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WEAPONIZING HUNGER

**COLONIAL LEGACIES AND STORIES
OF RESILIENCE FROM WEST ASIA AND
NORTH AFRICA**





CONTENTS

Tanja Tabbara Legacies of Imperial Violence Starvation and Stories of Resilience from West Asia and North Africa	3
Annia Ciezadlo A Syrian Guide to Starvation	13
Michelle Eid Weaponizing Olives The Strategic Destruction of Lebanon's Agriculture, Economy, and Connection to the Land	27
Mohamed Ismail Ireg Siege and Solidarity The Imperial Politics of Starvation in Sudan	37
Dr. Imen Louati Silent Violence, Agrarian Dependency The Fight for Food Sovereignty in North Africa	47
Dr. Schluwa Sama How Peasants Kept Resistance Alive Land, Labour, and Survival in Iraqi Kurdistan	57
Raya Ziada Harvesting Freedom Food Sovereignty and the Struggle against Colonial Hunger in Palestine	67
Authors	77

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LEGACIES OF IMPERIAL VIOLENCE

STARVATION AND STORIES OF RESILIENCE FROM WEST ASIA AND NORTH AFRICA

Starvation as a weapon is as old as war itself, a cruel instrument of power and control. One of the earliest paradigmatic cases in modern history is the 1904 genocide of the indigenous Herero and Nama peoples in present-day Namibia. Even after largely defeating a Herero uprising against German colonial authorities in Southwest Africa, Lothar von Trotha, the newly appointed commander, forbade surrender. He ordered his forces to drive the Herero into the fringes of the Kalahari Desert and sealed off access to water, sentencing those who remained to almost certain death. Those who attempted to flee were shot, beaten, hanged, starved, and subjected to sexual violence. This case illustrates how starvation was systematically employed as a tool of colonial genocide.¹

In the twentieth century alone, starvation was repeatedly weaponized — in both world wars, by colonial powers, and by governments against separatist movements and populations deemed ‘undesirable.’ But what does it mean to use starvation as a weapon? It involves the deliberate manipulation of food supplies, destruction of agricultural resources, and imposition of blockades to control, coerce, or punish civilian populations. Importantly, the crime

of starvation does not require that people actually die: the deliberate imposition of conditions that deprive civilians of sustenance, obstruct access to food, or disrupt relief operations, already constitutes a war crime.

FEATURES AND FORMS OF STARVATION

Bridget Conley and Alex de Waal define starvation not simply as an outcome but as a process of deprivation, occurring whenever actors impede a targeted population’s ability to access and reproduce the means of sustaining life. They highlight several key features of this process.²

One feature involves depriving people of their ability to obtain food, including the destruction or denial of food stores and the obstruction of activities necessary for subsistence — such as working, trading, or foraging. Attacks on health systems, water access, and essential infrastructure are in-

1 Conley, Bridget and Alex de Waal, “The Purposes of Starvation. Historical and contemporary uses”, *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 17, 3 February 2020, Purposes of Starvation | Journal of International Criminal Justice | Oxford Academic (last accessed on 1 December 2025). 2 Conley and de Waal, “The Purposes of Starvation.”

tegral to this form of deprivation. Another feature of starvation is that deliberate food deprivation in conflict settings is often accompanied by concurrent acts of violence, including direct physical or sexual violence, forced displacement, and the destruction of livelihoods and infrastructure. In addition, deliberate food deprivation often intersects with other forms of deprivation, whether environmental stress, global economic shocks, or internally generated inequalities and harmful policies.

As Conley and de Waal note, in a resilient community social ties and mutual aid can provide a buffer against famine. Yet during deliberate starvation, the process of destitution not only erodes material resources but also fractures the social bonds that enable survival.³

Conley and de Waal categorize the crime of starvation into several distinct forms, each with historical and contemporary examples:⁴

1. Mass killings: Starvation used as a tool of extermination or genocide. Historical examples include the Holocaust and its Hunger Plan (1941–45), the Herero and Nama genocide in present-day Namibia (1904), the Armenian genocide (1915–16), and the Ukrainian Holodomor (1932–33).

2. Population control through displacement: Often employed in counter-insurgency contexts, civilians are forcibly relocated from their homes and livelihoods into ill-prepared camps, disrupting food production and access. “A common feature of colonial, post-colonial and Cold War

counterinsurgency, resettlement camps demonstrate how policies ostensibly designed to control and separate a civilian population from armed groups, can become incubators of starvation crimes.”⁵ Crops and food stocks are destroyed, livelihoods disrupted, and populations left entirely dependent on authorities for survival. Examples include South Sudan (1985–2004, 2013–2018), Darfur, Sudan (2023–present) and Gaza (since October 2023).

3. Sieges to gain territorial control: Encircling and blockading populations to force compliance or surrender. Notable cases include the sieges by the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (1984–2004) and numerous sieges during the Syrian war, most prominently in Eastern Ghouta (2013–2018).

4. Material extraction and profiteering: The war situation creates war profiteers who benefit from the lack of normal agricultural and trade activities. Examples from East Ghouta show how businessmen cut deals with the Syrian regime in trading products between areas controlled by government forces and those controlled by rebels. Profiteering can also take place by settling land, which often involves (violently) dispersing people from their homes. Starvation crimes related to material extraction can also occur when one conflicting party is

³ Conley and de Waal, “The Purposes of Starvation.” ⁴ Conley and de Waal, “The Purposes of Starvation.” ⁵ Conley and de Waal, “The Purposes of Starvation.”

paid for preying on the civilian (sieged) population, as was the case in Darfur in 2003–2005, and currently is the case with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) since April 2023 in Sudan, in the Darfur region.

5. Flushing out populations: Similar to sieges or counter-insurgency, but focused specifically on controlling or eliminating civilian populations, often in mountainous or guerrilla-held areas.

6. Punishment: Imposed through sanctions, blockades, or collective measures. Examples include the economic sanctions on Iraq (1991–1996), and the blockade of Gaza (since 2007), where starvation serves as a coercive but not necessarily lethal measure.

7. Exploitation: Starvation is deliberately maintained to extract labour or resources. Historical examples include forced labour

in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Gulag; contemporary cases include South Sudan in 1989, where malnourished children were used to secure aid rations.

8. War provisioning: Armies sustain themselves by taking resources from local populations, leading to famines in affected regions.

9. Comprehensive societal transformation (“silent violence”): Policies, often economic or colonial, deliberately restructure societies to serve external or political interests, producing famine conditions. Examples include colonial India (1770–1940s) and Nigeria under British rule, where populations faced starvation to extract labour or orient economies toward imperial goals. According to Conley and de Waal: “Colonization was a process of coercively orienting economies to meet the economic and poli-



Wheat harvesting season in southeast Morocco, 2021.

tical goals of the metropole. In many locations, this produced starvation: native populations were often subjected to famine conditions as a result of policies to displace them and appropriate their land, or to compel them to produce cash crops for the imperial power."⁶ This phenomenon has been named "Silent Violence" by Michael Watts, and has been used by Conley and de Waal.⁷

DIRECT VIOLENCE AND SILENT VIOLENCE IN WEST ASIA AND NORTH AFRICA

In their respective case studies in West Asia and North Africa (WANA), the six contributions of this volume address these forms outlined above. As they demonstrate through their close ties to the countries they write about, throughout this region people have suffered from both direct and silent violence. Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, as well as countries in North Africa, share a colonial history of armed conflicts and exploitation, and still suffer from the legacies of imperial violence. Despite the resilience and creativity of the region's people, their economies have largely been shaped by the exploitation of resources by colonial rulers. Countries and localities that served as breadbaskets for populations in the region were turned into suppliers of oil, gold, and other raw materials for the colonizing powers.

Such exploitation produced vulnerable food systems, many of which were further weakened by structural adjustment programs in the 1980s, mainly from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

These programs have imposed forms of monocultural farming, hybrid seeds, and pesticides — making smallholder farming more difficult while increasing dependence on food imports. Significantly, such dependencies have made societies especially vulnerable in times of war and crisis.

As such, structurally imposed forms of vulnerability cannot be overstated. As Conley and de Waal argue: "Globalization of food markets and urbanization have [also] altered vulnerabilities: as populations increasingly rely on integrated and trade-dependent systems of food production and distribution, rather than local production, the disruptions of war have the potential to quickly create pockets of profound need."⁸ Such occurred in Beirut, for example, in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022, which disrupted global supplies of wheat. With less than 10 percent of wheat grown in the country, Lebanon is heavily dependent on imports. Already suffering from their own economic crisis, people had no access to bread for weeks, and at a time when they needed it most.

Starvation has been systematically deployed as a tool of control in conflicts in the WANA region, during siege and occupation, genocide and ecocide.

⁶ Conley and de Waal, "The Purposes of Starvation." ⁷ Watts, MJ, *Silent Violence: Food, Famine and Peasantry in Northern Nigeria*, (University of California Press, 1983), *Silent violence : food, famine, & peasantry in northern Nigeria* : Watts, Michael : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive (last accessed 2 December 2025). ⁸ Conley, Bridget and Alex de Waal, "The Purposes of Starvation. Historical and contemporary uses." *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 17, 3 February 2020, Purposes of Starvation | Journal of International Criminal Justice | Oxford Academic (last accessed on 1 December 2025).

As a tool of war, starvation is especially deadly when used against populations already highly vulnerable to food weaponization. In Darfur, Sudan, as Mohamed Ireg explores in this booklet, the fertile Gezira fields had already been exploited and looted by belligerents before the outbreak of the current war, leaving no buffer for local communities to rely on. Even before the current war began in April 2023, more than two million people were living in camps, dependent on humanitarian aid.

In the context of Israel's illegal occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, starvation has long been used as a weapon — in Gaza through the near-total blockade since 2007, and in the West Bank through closures and the division of the occupied territory into separate zones, cutting farmers off from their land and water resources. According to a UN report from 2022, 65 percent of Gazans were food insecure, which it defines as a lack of regular access to safe and nutritious food.⁹

In Syria, the regime's sieges and blockades of entire areas and camps were used to starve out the opposition. Bakeries — with bread being an essential part of the Arab Mediterranean diet — were deliberately bombed. As journalist Annia Ciezadlo, who also has an article in this booklet, writes, "[i]n the towns and villages of the Arab Mediterranean region, bakeries stand at the centre of life — they symbolize cohesion, the social contract. Bread is synonymous with food, like the biblical bread; one could even read it as a synonym for life itself."¹⁰

It is worth mentioning that for the first time in history starvation as a war crime has on-

ly very recently been on trial. This occurred in July 2025, when, under universal jurisdiction, five of the persons responsible for starving the people in the Yarmouk refugee camp in Syria from 2012 onwards, were taken to court by German authorities.¹¹ Nonetheless, it remains highly uncertain whether German authorities will pursue accountability for alleged war crimes committed in Gaza in the recent past, including holding responsible senior Israeli officials such as Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant, both of whom are currently under indictment by the International Criminal Court.

Iraq, once considered the breadbasket of the region, has been systematically exploited since the colonial period, its agriculture reshaped to serve the needs of the colonial powers: oil production prioritized over farming. Under the former President Saddam Hussein, agriculture was deliberately used as a political means of population control, or to punish dissent. With international sanctions imposed on the country in 1991, the Iraqi population was collectively punished, with far-reaching humanitarian consequences. The sanctions were often described as an 'invisible war.' After 1995, the "Oil for Food" policy flooded Iraq with Western surplus goods, which also transformed the country's eating habits. To this

⁹ Asi, Yara M., "Israeli siege has placed Gazans at risk of starvation — prewar policies made them vulnerable in the first place", *The Conversation*, 15 February 2024, Israeli siege has placed Gazans at risk of starvation – prewar policies made them vulnerable in the first place (last accessed 2 December 2025). ¹⁰ Ciezadlo, Anna, "The war on bread: how the Syrian regime is using starvation as a weapon", *The New Statesman*, 17 February 2014, The war on bread: how the Syrian regime is using starvation as a weapon, (last accessed 2 December 2025). ¹¹ El-Hitami, Hannah, "The starvation of Yarmouk on trial", *Qantara*, 26.11.2025, War crimes in Syria: The starvation of Yarmouk on trial | Hannah El-Hitami | Qantara.de (last accessed 1 December 2025).

day, as Schluwa Sama (contributing author in this booklet) and Ansar Jasim argue, Iraq has not recovered from the legacies of imperial violence.¹²

LEGAL INSTRUMENTS ADDRESSING STARVATION

With the formation of the United Nations in 1945 and growing efforts to protect human rights, a range of legal instruments has emerged to address the use of hunger as a weapon in armed conflict. Today, deliberately starving civilians is recognized as a war crime under both international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

The right to food is enshrined in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), which includes not only the right to feed

oneself but also the right to access land and resources necessary to produce food. The Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions (1977) explicitly prohibit the deliberate starvation of civilians during armed conflict, classifying it as a war crime.¹³

The Geneva Conventions further place obligations on all High Contracting Parties to “ensure respect” for their provisions.¹⁴ This third-party responsibility requires states to take diplomatic, political, or legal measures if another state violates its obligations —

¹² Jasim, Ansar and Schluwa Sama, “Imperialism and Iraq’s Agricultural System”, *Seeds of Sovereignty, Contesting the Politics of Food*, *Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung and Alameda Institute*, June 2024, pp 41 - 48, https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/engl/2024JUN-Food-dossier-alameda-ONLINE.pdf ¹³ Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. Geneva, 12 August, 1949, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949?activeTab=1949GCs-APs-and-commentaries> (last accessed 2 December 2025). ¹⁴ Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War., Geneva, 12 August, 1949, Commentary of 2025, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciv-1949/article-1/commentary/2025?activeTab=1949GCs-APs-and-commentaries#_c_Toc211344539

Photo of the
Tinghir Oasis,
Morocco, 2019.



although in practice, enforcement is weak. Earlier, the Hague Conventions (1907) had already prohibited attacks on towns, villages, and civilian populations that would lead to unnecessary suffering or starvation. While customary international humanitarian law, as documented by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), also recognizes starvation as an unlawful method of warfare.

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998) defined the war crime of starvation and codified individual criminal responsibility. Article 8(2)(b)(xxv) defines starvation as: “Intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival, including wilfully impeding relief supplies as provided for under the Geneva Conventions.”¹⁵

Similarly, the 1948 Genocide Convention prohibits deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to destroy a group, including through starvation (Article 2(c)).¹⁶ And as recently as 2018, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2417, formally linking armed conflict and hunger,

and condemning the use of food deprivation as a method of warfare.

Despite these legal frameworks, starvation is often misrepresented as a natural consequence of conflict or famine, rather than a deliberate strategy. Reflecting on Syria’s siege policy, Anna Ciezadlo observed in 2014:

Another reason why we have ignored this war crime may be that it is difficult to prove. Hunger thrives on the confusion and social unrest of war; famines and food shortages usually have multiple causes. This makes it easy to portray them as unfortunate but inevitable – as the result of tragic circumstances rather than deliberate manipulation.¹⁷

Similarly, human rights scholars Conley and de Waal note:

¹⁵ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, U.N. Doc. A/CONF.183/9*, <https://legal.un.org/icc/statute/contents.htm> (last accessed 2 December 2025). ¹⁶ Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 9 December, 1948, Article II, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/genocide-conv-1948/article-2?activeTab=> (last accessed 2 December 2025). ¹⁷ Ciezadlo, Anna, “The war on bread: how the Syrian regime is using starvation as a weapon”, *The New Statesman*, 17 February 2014, The war on bread: how the Syrian regime is using starvation as a weapon, (last accessed 2 December 2025).

THE WHOLE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS SYSTEM, DESPITE ITS FRAMEWORKS AND RESOLUTIONS, IS INCREASINGLY PERCEIVED – PARTICULARLY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH – AS INSUFFICIENTLY PROTECTIVE AND BIASED, NOT ONLY BUT ESPECIALLY WITH REGARD TO STARVATION CRIMES.

Starvation crimes are insidious, have a persistent impact, and most harm those who are clearly civilians: mothers and young children. Mass starvation has throughout history been mis-categorized as a natural phenomenon, or an unfortunate side-effect of conflict and political oppression. The numbers and names of its victims fade into the background, blurred traces of the horrors of history.¹⁸

Therefore, despite the described international legal achievements, the deliberate weaponization of hunger continues in the twenty-first century. Recent conflicts in Ethiopia, Myanmar, Ukraine, Sudan, and Gaza illustrate how mass starvation is used strategically, often with impunity. This situation highlights the selective nature of human rights enforcement, which is frequently conditioned by political considerations, and often applied only when it serves the strategic interests of powerful states.

Consequently, the whole international human rights system, despite its frameworks and resolutions, is increasingly perceived — particularly in the Global South — as insufficiently protective and biased, not only but especially with regard to starvation crimes. As Alex de Waal concludes: “The result is that more and more, belligerents can inflict mass starvation on vulnerable people with impunity.”¹⁹

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AS A FORM OF RESISTANCE

While international law and humanitarian norms provide frameworks to protect civilians against starvation, in practice enforcement is often limited because of the lack of political will of powerful actors, leaving communities to rely on their own strategies to survive. The struggle for food in the context of political violence hence becomes the struggle for freedom: Food is also about power, access and justice. Farmers and communities resist and claim their right to live and to eat. Food sovereignty as a practice becomes itself a (sometimes desperate) form of resistance against control and destruction.

