

Strategic Sectors | **Economy & Territory**

Food Security and Conflicts in the Mediterranean Region

Sébastien Abis

Director, Club DEMETER

Research Fellow, The French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs (IRIS), Paris

Peace, stability and a climate of collective confidence in society constitute essential determining factors for any agricultural development and food security strategy. Without these decisive components, the historic equation to solve for agriculture –namely, feeding a growing population with constantly evolving consumer habits– becomes highly complex. Agricultural problems can become even more aggravated if the geographic conditions prove particularly unfavourable. The scarcity of water, land ownership boundaries and climate stress undeniably accentuate pressure on agriculture.

In this regard, there has always been a close connection between geopolitics and food security. Though this conflict dynamic is not new, it could intensify in the future. Such a world-wide observation takes on an exacerbated dimension in the Mediterranean Basin. To understand the interactions between agriculture, food and security, it is useful to put the challenges posed into perspective over time and recall certain factors.

Taking a Step Back: The Importance of the Long Term

The history of the world and of the Mediterranean region is full of events during which agricultural and food issues played a significant role in the deployment of power strategies, the triggering of crises or the course of wars. In Antiquity, both in Athens and Rome, the powers that be worked to build their

City-States and their social pact without ever underestimating the centrality of food in their political vision. The same is true in later times, during the centuries of Arab or Ottoman domination: agriculture appeared as a pillar of socio-economic balance and every extreme meteorological episode caused food shortage and insecurity, weakening societies. Risks of popular revolt progressed systematically when hunger gained ground.

Closer to the present day, the colonial period should also be read as the will of European nations to conquer basic resources abroad that they did not have at home. It must also be kept in mind that the Europeans began to benefit from substantial food security as of the point when they ceased to wage war against one another! The construction of a unified Europe, which began after the Second World War, and the Common Agricultural Policy that consolidated it as of the 1960s are the key examples of virtuous agricultural geopolitics when weapons ceased to sound and peace settled in for the long term in territories.

In saying this, we find an obvious echo of the reality of a Mediterranean too imbued even today with rivalries or wars. Simple correlations show that the levels of food insecurity and chronic or acute malnutrition are higher in countries involved in violent or hidden conflicts.

A Persistent Constant: The Vicious Cycle of Misfortunes

If agriculture and food so often go hand in hand with geopolitics, it is because the interactions can go both ways in this cycle. Indeed, on the one hand, agricultural and food insecurity (at times with their underlying climate reasons) can cause social un-

rest, render individuals vulnerable or force them to migrate, thus potentially influencing revolutionary movements such that they could become political crises or even worse, conflicts. On the other hand, war situations lead to physical insecurity for populations, true, but also generally to economic and food insecurity as well.

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Poverty and hunger spread in areas where combat predominates. The longer the latter lasts, the greater these human insecurities grow. Access to food automatically erodes for various reasons that are, moreover, the pillars of food security: less availability in terms of in-country production and import capacity (i), greater irregularity in harvests or the supply chain (ii), greater constraints in access due to diminishing purchasing power, damaged infrastructure or covetousness among actors, considering the power relations at play (iii), less nutritional value and safety of foods due to deteriorated sanitary conditions and less varied consumption for individuals (iv).

The example of Syria alone shows us to what degree this vicious cycle works both ways. Though the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011 naturally cannot be exclusively attributed to the droughts and migrations of distress by rural populations in the late 2000s, these factors cannot be ignored. By the same token, though the agricultural and food problems in Syria do not epitomize the scope of the human tragedy gripping the country since 2011, there is no denying that migrations by populations in distress have skyrocketed, that hunger affects a significant proportion of the population and that agricultural lands have been ravaged by combat. If peace comes to Syria tomorrow, it will take years to rebuild the country's agriculture and the basic conditions for food security.

Various Scales of Conflict

Agricultural and food tension exists inevitably, therefore, in periods of conflict. They globally leave a mark on societies, but also affect different population grids to different degrees. The inhabitants of rural areas can lose their work tool and their food security at once. They suffer a double penalty when war is waged in their territories. Fishermen are likewise affected: if coastal control is subject to the harsh reality of combat, fishing activity is just as compromised as agriculture. In the Mediterranean, food security rests as much on land production as it does on fish and seafood.

Moreover, each conflict transforms the parameters of local and international commerce. Political alliances can redesign trade and the flow of merchandise. Barriers can also obstruct its operation. Practices of corruption or resource pillaging sometimes disrupt local or national food systems as well. Daesh, with its territorial and societal ambitions, has been a good example of this over the past few years. On a more macroeconomic level, the power plays of those involved in the theatre of conflicts in question raise the spectre of the use of food as a weapon, whether to weaken an area or actor, or on the contrary, come to their aid. In this agricultural geostrategy, whether contingent or longer-term, constraining or even aggressive trade measures flourish (financial sanctions, embargoes, blockades, diversions, etc.).

