role of the US-supported NGOs was

and will continue to be insignificant in the deeply nationalistic Egyptian uprising.

What Role to Expect from the “International Community”?

The Arab People has undertaken a long overdue journey of self-liberation. The “international community” must refrain from interfering in this process, and from attempting to impose an agenda that cannot be, in view of its political aims and economic goals, devoid of self-interest.

Moreover, the international community has lost much credibility among the peoples of the Arab world. This is essentially due to two reasons: one is the support to the establishment

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of autocracies subservient to the West, and that have exploited and oppressed the people. The current shift in positions in support of the uprisings may pave the way to reconciliation if the sincerity of these positions can be established. Few people in the region have forgotten the reaction of the US and the rest of the Western nations following the democratic election of a Hamas government in Palestine.

In spite of the potential disagreements that may emerge among the different groups involved in the protests, one issue has been made clear: the rejection of foreign (specifically Western) interference in the matters. Arabs across the nation feel the heavy burden of decades of manipulation by imperial powers seeking its own interest. They are strongly and unequivocally rejecting it. The empty rhetoric of democracy and freedom peddled by Western Europe and North America has been exposed to what it truly is: an insidious strategy to impose “market economy” and keep the Arab

countries under imperial domination.¹⁷

The rejection of foreign interference in the Arab Uprisings has been accompanied by the return of openly pro-Palestine and anti-Zionist stances. These were repressed by the regimes since the signature of the Camp David accord. In Egypt as in Tunisia, the protestors accused the dictator and his clique of being agents of Israel and traitors to the nation, and chanted for the liberation of Palestine. Pundits¹⁸ trace the protests in Tahrir square to the year 2000 when, for the first time, the Egyptian people occupied Tahrir square in support of the Palestinian Intifada.

In view of its strategic economic interests in the Arab World, and in light of the unwavering partnership with Israel, it is unlikely that those Western powers with vested interests will just sit and watch the Arab World being reshaped by the will of its people. While the initial position has been to support the dictators against the people¹⁹, a number of Western leaders have now adopted an opportunistic approach. They appear to be willing to make concessions regarding the dictatorships, as long as the essential political and economic nature of the regime and its subservience is not affected. The current feeling of elation running through the Arab World following the successful demise of two of the longest running dictatorship subservient to the US is being tempered by warnings about the hijack of the revolutions by the powers of reaction associated with imperial designs. One must learn here from the experience of Latin America where the US accepted and even supported the overthrowing of dictators. Instead, it fostered pseudo-democracies where political power is spread among a class of neo-liberal political elites closely associated with the global business sector.

In the Arab World, a strategy of this type would ensure that the ruling class continues to provide access to oil and minerals; and to markets wide open for manufactured goods among which food will continue to occupy the lion's share. It will promote a

neo-liberal economic environment that will cultivate capitalist market fundamentalism, and a political and economic and cultural normalization with Israel. This approach will soon be tested in Egypt by the litmus test of the gas exports to Israel and by external pressure (also through military and development aid) on retaining the Camp David accords.

Seemingly unshakable Western support to the continuous colonization of what has remained of Palestine is the other main reason why people would doubt the motives of any offer of support by the “international community”. It is impossible to envision a trust building process between the Arab peoples and that “community” without a radical shift in this position and sincere and unequivocal actions in support of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people to their land.

Endnotes

- ¹ In 2004, when L. Paul Bremer left Iraq he signed over 100 executive orders that arranged for certain laws in “sovereign” Iraq. Order 81 dealt with agriculture and opened Iraq to GMO markets as well as paving the way for Iraqi farmers to be sued should GMO business suspect them of saving patented seed. The dictatorship of Saddam Hussein had not allowed seed patenting, yet it was one of the first actions of the US occupiers, along with insuring that no state support would be offered to Iraq’s farmers. The exploits of ADM and Cargill have been chronicled here, and so it should come as no surprise that the U.S. government installed a former Cargill executive to manage Iraq’s agricultural policy. Iraq is now the fifth largest market for U.S. corn.
- ² www.maketradeair.com
- ³ www.ecofair-trade.org/pics/en/brosch_ecofairtrade_el.pdf
- ⁴ Lucile Garcon and Rami Zurayk (2010), Lebanon’s bitter harvest. *Le Monde Diplomatique*. <http://mondediplo.com/2010/11/14lebannon>
- ⁵ Cecile Raimbeau (2009), Colère des paysannes de l’Atlas Marocain. *Le Monde Diplomatique*. 04.2009. <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2009/04/RAIMBEAU/16979>
- ⁶ For example, the deposed Tunisian despot Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali vowed to reduce the price of staples such as sugar, milk and bread, but this did not prevent his ouster. Algeria, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Yemen have been purchasing large supplies of wheat in the world market to pre-empt protests.
- ⁷ Middle East? *Scientific American*. 01.02.2011. <http://www.scientificamerican.com/blog/post.cfm?id=are-high-food-prices-fueling-revolu-2011-02-01>
- ⁸ The Angry Arab News Services (27.01.2011). Egyptian Slogans, <http://angryarab.blogspot.com/2011/01/egyptian-slogans.html>
- ⁹ Total number is more than 40 as some slogans were double-barreled and fit in two categories.
- ¹⁰ The Angry Arab News Service (15.02.2011), Yemeni protest chants, <http://angryarab.blogspot.com/2011/02/yemeni-protest-chants.html>
- ¹¹ Caroline Henshaw (1.2.2011), The Politics of Food Prices in Egypt, *The Wall Street Journal Blogs*, <http://blogs.wsj.com/dispatch/2011/02/01/the-politics-of-food-prices-in-egypt/>
- ¹² Adam Hanieh (14.2.2011), Egypt’s Uprising: Not Just a Question of ‘Transition’. *MRzine*, <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2011/hanieh140211.html>
- ¹³ George Melloan (23.2.2011), The Federal Reserve is causing turmoil abroad, *The Wall Street Journal*. <http://online.wsj.com/>

article/SB10001424052748704657704576150202567815380.html

- ¹⁴ Hossam El-Hamalawy (12.2.2011), The Workers, Middle Class, Military Junta, and the Permanent Revolution, *Jadaliyya*, www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/629/the-workers-middle-class-military-junta-and-the-permanent-revolution
- ¹⁵ The Angry Arab News Service (1.3.2011), Class analysis of Tunisia, <http://angryarab.blogspot.com/2011/03/class-analysis-of-tunisia.html>
- ¹⁶ Clinton, USAID’s Shah at Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society. U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE. Office of the Spokesman. 16.2.2011 <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2011/February/20110216144118su0.4438985.html>
- ¹⁷ Interested readers are referred to the excellent analysis by Samir Amin (2010) in *Monthly Review*, <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/amin070210.html>
- ¹⁸ See for example http://www.challenge-mag.com/en/article__283 <http://www.arabawy.org/2011/03/01/anti-zionism-anti-imperialism-and-the-jan25-revolution/>
- ¹⁹ France offered military support to Ben Ali, and Obama’s initial position was to demand reforms to the Mubarak rule.