As this booklet demonstrates, in the WANA region local actors have developed forms of resilience — from communal kitchens and seed banks to cooperative farming networks and rooftop gardens — that not only sustain life under siege but also challenge the deliberate deprivation of food. These grassroots responses highlight the agency of affected populations, showing that where legal instruments fall short, people resist starvation and preserve their livelihoods, knowledge, and cultural practices.

¹⁸ Conley, Bridget and Alex de Waal, “The Purposes of Starvation. Historical and contemporary uses”, *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 17, 3 February, 2020, Purposes of Starvation | Journal of International Criminal Justice | Oxford Academic (last accessed on 1 December 2025). ¹⁹ De Waal, Alex, “The return of the starvation weapon. The collapse of global norms fuelling the catastrophes in Gaza and Sudan”, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December, 2025, 3 October, 2025, The Return of the Starvation Weapon: The Collapse of Global Norms Fueling the Catastrophes in Gaza and Sudan (last accessed 1 December 2025).

Food sovereignty is therefore not only about access to food — it involves practices of solidarity reclaiming resources, ensuring resilience in times of crisis, and transforming entrenched power relations. In besieged Syria, for example, seeds and gardens, small-scale farming, became acts of resistance: from 2013 onwards, activists and farmers multiplied local seeds, planted them in rooftop gardens, and distributed vegetables to sustain communities under siege.²⁰

STARVATION AND RESILIENCE IN ALGERIA, EGYPT, IRAQ, LEBANON, MOROCCO, PALESTINE, SYRIA, SUDAN, TUNISIA

The following six articles document the crimes of starvation, direct and silent violence, as well as creative, community-driven strategies that demonstrate how people struggle for survival on the ground:

Annia Ciezadlo takes us back to what life was like under the starvation siege in Syria between 2012 and 2018. How the siege affected people physically and emotionally, and how they had to become creative to survive.

Michelle Eid explores the economic and symbolic significance of the olive tree, the damage inflicted on South Lebanon's olive sector during the ongoing conflict with Israel since 2023, and the cultural resilience communities draw from olive cultivation and harvest.

Mohamed Ireg recounts recent acts of imperial and local, direct and silent, violence that have caused widespread starvation in Sudan, and describes how communities responded through Emergency Resistance Rooms. With the world largely ignoring them until it was too late, solidarity among people became their main means of survival.

Imen Louati examines imperial strategies of “silent violence” and their effects on farmers and communities across North Africa. She highlights how agroecology and food sovereignty networks enable peer-to-peer learning and support communities in achieving sustainability and survival.

Schluwa Sama analyses how former President Saddam Hussein in Iraq used starvation as a tool of coercion to control the Kurdish population, emphasizing how farmers — often overlooked in historical memory — actively supported resistance efforts.

Raya Ziada traces how colonial powers have reshaped landscapes through the governance of hunger. From the British Mandate to Israel's contemporary starvation policies in Gaza, she shows that food sovereignty is not just a technical issue, but a decolonial strategy and frontline.

²⁰ Z., Julia, “The struggle for freedom and food sovereignty: a letter of solidarity to the farmers of Syria”, *Open Democracy*, 14 June, 2014, The struggle for freedom and food sovereignty: a letter of solidarity to the farmers of Syria | openDemocracy and Bar-Tal, Julia: “Gärten als Widerstand,” INKOTA-Dossier 18 ER-NÄHRUNGSSOUVERÄNITÄT, Gärten als Widerstand.



A SYRIAN GUIDE TO STARVATION

On 19 May 2025, after subjecting the Gaza Strip to a total starvation siege for over two months and a near-total siege for 17 months before that, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made a grudging announcement:¹ as part of a plan to “capture”² Gaza and expel its 2.2 million Palestinians, he would introduce “minimal” humanitarian aid into the strip through a handful of high-tech militarized hubs, because his allies “cannot handle pictures of mass starvation”.

Netanyahu’s so-called humanitarian aid plan was an old trick: a decade earlier, then-Syrian president Bashar al-Assad used a similar gambit as the endgame of his infamous “kneel or starve” campaign. Between 2012 and 2018, up to 2.5 million Syrians were subjected to starvation sieges, almost all of them imposed by their own government.³ During these years, Assad would periodically let in a trickle of aid, usually with great fanfare — and then cut it off, with considerably less fanfare, the minute the outside world lost interest. Just as Netanyahu is doing now, Assad used access to food and medical care as bait in order to delay and distract and ultimately get what he wanted: mass displacement in exchange for lifting his sieges and letting in aid, which he was in any case obligated to do under international law.

Like Assad, Netanyahu is using this tactic for the simplest of reasons: it works. When Bashar al-Assad began closing off parts of Syria and subjecting them to starvation sieges, journalists (including me)⁴ naïvely referred to this tactic as “medieval”. Modern powers, the term implied, would never commit such a crime: we left that kind of Biblical savagery behind, in the dark twentieth century, after the horrors of the Holocaust and the Holodomor.⁵

Today, nothing could be more modern than starvation sieges, one of the oldest ways to kill.⁶ Netanyahu is using the same starvation playbook for Gaza that Assad did in Syria, in full view of the entire world, with the enthusiastic blessings and the lavish funding of the United States and the EU.⁷

1 Press conference by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, <https://x.com/netanyahu/status/1924390207169634744> (last accessed 27 November 2025). 2 BBC News, “Israel security cabinet approves plan to ‘capture’ Gaza, official says”, 5 May 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwy04km1zk0o> (last accessed 3 December 2025). 3 PAX for Peace, “Out of Sight, Out of Mind: the Aftermath of Syria’s Sieges”, February 2019, <https://paxforpeace.nl/publications/siege-watch-final-report/> (last accessed 25 November 2025). 4 The New Republic, “The War on Bread: How the Syrian Regime is Using Starvation as a Weapon”, 14 February 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/116615/syrian-war-crimes-regime-bombs-bakeries-uses-starvation-weapon> (last accessed 3 December 2025). 5 In 1932 and 1933, millions of Ukrainians starved in the Holodomor, a man-made famine engineered by the Soviet government under Joseph Stalin. 6 De Waal, Alex, *Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine*, Polity Press, 2018. 7 Follow the Money, “EU funds flow to Israeli defense sector”, June 2025, <https://www.ftm.eu/newsletters/bureau-brussels-eu-funds-israel-defense-sector> (last accessed 3 December 2025).

The US and the United Kingdom⁸ helped Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the wealthiest countries in the Middle East,⁹ to bomb, blockade,¹⁰ and starve 10 million people¹¹ in the poorest countries¹² such as Yemen — a crime UAE proxies¹³ are now repeating in Sudan.¹⁴ At least one Nobel Peace Prize winner, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, has been accused of using starvation¹⁵ to execute ethnic cleansing;¹⁶ another Nobel peace laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi, went to the Hague to de-

⁸ Amnesty International, "Yemen: Three years on, US and UK arms supplies to Saudi Arabia-led coalition are devastating civilian lives", March 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/03/yemen-three-years-on-us-and-uk-arms-supplies-to-saudi-arabia-led-coalition-are-devastating-civilian-lives/> (last accessed 3 December 2025). ⁹ Wikipedia, "List of Arab League countries by GDP (nominal)", November 2025, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Arab_League_countries_by_GDP_\(nominal\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Arab_League_countries_by_GDP_(nominal)) (last accessed 3 December 2025). ¹⁰ Middle East Research and Information Project, "The Saudi Coalition's Food War on Yemen", March 2019, <https://merip.org/2019/03/the-saudi-coalitions-food-war-on-yemen/> (last accessed 3 December 2025). ¹¹ UN News, "Waiting to declare famine 'will be too late for Yemenis on brink of starvation'", July 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/07/1068101> (last accessed 3 December 2025). ¹² Concern USA, "The World's 10 Poorest Countries in 2025", July 2025, <https://concernusa.org/news/worlds-poorest-countries/> (last accessed 3 December 2025). ¹³ The Wall Street Journal, "How U.A.E. Arms Bolstered a Sudanese Militia Accused of Genocide", October 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/how-u-a-e-arms-bolstered-a-sudanese-militia-accused-of-genocide-781b9803> (last accessed 3 December 2025). ¹⁴ The Lancet, "El Fasher crisis: over 500 days under siege amid global inaction", November 2025, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(25\)02244-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(25)02244-5/fulltext) (last accessed 3 December 2025). ¹⁵ De Waal, Alex, "Tigray is starving, it is time for the UN to act", Al Jazeera English, 4 November 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/11/4/tigray-is-starving-it-is-time-for-the-un-to-act> (last accessed 4 December 2025). ¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, "Ethiopia's Invisible Ethnic Cleansing", June 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/16/ethiopia-invisible-ethnic-cleansing> (last accessed 3 December 2025).

Family gardens supported by the grassroots organization Bassma for Social Development, Yarmouk, Damascus, 2014.



fend her government's use of starvation¹⁷ against the Rohingya minority.¹⁸ The Russian Federation, not to be outdone, used the strategy in Ukrainian cities.¹⁹ It would be fair to say that we have entered an age of state-sponsored starvation:²⁰ technologically advanced, politically unpunished,²¹ and not only thoroughly documented but live-streamed nonstop.

CHRONICLE OF A SIEGE

Syria was an early warning system, and the entire world failed the test. "That was one of the frustrations: that our theory of change was totally wrong", said Marjolein Wijninckx, then-Middle East Programme Lead for the Dutch peace-building organization PAX,²² which tried to lobby multilateral organizations like the UN to put pressure on the Syrian regime: "We had not even imagined in advance that such crimes would be met by so much indifference."²³

But if modern states are perfecting the art of starvation, the people under siege have a playbook too. They write it in group chats on WhatsApp and Signal, on Instagram accounts and Facebook pages, through Viber and Skype calls with people outside. They write it in tents and internet cafes. They write it in Arabic, English, Ukrainian, Tigrayan, indigenous Sudanese languages,²⁴ and in the international language of seeds.²⁵ Abdullah al-Khateeb, a Palestinian-Syrian writer, filmmaker, and human rights activist, even wrote a guide titled *The Forty Rules of Siege*,²⁶ based on the Turkish writer Elif Shafak's international bestselling novel *The Forty Rules of Love*.

FORTY RULES OF SIEGE IN YARMOUK, MOADHAMIYAH, EASTERN GHOUTA, MADAYA, AND HOMS

Throughout the Syrian conflict, the government used food as a weapon of war, while civilians used food to fight back. Once they realized they were on their own, Syrians under siege created their own food systems. Almost overnight, students turned into farmers, and farmers turned into teachers, and pharmacists and factory workers turned into bakers, fighters, and civil society activists. All of them came to understand food as an overarching system of power — but also as a social, ecological,

17 Reuters, "U.N. expert says Myanmar government employs starvation policy in Rakhine", March 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-un/u-n-expert-says-myanmar-government-employs-starvation-policy-in-rakhine-idUSKCN1G01G5> (last accessed 5 December 2025). 18 Al Jazeera, "Transcript: Aung San Suu Kyi's speech at the ICJ in full", December 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/12/transcript-aung-san-su-kyis-speech-at-the-icj-in-full> (last accessed 27 November 2025). 19 Amnesty International, "Ukraine: Russia's cruel siege warfare tactics unlawfully killing civilians — new testimony and investigation", 1 April 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/04/ukraine-russias-cruel-siege-warfare-tactics-unlawfully-killing-civilians-new-testimony-and-investigation/> (last accessed 4 December 2025). 20 Interview with Alex de Waal, 29 March 2022. 21 De Waal, Alex, "The Vanishing Point of the Laws of War", New York Review of Books, 11 September 2022, <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2022/09/11/the-vanishing-point-of-the-laws-of-war-famine/> (last accessed 4 December 2025). 22 Pax for Peace is a Dutch peacebuilding organization founded in the aftermath of World War II. Wijninckx was Middle East Programme Lead until July 2024. <https://paxforpeace.nl/> (last accessed 5 December 2025). 23 Interview with Marjolein Wijninckx on 1 September 2020. 24 "Documenting Sudanese Food as an Act of Resistance: Featuring Omer al Tijani", Radical Books Collective, <https://www.radicalbookscollective.com/p/18-documenting-sudanese-food-as-an> (last accessed 27 November 2025). 25 Last video from Gazan content creator Medo Halimy, Al Jazeera English, <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/r9fcrtnW19s> (last accessed 27 November 2025). 26 Al-Khateeb, Abdullah, "The 40 Rules of the Siege", Documenting Oppression Against Muslims, 22 November 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190228102503/https://www.doamuslims.org/40-rules-of-the-siege-living-under-assads-siege-of-yarmouk/> (last accessed via Internet Archive's Wayback Machine 25 November 2025).

and even spiritual practice. As al-Khateeb wrote in his *Forty Rules*:

The siege forces you to eat anything, even grass that's meant for livestock. And even when conditions get a bit better, you have to keep treating grass like it's something sacred, a gift from heaven.²⁷

Throughout the conflict and after, I talked to people from different parts of Syria, where they lived under siege: Yarmouk, Moadhamiyah, Eastern Ghouta, Madaya, and Homs. Here is what they told me, and what I understood:

1. Governments always lay siege in stages,²⁸ first gradually, then suddenly.²⁹ Each phase contains its own particular tension and transformation.
2. People usually entered the first stage with disbelief, then with attempts to raise the alarm, and ended it with a dawning realization that they were on their own.
3. They spent the second stage alternating between generosity and hoarding — in other words, navigating the tensions between individual and collective survival.
4. During the third stage, they moved from individual to collective action. They began to transform the war economy into small-scale solidarity economies, by creating sustainable systems for food production and sharing.

Of course, these stages are somewhat arbitrary, and often overlapping, occurring differently for different people and communities. But they are a useful tool: by recognizing these stages, along with people's very human reactions to being cut off from food, we can better understand ourselves. Knowing them can help all of us learn — not just how to survive a siege, but how to survive an age of catastrophe: pandemics, climate change, and the global rise of authoritarian governments.

This is to say that Syria's collective siege playbook is part of a worldwide warning system, a manual for the future — everyone's future, if we fail to listen and prepare yet again. "In the future, there will be more crisis," said Saeed al-Batal, an activist and filmmaker³⁰ from Eastern Ghouta, an area just outside Damascus that was under siege for five years. "But the countries that have this kind of ability are more likely to survive, because people who live there are more prepared for catastrophes — mentally, which is more important than physically."³¹

²⁷ Ibid. ²⁸ Interview with Abdullah al-Khateeb and Ansar Jasin on 29 August 2020. ²⁹ Interview with Saeed al-Batal on 10 August 2020. ³⁰ <http://www.films-de-force-majeure.com/portfolios/still-recording/?lang=en> (last accessed 27 November 2025). ³¹ Interview with Saeed al-Batal on 10 August, 2020.

SIEGE STAGE ONE

In retrospect, the war on bread was probably the prelude. Throughout the summer of 2012, the Assad government bombed bakeries³² in rebel-friendly areas all over Syria. This had a double effect: it forced people to leave those areas, and drove up the price of bread. By the end of the year, bread would be so scarce in some areas that the price would rise almost 20 times³³ what it had cost before the uprising.

But in late fall, the regime began to tighten the noose. In November 2012, the rebel Free Syrian Army took control of Moadhamiyah, a town in the Ghouta, the arc of lush agricultural lands³⁴ cradling Damascus to the south and east. The uprising against Assad, which had been rippling across the countryside, had reached the outskirts of the capital.

By late November, the Syrian military had set up checkpoints around Moadhamiyah. At first, they let people pass through after checking their bags, but would confiscate food going in, especially wheat, flour, or bread. "I started to realize what they were doing the minute we started to run out of bread," said the Palestinian-Syrian writer

and activist Kassem Eid, when I spoke to him in January 2014.³⁵ (In those days, he went by the *nom de guerre* Qusai Zakarya.)

According to Eid, it took about three months for the town to run out of flour. People started stretching what flour they had by adding ground *burghul* (parboiled cracked wheat) and rice, making what Eid called "a weird kind of bread" that would fill the stomach but leave them unsatisfied. Breakfast traditionally revolves around bread: bread and olives, bread and labneh, bread with *zaatar* (a ground mixture of sesame seeds, sumac, and dried leaves of Syrian oregano, *origanum syriacum*). They started to skip it, waiting for lunch and dinner, which they ate with *burghul* or rice instead of bread.

³² Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Government Attacking Bread Lines: Civilian Deaths at Bakeries Are War Crimes", August 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/08/30/syria-government-attacking-bread-lines> (last accessed 5 December 2025). ³³ Abu Leila (nom de guerre), "Finding Bread in Aleppo", Syria Deeply, <https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/syria/articles/2012/12/05/finding-bread-in-aleppo> (last accessed 5 December 2025). ³⁴ Topographic map of Damascus, with the Ghouta hand-coloured in green, https://www.archnet.org/authorities/3603?media_content_id=96462 (last accessed 5 December 2025). ³⁵ Interview with Kassem Eid on 23 January 2014.

SYRIA'S COLLECTIVE SIEGE PLAYBOOK IS PART OF A WORLDWIDE WARNING SYSTEM, A MANUAL FOR THE FUTURE – EVERYONE'S FUTURE, IF WE FAIL TO LISTEN AND PREPARE YET AGAIN.