To these 'physical' aspects, we must also add the entire panoply of food risks that can further arise in cases of conflict: inflation of food prices and the phenomenon of speculation, cold chain interruption or disruption of storage capacity, proliferation of animal or plant diseases, onset of malnutrition... Added to the socio-political violence are thus potential economic, logistic, health and nutritional shocks. This is applicable to the warring country and its regional neighbourhood, experiencing this poly-crisis by ripple effect. Again, using the example of the war in Syria, we are finding agricultural and food difficulties have been projected across the entire Middle East over the past years, not to mention the emission of 'shocks' from Yemen, Iraq or other pockets of violence in this chronically unstable area.

In any case, beyond the conflict dynamics described, it seems useful to complete the analysis of

interactions between geopolitics and agriculture with the consideration of a series of issues that are at times less visible but just as strategic in the region. First of all, the demographic challenge posed to food security is real. The Middle East North Africa (MENA) region went from 100 to 500 million inhabitants in the space of a half century (1965-2015). The population is set to reach 700 million by 2050, a number that remains very uncertain due to the number of potential candidates for exile but also immigrants arriving from Sub-Saharan Africa, where demographic growth is colossal.

More mouths to feed in the region over the past few years, therefore, but less resources for agricultural production! Water poverty is the most pronounced on the planet and nearly all arable land is already being farmed. Conflicts between water users will likely escalate, as well pressure on land resources in countries where construction takes precedence over the preservation of agricultural land. These geographical constraints, that only technical and technological response will attenuate, are multiplied by the acceleration of climate changes massively affecting the region. They also reveal the governance shortcomings prevailing in many Mediterranean countries despite their nominal commitment to follow the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda.

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Another major challenge: the inclusion of rural communities in economic growth and modernization of living conditions. The precariousness of women in the rural milieu or the lagging digital connectivity for youth in these areas are insidious problems threatening the stability and cohesion of countries. In Tunisia, this geographical divide between the urban

populations along the coast and the rural ones inland is not going away, despite the fact that it was one of the determining factors of the 2011 revolution. The lack of employment and perspectives in these peripheral regions, where agricultural activity predominates without significant advantages in terms of food processing or market entry, have long been the main instigators of rural exodus. And they may be even stronger tomorrow, but with people moving internationally, since local urban prospects are drastically diminishing. And finally, how can we not mention that the farmers' geographic and social isolation can at times hamper their capacity for development, a phenomenon aggravated in times of war or instability. Farmers thrive on exchanges with their peers, but also with the population at large, to comprehend their needs or expectations. Farmers should need access to information, financing and markets; and all of these prerequisites for their economic activity require communication, openness and confidence.

Looking Ahead

Water shortages and competition for its use, land shortage and deterioration of agricultural land, increasing climate constraints and weather disruptions, rapid changes in food demand in the production context with limited opportunities, marginalization of rural regions and frequent contempt towards farming populations: these are many invisible conflicts that are unfortunately heightening food tensions in the southern and eastern Mediterranean.

Though the North Shore is not exempt of difficulties in regard to these issues, which lie at the base of human security, the demographic, legal and above all political situations are completely different. Peace for decades, a solid body of rights to assert and rules to abide by, professional organization by sectors for farmers and the agri-food industry but also cooperation at all levels – local as well as national, not to mention supranational with the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) – have allowed European countries to reach an exceptional level of food security (quantitative and qualitative). This was enabled by the coexistence of a significant number of decisive factors for such structural development: a long-term geopolitical vision for the construction of

the EU wherein food was considered a priority, confident mobilization of the agricultural and rural forces, well accompanied by authorities convinced of the strategic dimension of agriculture, research and training adapted to social, technical and environmental change... But above all it is the stability and absence of conflicts over time – i.e., a favourable geopolitical context – that has allowed the development of competitive agriculture and established effective food security.

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Recalling these obvious facts is not trivial at a time when Europe is considering its future prospects, sometimes forgetting the essential issues in ongoing food debates. This reminder is also being made for the Mediterranean area, still beset by divisions and conflicts. Geopolitics are essential for understanding the agricultural vulnerabilities of this region. As in the rest of the world, Europe and the Mediterranean region remain dependent on this tenacious agricultural history.

Respecting the diversity of the agricultural world is a necessity, but this wealth cannot flourish without stability. It is thus all the more shocking to see how this issue is at times downgraded on the strategic agenda for development or security. “Few phenomena have influenced the political behaviour of peoples as intensely as the food phenomenon and the tragic need to eat” –it was these words that Josué de Castro wrote in the preface to his book, *Geopolítica da fome (The Geopolitics of Hunger)*, first published in 1951.

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