

Did Food Prices Plant the Seeds of the Arab Spring?

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This presentation looks at food security in MENA from the national, aggregate, macro perspective i.e. how a country secures adequate food to meet its national requirements. It argues that the MENA region relies heavily on food imports, which makes the region vulnerable to both price and quantity shocks in global food markets. As a result, the 2007/08 and 2011 hikes in global food prices had severe socio-economic impacts in many countries in the region. It is argued that this played a contributory role in helping to trigger the uprisings known collectively as the Arab Spring, although such an argument needs careful qualification. The politics of food in MENA does not just concern domestic politics. Heavy reliance on food imports in a global context where 5 main suppliers account for nearly 75% of global grain trade, means that geo-political factors, such as relationships with the UAS and EU, also play an important role. In light of both the domestic political and geo-political implications of a national food security strategy which relies heavily on food imports, a concept of “food sovereignty” is emerging in the region, whereby nation states want political control over supplies of food. This is leading in two new directions – a renewed emphasis on domestic food production in some MENA countries and the rise of land acquisition in third party host countries to provide direct food supplies to the region. A third possibility, which deserves more attention, concerns possible measures to strengthen the MENA region’s participation in international food markets.