During this stage, they lived off *mouneh*. The word comes from the verb *mana*, to store, or preserve the abundance of harvest for the winter months.³⁶ Like a lot of Arabic words, *mouneh* can denote both the product itself and the practice of making it: among other things, it can include sun-dried tomato paste; *kishk*, or dried fermented yogurt with *burghul* lamb preserved in rendered fat; syrups, pickles, marmalades, and jams (“You can make marmalade from anything except onions and garlic”, says al-Khateeb),³⁷ *makdous*, tiny preserved eggplants stuffed with walnuts, red peppers, and garlic, the dried apricot leather known as *qamar id-deen*, moon of the faith, or dried figs preserved with sesame seeds and sugar, which Eid described, when I spoke to him in 2014, as “like eating something in heaven.”

One day in late February 2013, Eid found himself eating *makdous* with a spoon. “This is something that we never used to do before,” he said. “In normal times, you scoop them up and eat them with bread.” At the time, he realized they were in serious trouble: “We started to ring the alarm in the town. All of us started to realize that what’s going on is really dangerous, that sooner or later we will run out of everything, and pretty soon we will be starving. That’s why we tried to tell the world what’s going on.”

Eid and his friends reached out to international organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the United Nations (UN), asking them to use any leverage they had with the Assad government to bring food convoys into

Moadhamiyah. A few months later, the rice and *burghul* began to run out.

In Eastern Ghouta, the system was the same: a few checkpoints, intermittently open, would allow people — mostly women — in and out with only two bags. But in early August, on the third day of Eid, following the month of Ramadan, the word started to circulate that the military had closed all the checkpoints. Overnight, “everything is gone from everywhere”, said al-Batal: “All the stores are closed. Everyone is reconsidering what he has.”³⁸

This was one of the most important moments of the first phase: collective realization. When that happened, panic began, while food disappeared. “When food goes low, it doesn’t just keep going lower and lower. It reaches a certain point, and then it suddenly disappears from the market,” said al-Batal. “We call it the shock wave, when suddenly everything disappears. Suddenly, to everyone, the priority now will become food.” The same process was playing out, on slightly different timelines, in dozens of other areas where the government had lost control: in Aleppo, Darayya, Homs, Eastern Ghouta, and especially Yarmouk.

In 1957, the Syrian government established Yarmouk as a camp for Palestinian refugees, just south of Damascus. But more and more Syrians moved in, as well as Iraqi refugees, and it became a dense and

³⁶ Massaad, Barbara Abdeni, *Mouneh: Preserving Foods for the Lebanese Pantry*, Interlink Books (2018). ³⁷ Interview with Abdullah al-Khateeb and Ansar Jasim on 29 August 2020. ³⁸ *Ibid.*

thriving neighbourhood.³⁹ By March 2011, when the rebellion against Assad began, only about 160,000 of the area's 1.2 million residents⁴⁰ were officially designated as Palestinian refugees. As the uprising spread across the country, even more displaced Syrians fled to Yarmouk. On 16 December 2012, after a series of skirmishes⁴¹ between government-backed militias and the opposition, the government sent MiG fighter jets⁴² to bomb a mosque, a hospital, and four schools where displaced people were sheltering.

Over the next few days, most of the population fled, and the government set up a wall of checkpoints between Yarmouk and Damascus. Those who stayed found themselves under siege — but not entirely, and not immediately. “At the beginning, most people did not take it seriously, or want to organize in order to distribute resources,” said al-Khateeb. “They didn’t believe it would be a real siege.”

For the next six months, until around mid-2013, the government managed the camp with a system of intermittent reinforcement that kept people guessing and hoping that it would lift the partial siege any day. At first, people could go in and out — albeit only sometimes. Some days the checkpoints would let people leave, some days they would not. On rare occasions, the government would allow civil society groups to bring in aid, but most of the time, they would not. Soldiers would confiscate any food weighing over 1 kilo. They would search people to make sure nobody brought in more than ten pieces of bread. Strategically, the soldiers alternated the foods they

allowed and confiscated, which kept people guessing what they could bring through the checkpoint.⁴³ “Day after day, they started to make it more difficult,” said Osama Jafra, a civil society activist from Yarmouk (his name, like Eid/Zakarya’s, is also an alias for safety reasons).

Thanks to this psychological warfare, it took time for people to absorb what was happening. They didn’t notice that they were slowly starting to use up all the food inside the camp, or that armed gangs from a nearby neighbourhood to the south were systematically looting food from abandoned homes. But on 21 July, 2013, the checkpoints closed. And this time they didn’t reopen.

By November 2013, the situation in Moadhamiyah was so desperate that Kassem Eid launched a hunger strike⁴⁴ in an attempt to bring international attention to the sie-

39 Al-Khateeb, Abdallah; Jasem, Ansar; and Shaheen, Abdulrahman, “Twice dispossessed: Palestinian refugees in Syria deprived of housing, land and property rights. Yarmouk camp as a case study”, <https://paxforpeace.nl/news/new-report-twice-dispossessed-palestinian-refugees-in-syria-deprived-of-housing-land-and-property-rights-yarmouk-camp-as-a-case-study/> (last accessed 5 December 2025). 40 “Yarmouk Refugee Camp”, Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, <https://www.palquest.org/en/highlight/33649/yarmouk-refugee-camp> (last accessed 5 December 2025). 41 Natasha Hall, “Palestinian Refugees and the Siege of Yarmouk”, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2014/03/palestinian-refugees-and-the-siege-of-yarmouk?lang=en> (last accessed 5 December 2025). 42 “9 Years On, Tragic Traces of ‘Mig Massacre’ Still Present in Yarmouk Camp”, Action Group for Palestinians of Syria, <https://www.actionpal.org.uk/en/post/12586/action-group-for-palestinians-of-syria/9-years-on-tragic-traces-of-mig-massacre-still-present-in-yarmouk-camp> (last accessed 5 December 2025). 43 Interview with Osama Jafra on 14 December 2014. 44 Ahmed, Idrees, “Stop Starvation in Syria | End the Blockades”, Pulse Media, <https://pulsamedia.org/2013/12/19/stop-starvation-in-syria-end-the-blockades/> (last accessed 5 December 2025).

ge. Civil society groups began to document the siege crimes: sniper attacks on food producers, deaths from malnutrition. They worked with outside groups, such as PAX for Peace, to get the message out. But the international community responded, at first, with disbelief — and then indifference. “We went to policymakers with this message, that people are being starved, and they just didn’t believe us,” said Wijjinckx, who managed the project for PAX. “They laughed at it! No one could imagine that any warring party would be capable of doing this to a civilian population.”

PAX set up a database called Siege Watch,⁴⁵ a monitoring project that worked with local activists across all of Syria to document the use of food as a weapon. “We started documenting,” said Wijjinckx, “and we couldn’t imagine that the international community, in the face of all this evidence, wouldn’t act.” She gave a rueful laugh. “And then we documented for years. And nothing happened to stop it.”⁴⁶

SIEGE STAGE TWO

By 2015, at least 1 million Syrians were under siege — the vast majority of them by their own government. When they realized that they were on their own, they reacted in three ways: some tried to ignore reality, some panicked, resorting to hoarding and stealing, and some set up rationing systems. Some vacillated between all three. Each response was a different way of negotiating the tension between individual and collective survival. This was the second stage.

In Moadhamiyah, Eid and others survived by eating one of the area’s main products: olives. “Lots and lots and lots — you can add as much ‘lots’ as you wish — of olives,” he said. When I asked if he was sick of olives, he laughed, and responded: “You have no idea.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ <https://siegewatch.org/> (last accessed 5 December 2025). ⁴⁶ Interview with Marjolein Wijjinckx on 1 September 2020. ⁴⁷ Interview with Kassem Eid/Qusai Zakarya on 23 January 2014.





Olives sustained them in body and soul: in the Quran, God swears by the fig and olive tree to show their value, and Eid cited scientific studies that show they are rich in minerals, fibre, and healthy fats. So while they lost a lot of weight on the olive diet, they didn't lose physical strength. "Believe me, we have witnessed how valuable they are," he said. "It's something very spiritual to eat this amount of olives. And in a very weird way, I think this might be studied or

talked about a lot in the future — how we survived this long, eating olives."⁴⁸

In Madaya, a small mountain town about an hour from the Damascus city centre, the military burned agricultural lands and imposed a total siege in July 2015. "In the first month, everyone was running out of everything," said Abbas, a schoolteacher

⁴⁸ Ibid.

who was shot and almost killed by a government sniper on the first day of the siege. “When this happened, people panicked. All of them went to the stores — just like when COVID-19 broke out — and all of the stores were empty.”⁴⁹

Meat disappeared entirely. Sheep and cows that could have provided milk were instead butchered, either because they were injured by government shelling, or because people were too hungry to plan. “Almost all of our livestock got butchered to eat right away, which destroyed our strategic food supplies,” said Abbas. “But you can’t stop a hungry man from eating. This is something that all the world needs to know.”⁵⁰

Not everyone could handle this stage. Some people, if they were lucky enough to get food, would eat it all immediately. “I know a guy, if he got 5 kilos of anything, he would cook it and eat it that day,” said Abbas. “But my brother created a system, and he told us: ‘Hey, we have to follow the system to survive.’” Abbas’s brother would come home from his job at the water bottling factory, take care of his wounded brother, and then go check the family’s land — fortunately not part of the burnt area — and make sure people weren’t stealing their vegetables.

The same thing happened in Yarmouk, where civil society activists had set up a network of small farms and urban gardens⁵¹ in vacant lots and on rooftops. Hungry people raided the gardens, stealing the vegetables before they were ready for harvest. As a farmer joked: “They didn’t gi-

ve the watermelon the chance to say, ‘I am a watermelon.’ At that moment, they had already stolen it.”⁵²

Everyone I spoke to considered such acts of theft to be the price of collective survival. “Ethics becomes something that you look at from a different angle,” said al-Batal. “Ethics are overrated when it comes to food. I have seen people that were really good people, but they have stolen from me at one point or another during the siege. I know about those weak moments. I also lived them.”⁵³

To get through the worst months, al-Batal and four other friends set up a brutal rationing system. They would split 1 kilo of animal fodder and 1 kilo of meat between them per day: each person got 200 grams of each, for a grand total of 400 grams of food a day. He explains: “The first six months of siege was really, really hard. Suddenly you have to organize your day around one meal. And if it’s a bad situation, and it’s a bigger family, usually it’s one meal every two days.” Even if there was food in the house, they would have to control themselves: one day you eat; the next day, your brother eats. “This is the minimum level at which you can live,” he said. “And you can survive like this for maybe several months. But what’s going to happen is you are getting lower in strength.”

⁴⁹ Interview with Ebrahim Abbas on 28 August 2020. ⁵⁰ *ibid.* ⁵¹ Ciezadlo, Annia, “A garden grows amid the daily dangers of a siege in Syria”, *Al Jazeera America*, May 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150724060141/http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/5/18/a-garden-grows-amid-a-siege-in-syria.html> (last accessed through the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine on 4 December 2025). ⁵² Video of unnamed resident of Yarmouk, date unknown, courtesy of Ansar Jasim. ⁵³ Interview with Saeed al-Batal on 10 August 2020.

During this time of fatigue, objects would feel heavier than usual. Walks would take longer. But after four or five months of rationing, al-Batal reached a kind of equilibrium: “Through this, you will find ease,” he said — echoing, consciously or not, the beloved verse from the Quran: *With hardship comes ease*.

SIEGE STAGE THREE

Between 2015 and 2018 at least 2.5 million people⁵⁴ — one in ten Syrians — were living under either long-term siege or partial siege. But al-Batal was not the only one who found a kind of strength: after the bleak months of rationing and theft, people started to turn desperation into creativity. They began transforming the war economy of scarcity, black markets, and profiteering into a solidarity economy. This was the third stage.

In Yarmouk, civil society activists like Jafra and al-Khateeb began to study agriculture. They grew gardens on rooftops and in empty lots. They reached out to food activists in other parts of the world. They got help from the international food sovereignty movement, a worldwide network of farmers and food producers. Farmers in far-away countries donated open-pollinated seeds that solidarity activists smuggled into the areas under siege. (This led to some surprises, like zucchinis that shocked everyone by turning out to be yellow.)

They built relationships with people from rural areas and learned secrets, such as how to add nitrogen to exhausted soil by

growing fava beans (also a good source of protein), and when to water crops (after sunset, so you do not lose precious water through evaporation). “We could not have done this without support of farmers explaining how this actually works,” said al-Khateeb. “That’s when I realized how important it is to have this kind of relationship.”⁵⁵

Solidarity between the city and the food-producing countryside increases people’s sovereignty over their own food supply, he pointed out. This makes people less vulnerable to being held hostage by whoever controls it. “In Yarmouk it was quite obvious, at the peak of the siege, that people from Damascus had always felt they were better than the people of the countryside,” he said. “During the siege, it was like, ‘So much for your higher class — you guys are starving, and we’re not.’”⁵⁶

In Madaya, Abbas and his friends organized *Bizret al-Khair* (Seeds of Good), a project⁵⁷ that distributed seeds to about 320 families. Veteran farmers taught their neighbours how to grow tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, eggplants, lettuce, zucchini, pumpkin, and green beans. They planted on windowsills, balconies, rooftops, or any other space open to sunlight but not to snipers. They had only two rules: first, seeds would not be sold, and second, sharing

54 PAX for Peace, “Out of Sight, Out of Mind: the Aftermath of Syria’s Sieges”, February 2019, <https://paxforpeace.nl/publications/siege-watch-final-report/> (last accessed 25 November 2025) 55 Interview with Abdullah al-Khateeb on 29 August 2020. 56 *ibid*. 57 Ciezadlo, Annia, “Sowing Hope and Weeding out Siege Profiteers”, Syria Deeply, July 2016, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2016/07/18/sowing-hope-and-weeding-out-siege-profiteers> (last accessed 5 December 2025).

one's surplus harvest with others. "God willing, we can support the whole town," said Wafika Hashem, one of the volunteers.⁵⁸

Madaya had three major advantages: water, arable land, and longstanding systems of sharing and smuggling. Syria is home to some of the oldest waterworks⁵⁹ in the world, and its villages have water sharing systems that go back centuries, perhaps even millennia. In Madaya, for example, each family had a designated day to use the water fountain.⁶⁰ This strong social fabric and tradition of sharing proved invaluable during the siege.

Historically, Madaya and Boukein, a neighbouring village, provided water and produce to Damascus. Its natural springs fed the country's largest bottled water factory,

which kept operating throughout the siege. Abbas's brother had a friend in the factory who would smuggle him bags of rice, *burghul*, and pasta. Although his brother's feet were size 42, he would wear size 49 shoes so as to hide the food in his socks. "It's a little bit disgusting, but we had to do it to survive," said Abbas. "We had this joke in the family: we would say 'this food smells of something.'"⁶¹

In Eastern Ghouta, al-Batal and four other friends formed a cooperative farm and grew wheat. They learned how to dig wells, how to use a simple hydraulic vacuum⁶² to pump water without electricity, and how to

⁵⁸ Interview with Wafika Hashem on 11 July 2016. ⁵⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norias_of_Hama ⁶⁰ Interview with Ebrahim Abbas on 28 August 2020. ⁶¹ Ibid. ⁶² This video illustrates the principle: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9eBf6_VW0vIo

MADAYA HAD THREE MAJOR ADVANTAGES: WATER, ARABLE LAND, AND LONGSTANDING SYSTEMS OF SHARING AND SMUGGLING. FOR EXAMPLE, EACH FAMILY HAD A DESIGNATED DAY TO USE THE WATER FOUNTAIN. THIS STRONG SOCIAL FABRIC AND TRADITION OF SHARING PROVED INVALUABLE DURING THE SIEGE.

make bread from scratch — from planting the wheat to chopping wood for the oven. “Everyone should know how to bake,” al-Batal said. “It’s something they should teach you in school, like how they teach you to give first aid.”⁶³

They learned practical things, such as how to burn plastic for fuel, how to fix a generator, and how to charge phones and computers from car batteries. With electricity scarce to non-existent, they learned the importance of solar panels, LED lights, and satellite phones. They built strategic reserves of things like salt (something most people don’t think about under normal circumstances) and wheat seeds, which you should vacuum seal and store underground.

But they found that intangible things were, if anything, more important. Age-old agrarian traditions like foraging, seed saving, and communal gardens were available when the entire international system fai-

led. They reclaimed longstanding cultural knowledge like how to make mouneh, and newfound practices such as inventing and sharing new recipes. Because most of these survival practices are sustainable, the very things that help us survive today could help to prevent catastrophes in the future.

The most essential elements of survival were the most intangible: strong social bonds and networks of solidarity. These took the outward forms of mutual aid (including smuggling), social kitchens, and local food hubs. But most important was the mental preparedness that al-Batal talked about:

You prepare for this in two ways: by having the stuff, and by preparing the humans. Everyone should practice living without phones, electricity, internet, running water. Otherwise, he said, you may find yourself washing your clothes by hand, and you might just break, because you remember your washing machine.”⁶⁴

63 Interview with Saeed al-Batal on 10 August 2020. 64 *ibid.*



Michelle Eid

WEAPONIZING OLIVES

THE STRATEGIC DESTRUCTION OF LEBANON'S AGRICULTURE, ECONOMY, AND CONNECTION TO THE LAND

In the past, the months of September, October, and November were bustling with life in Lebanon's southern regions. Farmers, agricultural workers, and families would launch the olive harvest season, gathering on the land, tending to the groves, graciously picking olives, and taking them to either family-owned or other local presses to extract olive oil — the Levant's "liquid gold".

However, since Israel's war with Lebanon began in October 2023, olive harvest seasons have looked starkly different, even after a ceasefire agreement went into place on 27 November 2024. Between destruction, forced migration, and constant threats, many farmers, agricultural workers, and families have been unable to participate in the olive harvest rituals which have been practiced on these very lands for decades, and even centuries.

The war has delivered devastating blows to the olive and olive oil sector, putting livelihoods at risk and threatening Lebanon's socio-economic, cultural, and environmental stability at large. This was not incidental damage. It was part of Israel's broader military strategy, one in which food systems became deliberate instruments of war.

GENERAL IMPACT OF THE 2023–2024 WAR ON LEBANON

The latest war on Lebanon has been nothing short of devastating. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Israeli airstrikes conducted between October and November 2024 rank¹ amongst "the highest number of attacks globally in the 21st century". Israel's attacks, primarily concentrated in South Lebanon, Bekaa, Baalbek, and Beirut's suburbs, amongst other areas, have damaged infrastructure, disrupted essential services, uprooted communities, and intensified a financial collapse that was already suffocating households across the country.

Although a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Lebanon went into place by the end of November 2024, Israel continues to strike² different areas to this day, most-

1 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), The Socioeconomic Impacts of the 2024 War on Lebanon (New York: UNDP, July 2025), https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-07/report_socioeconomic-impacts-lebanon-2024-war-english.pdf (last accessed 14 November 2025). 2 "UN Experts Warn Against Continued Violations of Ceasefire in Lebanon and Urge Protection of Civilians", Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), October 17, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/10/un-experts-warn-against-continued-violations-ceasefire-lebanon-and-urge> (last accessed 14 November 2025).

ly targeting individuals and/or buildings in South Lebanon, Bekaa, and Baalbek. By January 2025, the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health had reported³ 4,285 individuals killed and 17,200 severely injured. Over 1.2 million civilians were displaced by the time hostilities escalated between September and October 2024.

Beyond the immediate human toll, the war's long-term consequences have been catastrophic for Lebanon's infrastructure, economy, and social fabric. Over 90,000 structures — homes, businesses, power stations, health facilities, and other critical buildings — were affected, with 59,577 housing units left damaged to the point of being uninhabitable. According to a Lebanon Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment 2025 report,⁴ 11 billion US dollars are needed for reconstruction and recovery efforts.

IMPACT OF THE WAR ON LEBANON'S AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

Prior to the recent war with Israel, Lebanon's agricultural sector was already side-lined, bearing the compounded effects of political, economic, and security crises. In fact, for decades, agriculture has been one of the most neglected sectors of the Lebanese economy, receiving less than 1 percent of annual public spending and only limited institutional support.⁵ The onset of the 2019 financial collapse deepened this marginalization, and by the time the latest conflict erupted in 2023, Lebanon's rural economy was already on the brink.



3 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), The Socioeconomic Impacts of the 2024 War on Lebanon (New York: UNDP, July 2025), https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-07/report_socioeconomic-impacts-lebanon-2024-war-english.pdf (last accessed 14 November 2025). 4 World Bank, Lebanon Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA) (Washington, DC: World Bank, March 2025), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099030125012526525/pdf/P506380-f58e9761-b29e-4d62-97c3-ebf5a511c4e1.pdf> (last accessed 14 November 2025). 5 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Agricultural Sector Review in Lebanon (Rome: FAO, 2018), <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/244bd4ed-94a9-4cb4-a106-5451ca786137/content> (last accessed 10 November 2025).



Using munition shells and white phosphorus, among other weapons, Israel targeted many open green areas, groves, and crop land, with the damage spanning over 6,000 hectares of agricultural land alone.⁶ Israel's use of white phosphorus — documented by various sources, including Human Rights Watch⁷ — adds an additional

layer of long-term environmental effects: in at least 17 municipalities in southern Lebanon, white phosphorus shells ignited fires, leaving soils contaminated and making the land unfit for planting or cultivation. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, Lebanon incurred 118 million US dollars in damages and 586 million dollars in losses within its agricultural sector, with the damages and losses primarily concentrated in South Lebanon and the Bekaa.⁸ Effects of the war on agriculture were further compounded due to the damage or outright destruction of 1,050 hectares of agricultural infrastructure such as field irrigation systems, green houses, and solar panels. It is estimated that at least 263 million US dollars are needed for reconstruction and recovery needs in agriculture.

Information from the Lebanese Ministry of Agriculture indicates that at least 36,000 farmers have been directly and indirectly affected by Israeli aggression.⁹ Many farmers have suffered a complete loss of their crops due to the destruction or burning of their orchards, groves, and lands,

⁶ Marwan Issa, "Fields of Ruin: Lebanese Farmers' Scorched Harvest", The Alternative Policy Institute (Badil), 19 December 2024, <https://thebadil.com/analysis/fields-of-ruin-lebanese-farmers-scorched-harvest/> (last accessed 14 November 2025). ⁷ Human Rights Watch, "Lebanon: Israel's White Phosphorous Use Risks Civilian Harm", 5 June 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/06/05/lebanon-israels-white-phosphorous-use-risks-civilian-harm> (last accessed 13 November 2025). ⁸ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and Ministry of Agriculture (Lebanon), "FAO and Ministry of Agriculture Launch the Lebanon Agricultural Damage and Loss Assessment Report", 11 April 2025, <https://www.fao.org/lebanon/news/detail/fao-and-ministry-of-agriculture-launch-the-lebanon-agricultural-damage-and-loss-assessment-report/en> (last accessed 10 November 2025). ⁹ Hussein Tlais, "The Agricultural Sector Faces an Existential Crisis in a Post-War South Lebanon", Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung — Beirut Office, 4 August 2025, <https://rosalux-lb.org/publications/agricultural-sector> (last accessed 14 November 2025).

while other farmers have been unable to access their lands to maintain their crops and harvest them.

Furthermore, many land keepers — farmers, fishermen, beekeepers, and shepherds — were directly targeted by Israeli forces. For example, civilian Amer Abd al-Aal was killed by an Israeli drone strike in Hasbaya as he was tending to his chickens in April 2025, months after the ceasefire was announced.¹⁰ In June 2025, Israel targeted and killed beekeeper Mohammed Nasrallah as he tended to his bees in Houla, South Lebanon.¹¹

Today, a year after the ceasefire, many farmers are still “not allowed” to access their lands in certain areas beyond the Litani River in South Lebanon, requiring permission from Israel to tend to their own lands.¹² Shepherds in towns close to the border no longer feel safe roaming around with their herds out of fear of being targeted. Fishermen have to be careful on the shores from which they set sail. In Israel’s eyes, any activity on these lands warrants a military strike, so that the sovereignty of Lebanon’s residents and the state itself are rendered null.

“There are parts of these mountains that we used to play on as kids,” explained a shepherd from Kfarhamam, pointing to a mountain that Israel, threatening to strike, prohibited Lebanese people from approaching. “I used to take my goats to graze on the land there. Now, I have to buy them food instead and keep them on this small patch of land, fearing for their lives and mine.”¹³

THE LEVANTINE OLIVE: A SYMBOL OF HERITAGE AND A TARGET FOR DESTRUCTION

Within this broader context, the attacks on Lebanon’s olive and olive oil sector are especially painful. Amongst the crops deeply intertwined with Lebanon’s identity and social processes of production, the olive tree holds a particularly sacred place as a pillar of Lebanese agriculture. The tree is also considered a symbol of peace, faith, land, and belonging. For generations, families in southern Lebanon, the Bekaa, and the northern highlands have measured their lineage by the age of their olive groves, many of which are centuries old,¹⁴ standing as living witnesses to the country’s rural heritage, especially on a land that has witnessed catastrophe, peril, and wars for centuries. These groves have physically and emotionally nourished communities, while acting as a vital economic lifeline for many.

As such, olive and olive oil production play a major role in Lebanon’s agriculture. For at least 20 years, Lebanon, a considerably small country, has ranked amongst the

¹⁰ “Farmer Killed in Israeli Drone Strike in Southern Lebanon”, National News Agency, Lebanon (27 April 2025), <https://nna-leb.gov.lb/en/politics/775596/farmer-killed-in-israeli-drone-strike-in-southern> (last accessed 15 November 2025). ¹¹ The Cradle (@TheCradleMedia), X post, May, 2025, 5:22 p.m., <https://x.com/TheCradleMedia/status/1934670445522890826> (last accessed 5 November 2025). ¹² Dana Hourany, “Keeping the Land Alive: Farmers on the Front Line of the War Over Southern Lebanon’s Borderlands”, The Public Source, 10 November 2025 (updated 11 November 2025), <https://thepublicsource.org/lebanon-border-land-farmers> (last accessed 14 November 2025). ¹³ Interview by the author on 25 October 2025. ¹⁴ Lamis Chalak, Fayçal Malas, Bassem Hamadeh, Louay Essalouh & Bruno Khadari, “Centennial Olive Trees in Lebanon: A Substantial Patrimony”, HAL-ID: Hal-01607698 (2014), <https://hal.science/hal-01607698> (last accessed 5 November, 2025).

top 20 exporters of olive oil.¹⁵ Groves in the South alone constitute a considerable portion of the total olives and olive oil produced for both internal and external use. The region provides at least 30 percent of Lebanon's olives and one fifth of its olive-oil output.

Israel's destructive targeting of olive trees during its war with Lebanon is not accidental. According to data collected primarily between October 2024 and December 2024, although also encompassing attacks since October 2023,¹⁶ around 65,000 olive groves in South Lebanon were directly burned, with over 47,000 trees affected by white phosphorus exposure.¹⁷ As a result, many farmers whose olive groves weren't directly targeted still had no harvest in 2025.

"Although my land wasn't directly targeted, my neighbours' groves sustained shelling. This year, my trees barely bore any fruit. God knows how long it will be until my trees regain their health and bear the same amount and quality of olives they did before,"¹⁸ said a farmer from Deir Mimas, a town about ten minutes away from the southern border.

The deliberate striking of olive groves was not enough: Israel also entered several border towns, bulldozing trees, or else uprooting and transporting them back over the

borders, as was the case in the southern town of Mais el-Jabal.¹⁹ Furthermore, Israeli soldiers burned several trees and even cut them in half, exposing a strategy of attacking a symbol of cultural heritage for Lebanese people, and Levantine people at large — beyond agricultural, environmental, or economic dimensions.

**FOR DECADES,
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According to the World Bank, Lebanon will experience a 58-million-dollar loss in olive oil revenue as a result of the war and continuous restrictions on farmers.²⁰ Many groves and trees have been completely destroyed, while other groves require soil rehabilitation due to white phosphorus exposure. Still others are left unharvested, as Israel restricts farmers from accessing their lands. For example, this year, 2025, many farmers or fami-

¹⁵ "Olive Oil", Ministry of Economy and Trade (Lebanon) via LEBTRADE, <https://lebtrade.gov.lb/product/olive-oil/> (last accessed 14 November 2025). ¹⁶ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and Ministry of Agriculture (Lebanon), Lebanon: Agricultural Damage and Loss Assessment on the Impact of Conflict (Rome: FAO, April 2025), https://www.evsp.gov.lb/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Agricultural-damage-and-loss-assessment_FAO.pdf (last accessed 25 November 2025). ¹⁷ Jana Boumatar, "The Economic and Environmental Toll on Lebanese Agriculture", BLOMINVEST Bank Blog, December 5, 2024, <https://blog.bloinvestbank.com/?p=51433> (last accessed 5 November 2025). ¹⁸ Interview by the author on 10 October 2025. ¹⁹ L'Orient Today staff, "Israeli Army Bulldozes Olive Groves in Southern Lebanon", L'Orient Today, 5 June 2025, <https://today.lorientjour.com/article/1463398/israeli-army-bulldozes-olive-groves-in-southern-lebanon.html> (last accessed 14 November 2025). ²⁰ Jana Boumatar, "The Economic and Environmental Toll on Lebanese Agriculture", BLOMINVEST Bank Blog, 5 December 2024, <https://blog.bloinvestbank.com/?p=51433> (last accessed 5 November 2025).

lies from beyond the Litani River required special permission to enter their lands. Israel only “allowed” farmers to enter their otherwise restricted lands between 18 and 21 October to pick their olives under the protection of UNIFIL.²¹ Meanwhile, as Israel denies residents access to their own lands, groves directly at the border are left untouched, unharvested, and uncared for.

A STRATEGY EXERCISED BEYOND BORDERS

Israel’s actions in Lebanon must be understood within a broader historical pattern in which food systems are used as a tool of war. A central dimension of this violence is its alignment with the logic of colonial warfare, in which land and food systems are deliberately attacked to weaken the foundations of communal life. In settler-colonial contexts, controlling geography and populations requires the disruption of native livelihoods, the erasure of agricultural continuity, the weakening of local economies, and the severing of material and cultural ties that bind the people to the land.

Across decades of aggression in Gaza and the West Bank, Israel has systemically destroyed Palestinian groves, orchards, water reservoirs, and agricultural infrastructure. These actions have been incorporated into broader national policies of territorial control and economic incapacitation. In the West Bank, large-scale land confiscations have turned farms into settlement expansions²² or even militarized zones, while settler attacks target Palestinian farmers during harvest seasons,²³ often under the

protection of the Israeli forces themselves. It is estimated that one million olive trees have been destroyed by Israeli forces and settlers in the West Bank since 1967.²⁴ As is the case with Lebanon, olive groves in the West Bank have been repeatedly burned or uprooted, with families being prevented from reaching their land during the olive harvest. Under the guise of being “endangered” and needing “protection”,²⁵ Israeli authorities have set official laws and

21 Israa Akil, “South Lebanon’s Olive Harvest Disrupted by Israeli Restrictions”, Al-Akhbar, 27 October 2025, <https://en.al-akhbar.com/news/south-lebanon-s-olive-harvest-disrupted-by-israeli-restricti> (last accessed 14 November 2025). 22 Qais Omar Darwesh Omar and Rania Abu Shamala, “Israeli Army Bulldozes 70 Dunams of Palestinian Land in Occupied West Bank”, Anadolu Agency, October 20 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/israeli-army-bulldozes-70-dunams-of-palestinian-land-in-occupied-west-bank/3722045> (last accessed 14 November 2025). 23 “Israeli Army, Settlers Target Palestinian Olive Harvesters in West Bank”, Al Jazeera English, October 31 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/31/israeli-army-settlers-target-palestinian-olive-harvesters-in-west> (last accessed 14 November 2025). 24 “Palestinians inspect the damage to Abdul Fatah Hamoud School, which was targeted by Israeli occupation”, Wafa-Palestinian News & Information Agency, June 20 2025, <https://english.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/163964> (last accessed 14 November 2025). 25 Rabea Eghbariah, “The Struggle for Za’atar and Akkoub: Israeli Nature Protection Laws and the Criminalization of Palestinian Herb-Picking Culture”, (draft version, not for distribution or citation), accessed via Oxford Symposium, <https://www.oxfordsymposium.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Eghbariah.pdf> (last accessed 14 November, 2025).



Olive trees in Kfarhamam, Southern Lebanon, 26 October 2025.

regulations denying Palestinian people the simple act of entering wild green areas and foraging for common weeds or herbs, such as *za'atar* or *khobbayzeh*.

The targeting of olives in Lebanon thus fits this pattern clearly. By destroying food sources, contaminating the soil, restricting land access, and preventing harvests, Israel undermines both Lebanon's food security and sovereignty, weakening rural economies, displacing families, and attempting to fracture the relationship between communities and their ancestral lands. Olive trees carry a symbolic and practical significance that make them strategic targets within the larger framework of colonial warfare.

"When they attack our olives, they attack us," explained a farmer from Kfarhamam. "They attack our sustenance, they target our connection to the land. But our land, no matter how scorched, and burned, and destroyed, is ours. We are its keepers."²⁶

FOR GENERATIONS,
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THE COUNTRY'S RURAL
HERITAGE, ESPECIALLY
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WITNESSED CATASTROPHE,
PERIL, AND WARS FOR
CENTURIES.

²⁶ Interview by the author on 25 October 2025.

ROADS TO RECOVERY ARE FRAUGHT WITH CHALLENGES

The targeting and destruction of Lebanon's olive sector is not an isolated consequence of war, but part of a broader strategy that weaponizes the land, agriculture, the economy, and food systems to destabilize communities, undermining their ability to endure.

In Lebanon's south, where the olive harvest has long stood as a marker of community life, economic stability, and cultural belonging, life has been somewhat put on hold. The agricultural base has been weakened, while communities remain exiled from their regions, leaving their lands untended and at risk of further tampering by Israeli forces.

As for lands that are back in the hands of their owners, they remain fraught with challenges, pondering questions of soil rehabilitation, crop quality, and the ability of trees to reproduce the fruit they once held on their branches. The repercussions are

long-term and structural, disrupting the already weakened balances of the economy, public health, ecological resilience, and national stability.

While understanding this reality is important for recovery and reconstruction efforts by the Lebanese state, the decision ultimately remains outside of their control. As long as a power external to the country dictates how and when farmers and families are allowed to tend to their lands and pick their olives, Lebanon will never be able to truly exercise its right to food security, and its struggle for food sovereignty against global capitalist systems.

Food systems sit at the heart of sovereignty, free from all injustice. For Lebanon's farmers and communities at large, the battle for its olives is fundamentally a battle for the land and freedom.



Mohamed Ismail Ireg

SIEGE AND SOLIDARITY

THE IMPERIAL POLITICS OF STARVATION IN SUDAN

By the time Rapid Support Forces (RSF) fighters pushed into El Fasher and claimed the Sudanese army's headquarters in late October 2025, the city had already been starved for more than a year. The siege involved a throttling of markets, the bombing of food convoys, turning every road into an extortion corridor, whereby civilians were forced to pay ransoms for a right to flee. As soup kitchens and hospitals were struck, thousands were trapped, surviving on animal feed and weeds. When the RSF finally entered, it was not liberation but the logical end point of a starvation campaign — a city reduced to exhaustion, then overrun.¹

The tragedy of El Fasher is not an isolated atrocity but a method: the weaponization of hunger as a strategy of conquest and control. Two UN convoys were bombed. Those who escaped told of checkpoints where armed men demanded millions of Sudanese pounds for safe passage, and of children dying on the roadside when their families could not pay.² The siege starved civilians into submission before a single tank entered the city.

But starvation in Sudan is never purely domestic. The RSF's new foothold in El Fasher consolidates supply lines westward toward Libya — corridors long used for gold,

arms, and fuel smuggling. Behind every sack of looted grain lies a chain of global interests — from Khartoum's debt markets to Dubai's gold exchanges.

In El Fasher today, the politics of hunger is laid bare. Women line up at communal kitchens (*Takāya*)³ run by volunteers, sharing the little sorghum that remains. Aid workers speak of babies fed only sugar water because mothers are too malnourished to nurse. The city has become the face of a wider regional order where food itself is governed by force and by finance — a war fought through prices, checkpoints, and hunger.⁴

1 Katharine Houreld and Hafiz Haroun, "Sudanese paramilitary enters army's last stronghold in Darfur", The Washington Post, 26 October 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/10/26/sudan-rsf-el-fashir-darfur/> (last accessed 19 November 2025). 2 Katharine Houreld and Hafiz Haroun, "Darfur's Killing Fields", The Washington Post, 1 November 2025, republished in RealClearWorld, https://www.realclearworld.com/2025/11/01/darfurs_killing_fields_1144737.html (last accessed 19 November 2025). 3 Takāya (also spelled Takaya or ابي التت) is a Sudanese term referring to a community-run communal kitchen where volunteers prepare and distribute cooked food to displaced families, the poor, and people affected by conflict. These kitchens operate on local donations and collective effort, especially during sieges and humanitarian crises. 4 "Battle for Sudan's El-Fasher intensifies as RSF claims seizing army HQ", Al Jazeera, 26 October 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/26/battle-for-sudans-el-fasher-intensifies-as-rsf-claims-seizing-army-hq> (last accessed 19 November 2025).

TACTICS OF STARVATION: HOW HUNGER BECAME A WEAPON OF WAR

Starvation in Sudan is not the by-product of chaos; it is a deliberate method of rule. The siege of El-Fasher was not a brief encirclement but an engineered famine, built trench by trench. By closing the routes from Mellit and Tawila, the RSF severed the arteries that once fed the markets and hospitals.⁵

Convoys that tried to break through became moving targets. Humanitarian trucks were bombed on approach roads and looted after impact. The message was unmistakable: survival itself must be negotiated.⁶ Inside the city, every checkpoint was turned into a customs post of hunger, where passage was sold for money, gold, or fuel. Traders who once moved grain by the

ton now bribed gunmen to move a single sack. The siege turned food into ransom.

Looting deepened the crisis. Warehouses of the World Food Programme and local charities were stripped bare, their contents re-appearing on black markets at prices families could never afford.⁷

The hunger is gendered. Women queue for hours at communal kitchens, face harassment at checkpoints, made to barter jewel-

⁵ Refugees International, "Protection for Civilians Under Siege in El Fasher", (joint civil-society statement), 2 October 2025, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/advocacy-letters/safe-passage-protection-for-civilians-under-siege-in-el-fasher/> (last accessed 19 November 2025). ⁶ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Sudan Situation Reports", May–September 2025, <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan/> (last accessed 19 November 2025). ⁷ World Food Programme (WFP), "Statement on the looting of humanitarian warehouses in Sudan", 2 June 2023, <https://www.wfp.org/news/statement-looting-humanitarian-warehouses-sudan> (last accessed 19 November 2025).

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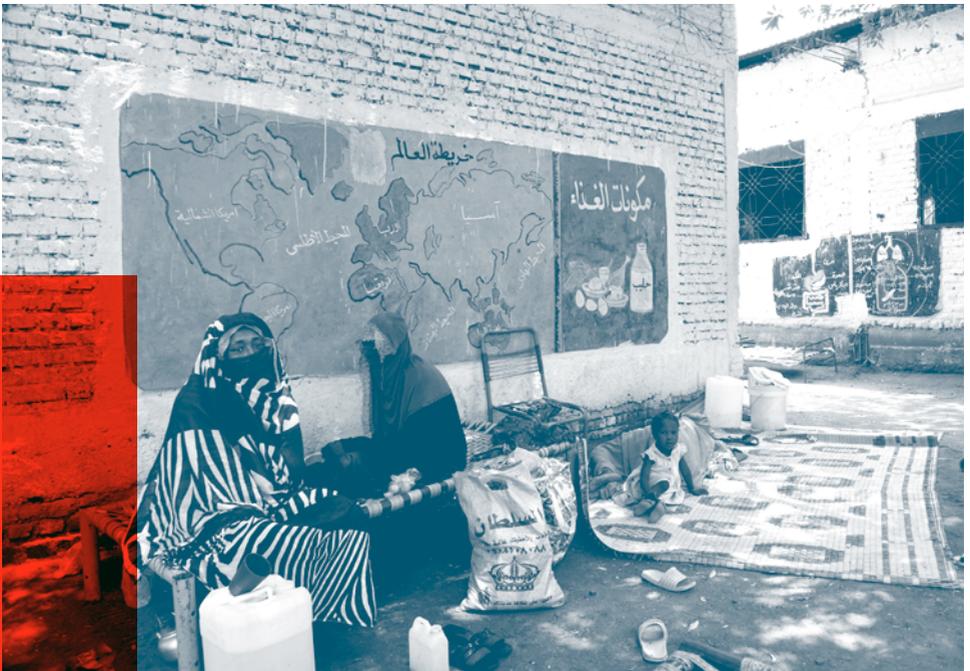
lery or labour for food. UN investigators warn that, alongside starvation, sexual violence has become a weapon, targeting women whose only crime is fetching bread.⁸

Even the blackout is weaponised. When RSF forces cut power and telecommunications, they did not just silence the city — they disconnected people from mobile cash, remittances, and information that could save lives. In a country where families rely on diaspora transfers to buy food, shutting down the network became another form of siege.⁹

In El-Fasher and across Sudan, hunger is not a natural disaster but a system. The siege produces famine; famine produces submission; and submission feeds a war economy that thrives on the misery it creates.

⁸ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “UN experts demand urgent action to protect civilians in Sudan as conflict intensifies”, press release, 3 October 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/10/un-experts-demand-urgent-action-protect-civilians-sudan-conflict-intensifies> (last accessed 19 November 2025). ⁹ Amnesty International, “Sudan: Internet shutdown threatens delivery of humanitarian and emergency services”, 8 March 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/03/sudan-internet-shutdown-threatens-delivery-of-humanitarian-and-emergency-services/> (last accessed 19 November 2025); ARTICLE 19, “Sudan: A year into the conflict, the fog of war persists”, 15 April 2024, <https://www.article19.org/resources/sudan-a-year-into-the-conflict-the-fog-of-war-persists/> (last accessed 19 November 2025).

One of the very early shelter centers in a school in Al Gadarif, Eastern Sudan, for people fleeing Khartoum, July 2023.



IMPERIAL ENTANGLEMENTS: HOW EXTERNAL POWERS FEED THE WAR ECONOMY

The war starving Sudan is not sustained by Sudan alone. Behind the checkpoints and looted warehouses lies an international machinery of extraction — a network of financiers, arms suppliers, and political patrons who have turned the country's collapse into a profitable frontier.

At its core stands the United Arab Emirates, the war's principal external sponsor. From airstrips in Chad and Libya, Emirati cargo planes delivered arms and fuel disguised as humanitarian supplies, feeding the RSF's battlefield endurance.¹⁰ The same network exported Sudan's gold through Dubai — an open secret financing the RSF's payroll and purchased loyalty on the ground.¹¹ The UAE's relationship with RSF leader, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as "Hemedti", is not a diplomatic accident but a continuation of its regional policy of controlling resources.

Israel's role, though quieter, is equally strategic. The normalization process between Khartoum and Tel Aviv reframed Sudan's generals as security partners rather than war criminals.¹² Normalization, in this sense, laundered a coup regime into the Western camp, giving the generals the confidence that starvation would draw concern but not intervention.

Western powers, meanwhile, maintain the illusion of neutrality. They condemn "both sides", suspend aid, and issue statements on humanitarian access while preserving

the deeper architecture of dependency: IMF conditionalities that push austerity, sanctions that restrict state imports but leave private traders untouched, and arms-embargo loopholes that funnel weapons through neighbouring states.¹³ In this theatre, humanitarian language becomes a moral cover for imperial continuity.

What binds these actors together is not ideology but the economics of control. Sudan's starvation functions as market regulation — clearing out subsistence producers, collapsing local markets, and reopening the country for privatized agribusiness once the guns fall silent. The same investors who finance arms today will finance land leases tomorrow. Hunger becomes a technology of transition, preparing the soil for capital.

The RSF's seizure of El-Fasher therefore marks more than a military milestone. It signals the consolidation of an externally fed war economy, where every corridor of food and fuel is linked to a port, a bank, or a foreign policy agenda far beyond Sudan's borders. To understand this war is to trace its

¹⁰ Amnesty International. "Sudan: Advanced Chinese weaponry provided by UAE identified in breach of arms embargo", 8 May 2025. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/05/sudan-advanced-chinese-weaponry-provided-by-uae-identified-in-breach-of-arms-embargo-new-investigation/> (last accessed 19 November 2025). ¹¹ Global Witness. Exposing the RSF's Secret Financial Network. 9 December 2019. <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/conflict-minerals/exposing-rsf-secret-financial-network/> (last accessed 19 November 2025). ¹² Middle East Monitor. "Sudan crisis not accidental: Rogue regimes UAE and Israel complicit in the genocide", 4 November 2025. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20251104-sudan-crisis-not-accidental-rogue-regimes-uae-and-israel-complicit-in-the-genocide/> (last accessed 19 November 2025). ¹³ Chatham House Report, Gold and the War in Sudan. 26 March 2025. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025-03-25-gold-and-the-war-in-sudan-soliman-and-baldo.pdf> (last accessed 19 November 2025).

logistics: from a looted warehouse in Darfur to a gold refinery in Dubai, from a siege checkpoint to an IMF meeting room in Washington. Starvation, in this sense, is global governance by other means.

THE BREADBASKET DISMANTLED: THE FALL OF GEZIRA AND THE COLLAPSE OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY

To understand the hunger consuming Sudan today, one must begin in the Gezira plains — once the pride of African irrigation and the backbone of the country’s self-sufficiency. The Gezira Scheme, carved between the Blue and White Nile, was not just an agricultural project; it was the living infrastructure of Sudanese sovereignty. Its millions of *feddans* (a unit of land around one thousand acres) of cotton, sorghum, and wheat fed the country, and anchored a rural middle class that resisted both famine and dependency.

That infrastructural heart has now been hollowed out. Since the RSF offensive into Gezira in December 2023, RSF and allied militias have swept through the Gezira region, looting farm machinery, burning storage silos, and extorting farmers at gunpoint.¹⁴ What began as military advance soon became economic conquest: control the fields, and you control the people who eat from them. The dismantling of Gezira is thus not incidental to the war — it is its economic logic. Both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the RSF view food systems as leverage. Between them, they have destroyed the cooperative networks that once defined the Scheme.¹⁵

But the roots of Gezira’s collapse stretch deeper than the current fighting. For decades, IMF-driven liberalization dismantled subsidies and privatized land, leaving smallholders indebted and equipment obsolete. When war erupted, there was nothing left to buffer the shock. The militias merely finished the work that neoliberalism began.

With the irrigation grid silent, hunger radiates outward. Cities that once drew their grain from Gezira now depend on smuggling routes or international aid that rarely arrives. Market surveys in mid-2025 recorded a 400 percent rise in flour prices and the reappearance of famine-era foods — sorghum husks, wild roots, animal feed — in urban diets.¹⁶ The collapse of Gezira thus turns every siege into national starvation, magnifying the weaponization of hunger from a local tactic to a countrywide system.

¹⁴ Sudan Tribune. “Sudan officials say RSF looted 17,000 plant gene strains and 20 warehouses in Al Jazirah State”, 4 July 2025. <https://sudantribune.com/article/302677> (last accessed 19 November 2025). ¹⁵ Radio Dabanga. “Farmers battle war’s economic scars to revive central Sudan farmlands”, 25 May 2025. <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/farmers-battle-wars-economic-scars-to-revive-central-sudan-farmlands> (last accessed 19 November 2025). ¹⁶ FEWS NET. “Food Assistance Outlook Brief, September 2025”, 30 September 2025. <https://fewsn.net/global/food-assistance-outlook-brief/september-2025> (last accessed 19 November 2025).



Women repurposed the school as a shelter and are cooking communally, Al Gadarif, Eastern Sudan, July 2023.

COMMUNITY RESISTANCE: MUTUAL AID AND THE POLITICS OF SURVIVAL

Yet amid the ruins, small acts of resistance persist. Displaced farmers have begun reclaiming micro-plots along riverbanks, using hand tools and saved seeds. Informal seed exchanges circulate heirloom sorghum and okra varieties that escaped the looting.¹⁷ These are fragile but radical acts — attempts to re-root food sovereignty in the soil of dispossession. If the war is about who controls the right to eat, then each seed kept alive is an act of political defiance.

If hunger has been weaponized from above, survival has been organized from below. Across Sudan, as formal institutions collap-

se and humanitarian convoys stall, ordinary citizens have built a parallel system of life support — Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), communal kitchens, and solidarity networks (Takāya) that sustain millions.¹⁸ What began in April 2023 as spontaneous neighbourhood coordination to rescue the wounded has evolved into the country's most vital social infrastructure.

¹⁷ ReliefWeb. "Mounting warnings that agricultural season has failed in Sudan", 17 June 2024. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/mounting-warnings-agricultural-season-has-failed-sudan> (last accessed 19 November 2025). ¹⁸ Karl Vick, "Locals in Sudan Are Saving Lives That International Aid Agencies Can't Reach", TIME, 16 January 2025, <https://time.com/7204654/sudan-humanitarianism-crisis-err-aid/> (last accessed 19 November 2025).

BEHIND THE CHECKPOINTS AND LOOTED WAREHOUSES LIES AN INTERNATIONAL MACHINERY OF EXTRACTION – A NETWORK OF FINANCIERS, ARMS SUPPLIERS, AND POLITICAL PATRONS WHO HAVE TURNED THE COUNTRY’S COLLAPSE INTO A PROFITABLE FRONTIER.

In Khartoum, Wad Madani, and El-Fasher, ERRs and the Takāya became the invisible government of daily life: coordinating evacuations, food distribution, shelter, and information.¹⁹ These activities are horizontal, volunteer-driven, and defiantly non-partisan. Unlike NGOs bound by donor red tape, ERRs operate through trust, local knowledge, and shared risk. They collect money through WhatsApp groups, source food from local traders, and run kitchens in mosques, schools, and abandoned offices. In a country starved by siege and bureaucracy alike, these networks embody what theorist Frantz Fanon once called “the people’s counter-institutions”. The communal kitchens represent the moral centre of this resistance. In El-Fasher,

before its fall, women ran makeshift soup kitchens in courtyards, using donated sorghum and firewood, feeding hundreds each day.²⁰ Cooking together became both a survival strategy and a political statement: a declaration that hunger will not be monopolized. These kitchens are the opposite of charity; they are acts of equality in the midst of enforced scarcity.

¹⁹ Kaamil Ahmed, “‘Deeply inspiring and humbling’: how neighbourhoods in Sudan are coming together to fill gaps left by foreign aid”, *The Guardian*, 31 December 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/dec/31/neighbourhoods-sudan-gaps-foreign-aid-community-kitchen-emergency-response-rooms> (last accessed 19 November 2025). ²⁰ Rawh Nasir, “‘We survive together’: The communal kitchens fighting famine in Khartoum”, *The New Humanitarian*, 24 June 2024, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2024/06/24/we-survive-together-communal-kitchens-fighting-famine-khartoum-sudan> (last accessed 19 November 2025).

ERRs and other local solidarity practices also function as information networks, countering the blackout warfare of the RSF.²¹ Through radio relays and community messengers, they share food prices, safe routes, and warnings of raids. In effect, they are rebuilding the informational commons that imperial and local powers deliberately destroyed.

Women sit at the heart of these networks. They organize food queues, manage remittances, and arbitrate disputes in communal spaces.²² Their leadership transforms survival into a feminist politics of care, contrasting sharply with the masculinized violence of the militias. To cook, to nurse, to share — these have become revolutionary acts in a war that seeks to privatize life itself.

The Emergency Rooms and communal kitchens are not relief mechanisms; they are the embryo of a future polity. They demonstrate that collective organization, not charity or foreign aid, is what keeps Sudan alive. In a country deliberately starved into submission, solidarity is the only nourishment that cannot be looted.

STARVATION AS A WAR CRIME AND THE SILENCE OF THE WORLD

International law is unambiguous: starvation of civilians is a war crime. Article 54 of the 1977 Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 forbids using hunger as a weapon or destroying objects indispensable to survival.²³ Sudan's sieges meet every element of that crime — food routes cut, markets shelled, convoys looted, civilians forced to trade rations for life.

Yet the world remains mute. The United Nations Security Council issues statements without consequence, and the International Criminal Court moves at a glacial pace. Western and Gulf powers condemn atrocities while financing or arming those who commit them. The African Union hides behind “non-interference”. The result is a hierarchy of outrage: some famines are global tragedies, others bureaucratic footnotes.

21 Amnesty International, “Sudan: Internet shutdown threatens delivery of humanitarian and emergency services”, 8 March 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/03/sudan-internet-shutdown-threatens-delivery-of-humanitarian-and-emergency-services/> (last accessed 19 November 2025). 22 Hana Jafar, “Madaniya (civic politics): Women’s Emergency Response Rooms as Flourishing Sites of Democracy in Wartime Sudan”, African Arguments, 21 August 2025, <https://africanarguments.org/2025/08/madaniya-civic-politics-women-emergency-response-rooms-as-flourishing-sites-of-democracy-in-war-time-sudan/> (last accessed 19 November 2025). 23 Human Rights Watch, “Starvation of Civilians as a Method of Combat”, 1999, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/sudan/SUDAWEB2-79.htm> (last accessed 19 November 2025).

Silence is not neutrality — it is complicity. In Sudan, the people keeping each other alive in kitchens and seedbanks are the only ones enforcing international law in practice. Their defiance is the world’s last measure of justice.²⁴

This text first appeared online in December 2025 at <https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/54162/siege-and-solidarity>

24 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights / UN Experts, “Using starvation as a weapon of war in Sudan must stop”, 26 June 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/06/using-starvation-weapon-war-sudan-must-stop-un-experts>

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the 1990s, the number of people in the UK who are employed in the public sector has increased from 10.5 million to 12.5 million, and the number of people in the private sector has increased from 17.5 million to 18.5 million (Department of Health 2000).

There are a number of reasons why the public sector has grown in size. One reason is that the public sector has become more important in the economy. The public sector has become a major employer, and it has become a major provider of services. Another reason is that the public sector has become more efficient. The public sector has been able to provide services at a lower cost than the private sector, and it has been able to provide services of a higher quality than the private sector.

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Dr. Imen Louati

SILENT VIOLENCE, AGRARIAN DEPENDENCY

THE FIGHT FOR FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN NORTH AFRICA

In recent years, six conflict-affected countries — Yemen, Syria, Sudan, South Sudan, Iraq, and Palestine — have been among those accounting for the highest number of food-insecure populations in the world.¹ But while war remains the main trigger for complex emergencies, these insecurities have been exacerbated by an already vulnerable situation. This includes, above all, external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a dramatic deterioration in food security in 2020 and 2021. It also includes the war in Ukraine beginning in 2022, which has had asymmetric repercussions throughout the region, putting severe pressure on countries that were heavily dependent on food imports, and whose foreign exchange reserves were depleted.

REFRAMING FOOD INSECURITY

To reframe the debate on food insecurity in Western Asia and North Africa (WANA), we must first focus on the destructive role played by ongoing conflicts, which are the main factor behind these crises. We also need to take into consideration silent violence, resulting from macroeconomic policies and structural adjustment condi-

tionalties, particularly noting how such impositions are responsible for agrarian dependency of most Arab countries. This dependency — which can be quantified through seed imports, financial obligations, and reliance on inputs — creates conditions that exacerbate conflicts, internal shocks, and armed conflicts.

The WANA region is often presented by global development analyses and international financial institutions (IFIs) as one of the most food-insecure regions. This is due to its inherent natural resource scarcity, growing populations, wars and conflicts, along with the heavy financial weight of food import dependency, as well as gaps in agricultural technology and “good governance”. In this discourse, the WANA region is often described as a homogeneous geographical area characterized by drought, infertile land, and scarce water resources.²

¹ Food Security Information Network, *Global Report on Food Crises*, 2022. ² Riachi Roland, and Giuliano Martiniello, “Manufactured Regional Crises: The Middle East and North Africa under Global Food Regimes”, *Journal of Agrarian Change* 23, no. 4 (2023): 792–810.

However, mainstream arguments overlook the political and historical nature of power dynamics underlying the establishment of food systems and the production of hunger in the region. In fact, the WANA region has embraced different food and agricultural paradigms, ranging from imperial and colonial interests in industrial monocropping to self-sufficiency objectives during the Cold War. Currently, this includes neo-liberalism and market-driven policies. Since the early 1980s, most governments in WANA have engaged in trade liberalization, which involves a massive rolling-out of state and austerity budget measures. Since the 1970s these policies have often led to civil discontent and massive “bread riots”, along with demands for social justice,³ leading to the more recent Arab uprisings of 2011, which emphasized again the political dimension of food.⁴

SILENT VIOLENCE AND AGRARIAN DEPENDENCY IN NORTH AFRICA

The notion of “silent violence”, as introduced by Michael Watts and utilized by Alex de Waal, refers to the non-immediate, chronic harm inflicted on populations by socio-economic, legal, and political measures that systematically deprive them of any ability to meet their basic needs.⁵ In the agrarian context, the implementation of neoliberal economic policies in North Africa has not only failed to bring about genuine market liberalization or democratic reforms, but also led to a fundamental shift in control that has not been to the benefit of populations. In essence,



3 John Walton and David Seddon, *Free Markets & Food Riots: The Politics of Global Adjustment*, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470712962>. 4 Ray Bush, and Giuliano Martiniello, “Food Riots and Protest: Agrarian Modernizations and Structural Crises”, *World Development* 91 (2017): 193–207. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2016.10.017>. 5 Alex de Waal, “Famine and Human Rights”, *Development in Practice* 1, no. 2 (1991): 77–83. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4028722> (last accessed 27 November 2025).



An agricultural worker harvests onions, Morocco, 2021.



food sovereignty has changed hands, shifting from centralized state elites to private and transnational corporate interests imposing control through property rights and global supply chains. This silent violence translates into chronic debt regimes, trade liberalization leading to import dependency, and the deprivation of small producers' legal rights.

In such circumstances, violence is sustained and long-lasting, often remaining silent until acute crises erupt. Indeed, following independence, North African countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco implemented various agrarian reforms between the 1950s and 1970s to overcome the legacy of colonialism. Algeria conducted a comprehensive "agricultu-

ral revolution” by nationalizing lands seized by settlers and redistributing them, often in the form of large state-run farms or cooperatives, with the aim of promoting access and small-scale development.⁶ In Morocco, agricultural modernization focused on creating a loyal class of middle-income farmers, while the monarchy secured its power by redistributing land colonized by the French and expropriated from rural elites, thereby maintaining state control over the land system.

Tunisia first nationalized vast colonized lands to support a brief experiment with peasant cooperatives, before shifting

towards market-based policies.⁷ Agrarian reforms in Egypt under the Nasser regime (1952–1970) redistributed agricultural land, improving security and increasing small- and medium-scale farm ownership.⁸

Ultimately, the dominant postcolonial development model in North African countries was characterized by a commitment

6 Omar Bissaoud, “Al-Filāḥa fī al-Jazā’ir: Min al-Thawrāt al-Zirā’iyya ilā al-Isḥāḥāt al-Librāliyya (1963–2002)” [Agriculture in Algeria: From Agricultural Revolutions to Liberal Reforms (1963–2002)], *Insaniyat/’Insāniyyāt* 22 (2003): 9–38. 7 Mohamed El-loumi, “Tunisie : agriculture le développement compromis”, In *Collection des Chemins de la dignité*. Tunis: Editions Nirvana, 2018. 8 Habib Ayeub and Ray Bush, *Food Insecurity and Revolution in the Middle East and North Africa: Agrarian Questions in Egypt and Tunisia*, London: Anthem Press, 2019.



An agricultural worker carries a crate of apples, Morocco, 2021.

to modernization through state capitalist and Green Revolution policies. These initiatives have involved large-scale irrigation projects, technical assistance, the promotion of mechanization, chemical inputs, and cash crop farming. Despite the initial objectives of self-sufficiency, this period often maintained large agricultural properties (under public administration or centralized cooperatives) and preserved the colonial model of exporting market-oriented crops (citrus fruits, cotton, olives, etc.).

From the 1980s, under pressure from IFIs such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, North African coun-

tries began a major shift towards neoliberalism. This resulted in trade liberalization, currency devaluation, privatization, and the reduction of public and social debt. The main impact on agriculture was the withdrawal of the state from natural resource management, which led to the commodification of state-owned land and water, which increased private sector capture. This transformation was accompanied by a dismantling of state support and an erosion of previous reforms.

In Algeria, state farms were divided up and gradually transferred to agricultural investors, with state support for inputs completely eliminated following an agreement with the IMF in 1994.⁹ Morocco intensified privatization in 2003, transferring ownership of 90 percent of former colonized land from public companies to private investors, state officials, and security agencies. Tunisia ended state-led commercialization of products, shifting agriculture towards exports and high value-added crops, even before its 1986 structural adjustment programme.¹⁰ Egypt eroded state farms, dismantled the Agricultural Cooperative Union, removed subsidies, and abolished ownership limits on reclaimed land; culminating in a 1992 law that ended tenancy security for leaseholders, which sparked protests.¹¹

The neoliberal orientation has shifted the region's focus away from food self-sufficiency, towards market-based food "security", making the region dependent on glo-

**FOOD INSECURITY
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⁹ Bissaoud, "Al-Filāḥa fī al-Jazā'ir." ¹⁰ Elloumi, *Tunisia: agriculture*. p. 42–62. ¹¹ Ayeb and Bush, *Food Insecurity and Revolution*.

bal commodity markets. Algeria and Egypt have become among the world's largest importers of wheat. At the same time, they have removed state subsidies and support for small farmers. These IMF- and WB-directed measures have resulted in the promotion of large-scale industrial agriculture. Such developments effectively reproduce colonial structures of land concentration, with a dominant export-oriented agriculture supported by international trade agreements — particularly with the European Union. Along with the prevalence of a globalized, consumerist diet, this has resulted in a dualistic agricultural sector, characterized on the one hand by subsidized, large-scale private farms, and on the other by marginalized and underdeveloped small farmers dependent on rain-fed agriculture.¹²

The expansion of capitalist agriculture has amplified the feminization of agricultural labour by creating a demand for cheap, flexible, and seasonal workers — a role women increasingly fill due to limited economic alternatives and male out-migration. This reliance on female labour occurs under highly precarious and exploitative conditions, marked by informal contracts, significantly lower wages than those paid to men, and the systematic exploitation of existing gender inequalities for profit.¹³ In addition, the region is subject to unequal trade within the global system, whereby EU agreements guarantee preferential ta-

12 Saker El Nour. "Towards a Just Agricultural Transition in North Africa", *Transnational Institute*, 2023. <https://www.tni.org/en/article/towards-a-just-agricultural-transition-in-north-africa> (last accessed 27 November 2025). 13 Ray Bush, *Poverty and Neoliberalism: Persistence and Reproduction in the Global South*. London: Pluto Press, 2007.



An agricultural worker sorts apples destined for the market, Morocco, 2021.

riffs for North African products, thus maintaining wage differences and extracting surplus value for the countries of the North. This dependence has led to the degradation of natural resources, the decline of seed biodiversity, and the neglect of local ecological systems.¹⁴

The IFIs implemented these mechanisms through programme conditionalities and policy prescriptions associated with loans and balance of payments support. Indeed, it was the structural adjustment programmes supported by the IFIs that promo-

¹⁴ El Nour, "Towards a Just Agricultural Transition".



ted export orientation, fiscal consolidation, and liberalization in the form of policy packages. The debt servicing pressures experienced by North African countries since the 1980s and their dependence on structural fund support allow limited public spending choices, making it politically and fiscally difficult to maintain subsidies or protective measures — thus perpetuating a cycle in which import dependence offsets domestic deficits, while debt obligations persist.¹⁵

Thus, food insecurity in North African countries is not a condition inherent to the nature of these countries, nor an inherent vulnerability, but rather a chronic crisis fuelled by silent violence.

SEED SOVEREIGNTY AS COUNTER-HEGEMONIC RESISTANCE

Despite oppressive structural pressure from the dominant financial and industrial system, multiple forms of popular resistance exist across North Africa, proving that “re-conquest” of local food and seed systems is possible and underway in the region.

In Tunisia, community initiatives such as women’s agricultural cooperatives are actively collecting and preserving traditional seeds.¹⁶ By doing so, they are restoring the genetic diversity lost to commercial monoculture. Tunisian farmers maintain informal networks that ensure seed exchange¹⁷ is possible without the encumbrance of official legal frameworks, such as the International Union for the Protection of New

Varieties of Plants (UPOV) and other national and international commercial systems. These grassroots networks thereby offer effective protection against external shocks, such as supply chain disruptions and price volatility. These community initiatives are supported by environmental organizations¹⁸ and research projects¹⁹ defending local agricultural knowledge by considering agricultural inputs — particularly seeds — not as commodities but as part of a collective right to food sovereignty and social justice.

Similar initiatives are underway in Morocco²⁰ and Algeria,²¹ where collaborative networks of farmers, associations, and researchers are actively promoting agroecology. Their work includes establishing community seed banks to preserve biodiversity and local varieties, supporting small farmers in the transition from monoculture to agroecological practices, regenerating soil, and creating environmentally responsible supply and consumption chains. These networks also foster peer-to-peer learning,

15 Mustapha Jouili and Mohamed Elloumi, “Extraversion versus développement agricole auto-centré : Le cas des pays du Maghreb”, *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* (2022): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2022.2092459>. 16 N. Souissi, “Permaculture : de jeunes Tunisiennes s’épanouissent dans une autre forme d’agriculture”, *Medfeminiswiya*, 2 April 2025, <https://medfeminiswiya.net/2025/04/02/permaculture-de-jeunes-tunisiennes-sepanouissent-dans-une-autre-forme-dagriculture/>. [last accessed 27 November 2025]. 17 Julia Terradot, “Semences autochtones : des paysans tunisiens résistent pour préserver la biodiversité”, *Inkyfada*. April 5, 2023, <https://inkyfada.com/fr/2023/04/05/semences-autochtones-tunisie/>. [last accessed 27 November 2025]. 18 Such as Observatory of Food Sovereignty and the Environment (OSAE), the Tunisian Association of Permaculture (ATP), Shapes and Oasis Colours Association (AFCO) etc. 19 Such as the Tunisian Arid Regions Institute, the National Gene Bank (BNG), the Tunisian National Agronomic Institute (INAT) etc. 20 Such as the Network of Agroecological Initiatives in Morocco (RIAM) 21 Such as Torba.

and the exchange of knowledge concerning sustainable agricultural methods.

In Egypt, resistance efforts employ coordinated strategies across both rural and urban areas. Indeed, female-headed farming households of rural areas such as Fayoum maintain local food circuits by perpetuating traditional practices of informal exchanges of seeds and seasonal produce.²² Meanwhile, in urban areas such as Cairo, new forms of resistance have emerged in city suburbs such as Dar El Salam, where neighbours grow vegetables on rooftops to sell directly into the neighbourhood, or to distribute on a trust basis.²³ This creates short food chains based on proximity and reciprocity, which actively challenge the extractive model. Many farmers in Egypt also retain their sovereignty, mainly for non-standardized crops grown on small plots for direct household consumption, e.g. okra, jute mallow (*molokhia*), or onions. These crops are largely overlooked by transnational corporations and export markets, thereby minimizing external pressure for privatization.²⁴

A key and often invisible characteristic of this resistance is the leading role played by women, who are responsible for selecting, conserving and exchanging traditional seeds. Local varieties — local crops in Egypt and Tunisia, for example — represent cultural patrimony and are essential from a nutritional point of view, providing a necessary alternative to the homogenized inputs of industrial agriculture.

CONCLUSION

My analysis demonstrates how the ecological and food crisis in North Africa is closely linked to neoliberal policies that have systematically undermined farmers' autonomy as well as national food sovereignty. Causing them to lose their means of production, this dependence ties farmers to royalty and compulsory purchase schemes imposed by international companies.

However, through counter-hegemonic movements in the region, resistance has become possible and vital for the survival of smallholders and family farms. The development of these practices and the strengthening of these networks will require a political will to legally protect farmers' autonomy, by reorienting governmental priorities from corporate profit towards socio-ecological justice.

22 Such as Fayoum Agro Organic Development Association (FAODA). 23 Valdi Carosa, "Egypt's Roof Top Farms Helps Generate Income and Food Security", YouTube video, posted by CGTN Africa, 25 November 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_VpXPpFYzU (last accessed 27 November 2025). 24 Saker El Nour, "Seeds as Instrument of Domination: The Erosion of Sovereignty in Egyptian Agriculture", *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung*, November 2025, <https://rosaluxna.org/publications/seeds-as-instrument-of-domination-the-erosion-of-sovereignty-in-egyptian-agriculture/> (last accessed 27 November 2025).



Dr. Schluwa Sama

HOW PEASANTS KEPT RESISTANCE ALIVE

LAND, LABOUR, AND SURVIVAL IN IRAQI KURDISTAN

“We have been living and working on this land for as long as I can remember. My father, my grandfather, and those before him. Now, I have finally bought the land,”¹ said Mustafa, standing in a village in Dohuk governorate, Kurdistan, Iraq. While Mustafa always owned the land in practice, he had to purchase it to acquire legal title. His wife explained that they could now finally build another house and do as they pleased on their land. As his family had lived for generations from its soil, cultivating and relying on the harvest of their labour, Mustafa knew the land like no other. However, it was only now that he could formally claim ownership in the name of his family. Only now, after his children had moved to the city of Dohuk and were able to support him, could he buy what had always been his. After several generations living on their land, Mustafa was no longer legally landless.

COLONIAL LANDOWNERSHIP

Mustafa’s situation can be traced back to British colonialism in Iraq and Kurdistan. Controlling those who produced food was a primary strategy for controlling the country. As in many colonies, the British imple-

mented and renewed Ottoman property laws, the so-called *taswiya* (settlement), as a mechanism to reshape agricultural production and restructure society. Before the 1930s, land had “been held in some form of common tribal ownership”.² Land registration meant individualization and the imposition of a new concept of property — one defined by the pursuit of profit.

Farmers were required to produce food but could not keep all that they produced. Instead, they retained between thirty and fifty percent, while the remainder went to absentee landlords, called *Aghas*,³ loyal to the British colonial force. Controlling food and those who produced it meant controlling and remodelling society. By the end of British rule in 1958, about 1 percent of all landowners owned 55 percent of all the land.⁴ In this sense, profit-making went hand-in-hand with consolidating political power and controlling society.

1 Sama, Schluwa, “The Value of Labour, Land and Life - Shifting Perspectives on the Rural Political Economy of Kurdistan and Iraq”. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Exeter, 2020, p. 87. All of the ethnography presented in this text has been quoted from my PhD thesis. 2 Farouk-Sluglett, M., and P. Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1990, p. 31. 3 *Agha* is used in Iraqi Kurdistan today for people who have tribal and thus political authority, for those owning land or are wealthy. 4 Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, p. 32.

These structures remain powerful today, as the absentee landlords of that period became part of the contemporary political elite. In the village next to Mustafa's, the *Mukhtar*⁵ said that he still gives a "symbolic" part of his harvest to the local *Agha*, who is linked to the ruling party in the area. Although he would be obliged to give more, the *Mukhtar* explained that today this act is more a gesture of "respect", particularly as agriculture in the region is no longer very productive. Indeed, unable to support themselves through agriculture alone, many farmers have at least one family member with a state salary.

In many colonized countries, agricultural policies introduced under colonial rule were reversed during the 1960s and 1970s. In Iraq this was only partly the case. While the example of Mustafa and some villages in the Dohuk governorate show that colonial land systems persisted in certain areas, other regions experienced significant change, such as Yousefia, a village near Baghdad where farmers interviewed by the

⁵ The *mukhtar* is usually the state-recognized administrative representative of a village or neighbourhood. In Iraqi Kurdistan — especially in Dohuk — *mukhtars* are often selected or endorsed by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which effectively turns the role into an extension of party authority in the village.



Breakfast in a
Kurdish-Iraqi
village

author in March 2022 proudly explained that they were given land during the agricultural land reforms introduced by Abdul Karim Qasim⁶ in 1958. Qasim attempted to reverse some colonial policies through this reform. However, land reforms were slow and by 1968 only 39 percent of the confiscated land had actually been distributed to peasants.⁷

This contrast shows how centrally enacted policies were implemented unevenly across Iraq and Kurdistan. Locality played an important role: many Kurdish villages were far from Baghdad, difficult to access due to mountainous terrain, had strong local hierarchies that had been reinforced during colonial times, and were difficult to alter through centralized policy alone.

⁶ Abdul Karim Qasim (1914–1963) was an Iraqi military officer and politician who became Prime Minister and de-facto leader of Iraq after the 1958 revolution, which overthrew the British installed Hashemite monarchy and thus effectively ended direct British colonial rule of Iraq. ⁷ Farouk-Sluglett, Sluglett, p. 101.

CUSTOMARY KNOWLEDGE VS. COLONIAL KNOWLEDGE

Although Mustafa was eventually able to buy the land, other villagers found different ways to navigate colonial landownership laws. In another village, Rengin, a woman in her forties with much experience in agriculture downplays the significance of legal ownership, emphasizing instead customary knowledge. Looking into the valley, she explained: “See, this is ours ... see down there ... that is all ours. We put the seedlings there in that field, and then we still have the *zavi* (large field) where we planted more seedlings, which we later harvest.” When asked whether the land was registered, she replied: “No, it is not ... but we know what belongs to whom.”

Sabri, a young man in his twenties from a neighbouring village, explained that his uncle had given him and his brothers a field to cultivate for a year because he could not

WHILE CENTRALIZED COLONIAL POLICIES PROFOUNDLY RESHAPED RURAL SOCIETY, VILLAGERS WERE NEVER A PASSIVE MASS BLINDLY OBEYING SUCH LAWS.

manage it himself. Strict individual ownership laws were foreign to them. When asked whether they leased land to anyone or paid rent themselves, he shook his head: “No, it is our land and our family’s land.”

Thus, while centralized colonial policies profoundly reshaped rural society, villagers were never a passive mass blindly obeying such laws. While colonial policies aimed to strip farmers of their rights to land, villagers and peasants⁸ found ways to remain on their land. Some circumvented the rules, some ignored them, while others relied on customary knowledge and social relations to counter these impositions.

⁸ “Villagers” and “peasants” both refer to people living in rural communities who work in agriculture. The terms are used interchangeably here, with “peasants” emphasizing small-scale farming and “villagers” their place within rural community life.



View over Amediye,
Dohuk, Kurdistan–Iraq,
17 March 2020.



Village near Amediye, Dohuk,
Kurdistan –Iraq, 18 November 2020.

**PEASANTS
AND VILLAGE
STRUCTURES
SUSTAINED THE
RESISTANCE.**

**VILLAGES AS SITES OF
RESISTANCE TO SADDAM
HUSSEIN**

Today, patterns of colonial landownership are transformed into new forms of political loyalty. Sabri’s uncle explained that, during the resistance against the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, they no longer gave part of their harvest to the *Aghas*, the old landowning class, but instead supported the *Peshmerga*⁹ fighters associated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). For their part, the *Aghas* are now largely integrated into political parties, where they hold considerable influence. However, while villagers may no longer share their harvest, as they remain living on land registered in the name of *Aghas*, political loyalty is still expected in other forms. Thus, villagers resisted Ba’athism in part as a way to demons-

⁹ *Peshmerga* is the term referring to today’s military forces in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Before 1991, it designated the partisan/ guerrilla forces fighting the Ba’ath regime. The literal meaning from Kurdish is “those who look death in the eye”.

trate loyalty to the KDP. In contemporary narratives, villagers appear mainly as people who, out of Kurdish-nationalist sentiment, sheltered and fed fighters. In reality, colonial landownership continued to structure rural life even if its coercive dynamics are masked as Kurdish nationalism.

AGRICULTURAL LABOUR FED THE RESISTANCE AGAINST SADDAM

Although villagers' relations with the *Aghas* were still structured by colonial landownership, they were far from passive during the resistance against the Baathist regime. Nazê, from another village near the Amediye district, remembered:

The village was bombarded most of the time in the 1980s because we had different Peshmerga at our place. We had Peshmerga of the KDP and the Communist Party. Sometimes ten of them stayed the night, and other nights it would be 30 or 40. We gave them dinner and prepared lunch for the next day. We did a lot.

Nazê's account makes clear that it was peasants and village structures that sustained the resistance. It was through their agricultural labour that villagers managed to shelter and feed most resistance fighters.

The support of peasants for the resistance cannot be explained solely through nationalist narratives. While the popular slogan "No friends but the mountains" expresses Kurdish isolation and resilience, it often romanticizes Kurdish nationalism and obscures the multi-ethnic, multi-religious nature of anti-Baathist resistance. People from across Iraq — Arabic-speaking, Kurdish-speaking, Yezidi, Christian, and others — joined the struggle against Saddam Hussein. Gulchin, from the same village as Nazê, recounts:

Back then, before 1988, we also had Peshmerga and all sorts of people living with us in the village. We had Christians, Arabs, and people I never knew, living in this country. I used to ask my father who these people were. They did not even speak Kurdish ... And he would say that we need

THE FIGHT AGAINST THE BAATHIST REGIME WAS A STRUGGLE SHARED BY PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER IRAQ, WHO FOUGHT IN THE MOUNTAINS AND WERE SUSTAINED BY LOCAL VILLAGE COMMUNITIES AND THEIR FOOD SYSTEMS.

to support them because they were all against Saddam. And, eventually, they were our brothers. I myself had brothers who were also fighting Saddam, and they were hosted by other families in other villages.

Thus, the fight against the Baathist regime was a struggle shared by people from all over Iraq, who fought in the mountains and were sustained by local village communities and their food systems.

GENOCIDAL VIOLENCE AND PEASANT PERSEVERANCE

Villages became centres of resistance not only because of the mountainous terrain, but because villagers could feed themselves and others. During the fight against Saddam Hussein, they repeatedly described how they relied on their own resources to survive and support those who opposed the regime. Sugar and tea had to be

Agricultural field in a village near Amediye, Dohuk, Kurdistan-Iraq, 18 November 2020.



SEED SAVING PRESERVED KNOWLEDGE, AUTONOMY, AND CONTINUITY OF ARMED STRUGGLE IN THE FACE OF STATE REPRESSION. THUS, DESPITE SEVERE REPRESSION AND CONTINUING SURVEILLANCE, RURAL COMMUNITIES MAINTAINED A REMARKABLE DEGREE OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY.

smuggled from the cities, although most food continued to be produced locally. Villagers saved their own seeds for vegetables, fruit, rice, and wheat, and exchanged them within the community. Although state policies compelled many to grow specific crops — such as tobacco in the Amadiye region, which the state purchased at fixed prices — villagers still managed to decide what they grew, according to their own needs and the needs of those they sheltered.

In a context where the state sought to impose dependency, their reliance on saved and exchanged seeds was therefore not only an agricultural practice, but also an act of political resistance. Seed saving preserved knowledge, autonomy, and continuity of armed struggle in the face of state repression. Thus, despite severe repression and continuing surveillance, rural communities maintained a remarkable degree of self-sufficiency. This is especially striking considering the scale of violence inflicted on Iraqi Kurdistan during the 1980s, and the systematic attempts to dismantle rural life.

The construction of *mu'jammāt* — the so-called collective towns — illustrates the regime's coercive strategy. Built in the 1970s and expanded over the following decades under the guise of modernizing agriculture, these settlements served the Baathist government's counterinsurgency goals: to destroy the independence of rural communities and create a population reliant on the state for basic survival. This model was not unique to Iraq: it drew on international development discourses surrounding agricultural modernization and the Green Revolution. These programmes claimed that centralized settlements would facilitate access to modern agricultural inputs — tractors, hybrid seeds, chemical fertilisers — and supposedly make agriculture more efficient and productive.

Increasing productivity and higher food supplies were actively promoted by international organizations, including the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Contrary to popular narratives, this modernization discourse aligned well with models of

central state-led planning. Examples of collective towns were also common in the Soviet Union. State intervention was justified as a means of increasing productivity and achieving higher yields. For Iraqi Kurdistan, however, the political purpose was clear. As Genat writes, “The real outcome of the project of state-supported agriculture was the Iraqi government’s counterinsurgency goal of establishing a dependent community of Iraqi Kurds, reliant on the goodwill of the state for their survival.”¹⁰

This strategy represents a deliberate use of hunger as a tool of control — a form of indirect weaponization of starvation through structural dependency. By forcibly relocating rural populations into *mu’jammāt*, the Baathist regime disrupted traditional, self-sufficient food systems, dismantling the networks through which villagers supported themselves and resistance fighters.

This violence escalated into a genocidal strategy of starvation during the Anfal campaign. Almost 4,000 villages were destroyed and approximately 182,000 people killed.¹¹ The Anfal campaign culminated in the chemical attack on Halabja in 1988, which murdered almost 5,000 people at once. These acts did not only aim to kill; they aimed to break the material basis of rural life by destroying farmland, burning orchards, poisoning water sources, and forcibly removing people from landscapes that had sustained them for generations.

Once the Anfal campaign came to an end, as well as the Iran-Iraq War that had lasted from 1980-1988, people barely had the chance for any kind of stabilization, recon-

struction, or recovery before the next “invisible war”¹² began in 1990: the international sanctions against Iraq. The sanctions fostered an economic system reliant on food imports, making it difficult for farmers and peasants to live from agriculture. The Oil-for-Food Programme failed to account for Iraqi agricultural production; instead, it used Iraqi oil revenue to purchase and import food from outside the country. This influx of subsidized imports severely undercut the prices of domestically produced food. As a result, local peasants were unable to compete, making agriculture economically unsustainable for them.

However, it is crucial to point out that, even though villagers and farmers are diminished in number today, they continue to grow food, save and plant their own seeds, and in some areas manage to do so without the use of pesticides. Having remained resilient in the face of war, displacement, and massive violence, villagers and family farms continue to be the backbone of Iraqi and Iraqi Kurdish agriculture.

¹⁰ Genat, M. “From Agrarian Experiments to Population Displacement: Iraqi Kurdish Collective Towns in the Context of Socialist ‘Villagization’ in the 1970s”. *Disciplinary Spaces Spatial Control: Forced Assimilation and Narratives of Progress since the 19th Century*, edited by Andrea Fischer-Tahir and Sophie Wagenhofer, Bielefeld: transcript, 2017, 139. ¹¹ Human Rights Watch, “GENOCIDE IN IRAQ: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds”, July 1993, [https://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/#:~:text=Watch%20Report%2C%201993\)-.GENOCIDE%20IN%20IRAQ,Human%20Rights%20Watch,\(last accessed 18 November 2025\)](https://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/#:~:text=Watch%20Report%2C%201993)-.GENOCIDE%20IN%20IRAQ,Human%20Rights%20Watch,(last%20accessed%2018%20November%202025).). ¹² Gordon, Joy, *Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions*. Harvard University Press, 2010.



Raya Ziada

HARVESTING FREEDOM

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST COLONIAL HUNGER IN PALESTINE

“He who feeds you controls you.” Thomas Sankara¹ articulated this as a warning situated in the *longue durée* of colonial domination.² Hunger is neither incidental nor natural — it is designed, administered, and deployed to discipline populations. This article argues that food sovereignty rooted in agroecology, indigenous knowledge, and collective autonomy is not an agricultural concern but a struggle over life and political existence.

In Palestine, where agriculture has been systematically targeted for more than a century, the questions of who cultivates land, who eats, and who controls water are inseparable from the right to survive. Examining how British and Israeli rule restructured land governance and undermined local food systems, this article discusses food sovereignty as a political and ethical stance. It does so by placing Palestinian agroecological practices into dialogue with Zapatista communities in Chiapas,³ Brazil’s Landless Rural Workers’ Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, MST),⁴ and Sankara’s Burkina Faso.⁵ Supporting a claim that the administration of life cannot be surrendered to occupation, such practices constitute a refusal to accept colonial authority over the material foundations of survival.

LAND, HUNGER, POWER

Food is never just food. It is one of the oldest instruments of political power, the quiet structure through which colonial regimes reorganize life, and often the first terrain where people learn to resist. For centuries in historical Palestine, agriculture was not a technical sector; it was an entire way of living — with terraces cut into the hills, citrus groves feeding the ports, and shepherding routes that stitched villages to valleys. The British Mandate in Palestine (1920–1948) disrupted this world by reorganizing land into an economy of export, registration, and administrative mapping — an apparatus that framed dispossession as policy rather than conquest.⁶

1 Thomas Sankara was a revolutionary African politician who became president of Upper Volta in 1983. He changed the name of the country to Burkina Faso, and introduced legislation supporting socialism. He was killed in 1987. 2 Sankara, Thomas, *Thomas Sankara Speaks: The Burkina Faso Revolution 1983–87*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 2007 (2nd ed.), pp. 448. 3 Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), *First Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle*, December 1993, <https://schoolsforchiapas.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/1st-Declaration-of-the-Lacandona-Jungle.pdf> (last accessed 7 December 2025). 4 Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), *Agrarian Program of the MST*, Sixth National MST Congress, São Paulo, February 2014, PDF <https://www.mstbrazil.org/sites/default/files/CR1%20-%20%20Agrarian%20Program%20of%20the%20MST%20-%20dez13-1.pdf> (last accessed 8 January 2026). 5 Ibid. Sankara, *Thomas Sankara*. 6 Government of Palestine, *Report by His Majesty’s Government in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the Council of the League of Nations on the Administration of Palestine and Trans-Jordan for the Year 1930*, London: HMSO, 1931.

After 1948, Israel expanded this machinery with a different precision. Settler-colonial governance reshaped agriculture into a system of control: monopolizing water, confiscating land, imposing monocultures, and deliberate ecological erasure. To command food is to command a people.

According to La Vía Campesina's insistence that communities define their own agrarian systems, under colonial conditions the struggle for food sovereignty does not appear as a development model. It emerges instead as a grammar of decolonization.⁷ Scholars such as Shukri Araf,⁸ Omar Tesdell,⁹ and Eduardo Galeano¹⁰ remind us that empires have always ruled by regulating the soil.

Once land becomes inaccessible, hunger becomes a policy tool, and dependency becomes an architecture. Planting under such conditions is not routine agriculture; it is a political act, an attempt to reclaim a world that someone else has tried to redesign.¹¹

COLONIAL AGRICULTURE AND THE ENGINEERING OF SCARCITY

Colonial agriculture never appears as simple extraction. It arrives with a blueprint and rewrites entire ecologies in its image. Across Latin America, Indigenous polycultural systems that integrated maize, beans, squash, herbs, insects, and forests were dismantled and replaced with monocultures such as sugarcane, coffee, and cocoa. These were not crops built to feed communities, they were engines for European mar-

7 La Vía Campesina, *Food Sovereignty: A Guide* (São Paulo: La Vía Campesina, 2018), <https://viacampesina.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/02/Food-Sovereignty-A-guide-Low-Res-Vresion.pdf> (last accessed 8 January 2026). 8 Araf, Shukri, *Agrarian Transformation Under Settler Colonialism*, Birzeit University, 2015. 9 Omar Tesdell, Yusra Othman, Yara Dowani, Samir Khraishi, Mary Deeik, Fouad Muaddi, Brandon Schlautman, Aubrey Streit Krug, and David Van Tassel, "Envisioning Perennial Agroecosystems in Palestine," *Journal of Arid Environments* 175 (2020): 104085, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaridenv.2019.104085> (last accessed 8 January 2026). 10 Galeano, Eduardo, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997. 11 Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees (PARC), *Lijan al-Ighathat al-Zira 'iyya al-Filastiniyya: Dalil al-Zira 'a wa al-Mu 'ashsha [Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees: A Guide to Agriculture and Livelihoods]* (Paris: UNESCO, 1996) (in Arabic), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000242047> (last accessed 8 January 2026).



kets, a transformation described by Eduardo Galeano as the conversion of whole continents into reservoirs for imperial hunger.¹² Hunger became a method of governance long before it was named a “crisis”.

The British Mandate carried these same logics into Palestine. Land registries, export-oriented planning, and the imperial appetite for citrus created an agricultural order that served empire and undermined local food security.¹³ Israel inherited this architecture and weaponized it.

Declaring Indigenous land as “state land” (according to the infamous Absentee Property Law of 1950) turned dispossession into an administrative gesture. Military zones consumed fertile valleys. Wells were sealed. Terraces that held generations of memory were bulldozed. Olive trees, some centuries older than the states claiming their land, were uprooted by the hundreds of thousands. The Applied Research Insti-

¹² Galeano, Eduardo, *Open Veins of Latin America*. ¹³ Government of Palestine, *Report by His Majesty's Government*.



Olive harvest in Beita,
West Bank, 1 November 2025.

tute–Jerusalem (ARIJ) and human rights organizations have documented this destruction with painful precision.¹⁴

The pattern is not unique to Palestine. It repeats across Africa and Latin America: cotton in Sudan, peanuts in Senegal, sugar and soy in Brazil’s northeast and the Amazon. The script is old but brutally consistent: erase diversity, impose dependency, fracture autonomy. Colonial agriculture does not merely extract what grows on the surface — it reorganizes life from the root.

GREENWASHING, ECOLOGICAL DOMINATION, AND THE POLITICS OF ERASURE

Israel’s “environmentalism” has never been primarily about the environment. It functions as a political disguise for land seizure, a way to paint over dispossession using the language of conservation. For more than a century, the Jewish National Fund (JNF) planted non-native European pines over the ruins of Palestinian villages depopulated in 1948.¹⁵ This practice, described by scholars of environmental history as a form of ecological domination, replaces diverse Mediterranean ecosystems with fast-burning monocultures, designed to erase the physical traces of expelled communities.¹⁶

Greenwashing becomes an ecological extension of settler-colonialism: forests that obscure theft, parks that overwrite memory, and “restoration” plans that justify ongoing displacement. What appears as environmental stewardship is, in practice, a political technology of erasure.

AGROECOLOGY AND THE GRAMMAR OF PALESTINIAN RESISTANCE

Against this machinery of control, Palestinian agroecology speaks a different language: quiet but firm, built on survival, dignity, and refusal. Community-run farms in the West Bank have used agroecology as a form of political presence under occupation, maintaining cultivation directly beside the Wall¹⁷ and military zones.¹⁸ The Palestinian Heirloom Seed Library safeguards ancestral seed varieties threatened by confiscation and agricultural erasure, documented internationally as part of a broader struggle for agricultural memory.

Women’s cooperatives in the Jordan Valley and across Israeli partitioned Area C restore soil through agroecology, while building political and economic autonomy. Peer-reviewed research shows that agroecology reconnects Palestinians to land under conditions explicitly designed to sever that relationship.¹⁹

14 Applied Research Institute–Jerusalem (ARIJ), “Monitoring Israeli Colonization Activities”, <https://www.arij.org> (last accessed 7 December 2025). 15 Jewish National Fund (JNF), “Forestry”, <https://www.jnf.org/our-work/forestry-green-innovations> (last accessed 7 December 2025). 16 Irus Braverman, “Planting the Promised Landscape: Zionism, Nature, and Resistance in Israel/Palestine,” *Natural Resources Journal* 49, no. 2 (2009): 317–365, <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nrj/vol49/iss2/3> (last accessed 8 January 2026). 17 Otherwise known as the separation barrier, or Apartheid Wall, Israel built the eight-metre-high concrete structure to segregate West Bank Palestinians. In 2004, the International Court of Justice ruled that the wall violates international law. 18 Omar Tesdell, Yusra Othman, Yara Dowani, Samir Khraishi, Mary Deeik, Fouad Muaddi, Brandon Schlautman, Aubrey Streit Krug, and David Van Tassel, “Envisioning Perennial Agroecosystems in Palestine,” *Journal of Arid Environments* 175 (2020): 104085, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaridenv.2019.104085> (last accessed 8 January 2026). 19 Tesdell, Omar, “Territories of Life: Agroecology in Palestine”, *Journal of Political Ecology* 22, no. 1 (2015): 320–340. <https://journals.uair.arizona.edu/index.php/JPE/article/view/19917> (last accessed 7 December 2025).

GAZA PRESENTS THE WORLD WITH THE clearest demonstration of hunger deployed not as a tragic consequence of war but as a calibrated political weapon. The blockade and the genocide function as an administrative system that determines who eats, what grows, and how long bodies can survive.

Addressing mainly the French occupation of Algeria in the mid-twentieth century, Frantz Fanon reminds us that decolonization begins with reclaiming the material structure of life, land, labour, and production as the foundation of political transformation.²⁰ Palestinians enact this daily, planting where bulldozers passed last week. Each seed becomes a quiet declaration, a gesture of *sumud* (resilient steadfastness): we remain.

TRANSNATIONAL CONSTELLATIONS

Across the Global South, from Chiapas to the Sahel, from the favelas of Brazil to the drylands of South Africa, communities confront the same matrix of extraction and engineered scarcity. The violence differs in form, but its logic is consistent: dispossession as policy, hunger as governance, ecological degradation as collateral to capital or security.

Palestine's struggle resonates globally. In Chiapas, the Zapatistas reorganized land through the *milpa*²¹ system, as a refusal of agribusiness and state control.²² In Brazil, the MST transformed land occupations into agroecological settlements, schools, and seed banks.²³ In Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara placed food sovereignty at the centre of revolutionary governance, emphasizing local production, seed autonomy, and the rejection of dependency.²⁴

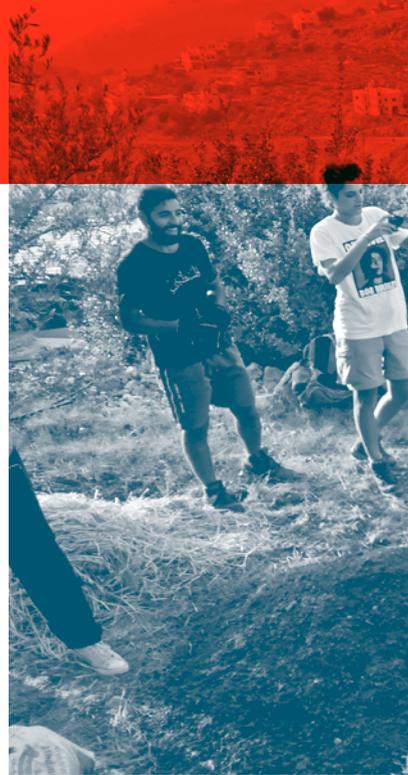
²⁰ Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Richard Philcox, New York: Grove Press, 2004. On the relevant analysis of material transformation and reclamation of land, see especially pp. 27–39. ²¹ Based on the agronomy of the Maya and of other Mesoamerican peoples, the *milpa* system is primarily used to produce crops of maize, beans, and squash. ²² Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), *First Declaration of the Lacandona Jungle*, 1993, <https://schoolsforchiapas.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/1st-Declaration-of-the-Lacandona-Jungle.pdf> (last accessed 7 December 2025). ²³ Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), “Principles of Agrarian Reform”, <https://mst.org.br> (last accessed 7 December 2025). ²⁴ Sankara, Thomas. *Thomas Sankara Speaks: The Burkina Faso Revolution 1983–87*, 2nd ed. New York: Pathfinder Press, 2007. See pp. 145–151 for speeches on food sovereignty and autonomy.

Across these struggles, the lesson is consistent: land is not a commodity; it is a relationship. Food is not a product, it is a political horizon.

GAZA: THE STARVATION ECONOMY

Gaza presents the world with the clearest demonstration of hunger deployed not as a tragic consequence of war but as a calibrated political weapon. The blockade and the genocide function as an administrative system that determines who eats, what grows, and how long bodies can survive. Restrictions on seeds, fertilizer, and fishing zones are part of a structured regime of deprivation. The targeting of greenhouses, irrigation lines, bakeries, and food warehouses follows a pattern too consistent to describe as incidental.

Amnesty International and UNICEF have documented what this looks like on the ground: infants dying from dehydration, mothers unable to produce breast milk, people collapsing in breadlines that become massacre sites. Malnutrition reshapes children's bones, not because food is unavailable, but because it is deliberately withheld through siege, checkpoints, and genocidal violence. The starvation is engineered with the same precision as the drones above the Strip.



United Nations assessments document rising child deaths from dehydration and acute malnutrition, the collapse of maternal nutrition, and the destruction of food production systems.²⁵ The International Committee of the Red Cross reports a complete breakdown of civilian life linked directly to the denial of food, water, and med-

²⁵ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs – occupied Palestinian territory (OCHA oPt), *Humanitarian Needs and Response Update, 1 April 2024: Food Security and Nutrition* (5 April 2024), <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-needs-and-response-update-26-march-01-april-2024> (last accessed 8 January 2026); *Gaza Humanitarian Response Update, 8–21 July 2024* (24 July 2024), <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/gaza-humanitarian-response-update-8-21-july-2024> (last accessed 8 January 2026); *Humanitarian Situation Update #323 | Gaza Strip* (18 September 2025), <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-update-323-gaza-strip>. OCHA - Occupied Palestinian Territory+2OCHA - Occupied Palestinian Territory+2 (last accessed 8 January 2026).

Participants of the first Palestinian agroecological camp organized by Manjala in Ein Kinya village, Ramallah, 2017.



ical access. Medical analysis published in *The Lancet* further confirms fatal dehydration among infants and the collapse of neonatal care under siege conditions.²⁶

This logic is old. You can trace it back through the British-managed famine in Bengal, the Great Hunger in Ireland, or the siege economies imposed across Africa. Colonial regimes understand that hunger is more obedient than any soldier. It breaks communities quietly, from the inside, and it rearranges the political imagination until survival becomes the only remaining horizon.

Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics captures how sovereignty is exerted through the capacity to decide who may live

and who must be left to starve.²⁷ What Israeli occupation imposes on Gaza is a form of rule in which food becomes a mechanism of domination and hunger a technique of governance.

The systematic targeting of orchards, wells, seed banks, and fishing boats corresponds to what Eyal Weizman descri-

²⁶ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Humanitarian Situation Update #323: Gaza Strip* (New York: United Nations, 18 September 2025), <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-update-323-gaza-strip> (last accessed 8 January 2026); *The Lancet*, "Gaza: The Health Catastrophe That Must End," *The Lancet* 403, no. 10427 (2024): 631., Al Jazeera, "Gaza Toll Could Exceed 186,000, Lancet Study Says," July 8, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/8/gaza-toll-could-exceed-186000-lancet-study-says> (last accessed 8 January 2026). ²⁷ Mbembe, Achille, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40.

bes as the politics of environmental destruction: violence inscribed onto land until the terrain itself becomes a weapon.²⁸ And yet Gazans refuse to vanish. In the middle of rubble, families coax tomatoes and mint from bombed soil. Farmers rebuild broken irrigation lines with scraps of pipe. Fishermen set out in barely functioning boats because dignity has its own logic. Women save seeds in jars under beds, passing them like inheritance, as if refusing the arithmetic of disappearance itself.

Even under total siege, agriculture becomes an act of political presence. A form of testimony. A declaration of life made with the smallest materials. You see it in rooftop gardens, children watering plants with bottled greywater, farmers again planting on land where they were nearly killed the week before. These gestures are not symbolic — they are the infrastructure of resistance.

In Gaza, food is more than sustenance. It is a fight against annihilation. It is the insistence that a people cannot be starved into silence, cannot be erased through rationing, cannot be reduced to calories in a spreadsheet. It is the clearest reminder that the struggle for Palestine is not metaphorical but material, rooted in the land and in the right of every human being to eat, grow, and remain.

CONCLUSION: THE SEED AS POLITICAL THEORY

Food sovereignty in Palestine is a political ethic, a refusal to surrender soil to occupation, seed to regulation, or future to colonial design. Across the Global South, people confront stolen land, manufactured hunger, and systemic extraction. The seed becomes a political theory: a promise that the world can be replanted against the violence that tries to erase it.

²⁸ Weizman, Eyal. *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*, London: Verso, 2007. For a relevant discussion of environmental destruction and the militarization of terrain, see especially pp. 184–192.

Food sovereignty in Palestine cannot be folded into the familiar language of “development” or “capacity-building” — such terms collapse under the weight of a century of dispossession. At its core, food sovereignty here is a demand that life not be administered by an occupying power, nor reduced to permissions negotiated through military bureaucracy. When land, water, and seed fall under colonial jurisdiction, the struggle for nourishment becomes indistinguishable from the struggle for liberation. Food sovereignty is not only survival. It is a revolutionary horizon, where land is reclaimed, memory is re-rooted, and life refuses to bow to the architecture of death.

**EVEN UNDER TOTAL SIEGE, AGRICULTURE
BECOMES AN ACT OF POLITICAL PRESENCE.
YOU SEE IT IN ROOFTOP GARDENS,
CHILDREN WATERING PLANTS WITH
BOTTLED GREYWATER, FARMERS AGAIN
PLANTING ON LAND WHERE THEY WERE
NEARLY KILLED THE WEEK BEFORE.**



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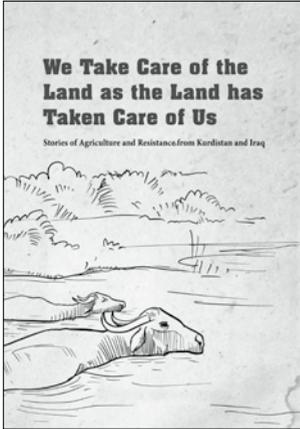
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FURTHER READING



Schluwa Sama,
Bahroz Jaza

WE TAKE CARE OF THE LAND AS THE LAND HAS TAKEN CARE OF US

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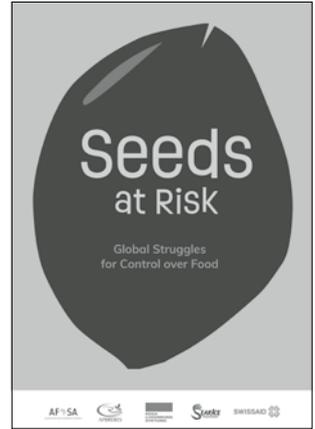
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«... in West Asia and North Africa local actors have developed forms of resilience – from communal kitchens and seed banks to cooperative farming networks and rooftop gardens – that not only sustain life under siege but also challenge the deliberate deprivation of food. These grassroots responses highlight the agency of affected populations, showing that where legal instruments fall short, people resist starvation and preserve their livelihoods, knowledge, and cultural practices. Food sovereignty is therefore not only about access to food – it involves practices of solidarity reclaiming resources, ensuring resilience in times of crisis, and transforming entrenched power relations.»

Tanja Tabbara