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Syria's Wheat Crisis

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine and subsequent blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea ports, has significant global impact on global energy and commodity prices. It has also exacerbated humanitarian concerns, particularly in the Middle East. The Middle East is the largest importer of wheat in the world, a staple in the production of bread, with Egypt the world's largest importer of wheat, receiving eighty percent of its wheat imports from both Russia and Ukraine.¹

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¹ Heba Saleh and Emiko Terazono, "[Ukraine War Sparks Food Shortages in Arab Nations as Wheat Prices Soar.](#)" *The Financial Times*, 21 March 2022, accessed 11 September 2022.

The structural weaknesses of most Middle Eastern economies, with the notable exceptions of the affluent and hydrocarbon rich Gulf States, have underscored the significant impact on food security, particularly in Syria, which is still grappling with its over a decade-long civil war.

According to the US Department of Agriculture, Ukraine is the seventh largest producer of wheat and the fifth largest exporter, accounting for over ten percent of total exports.² In Syria, the Syrian Civil War has decimated the country's wheat production. Before outbreak of the conflict, over forty percent of Syria's workforce was employed in agriculture or agricultural-related industries, and the country was largely able to meet the food needs of its population.³ The decline of wheat production has been due to both the large-scale damage to agricultural production, which is significantly below pre-conflict levels, as well as environmental factors, as wheat production has been severely hindered by drought and the impact of climate change.⁴

According to the United Nations, Syria's wheat production in 2021 has been estimated at around 1.05 million tons, down from 2.8 million in 2020, and only one quarter of the pre-civil war average of 4.1 million tons (during the period 2002-2011).⁵ This drastic decline in production was exacerbated by one of the worst harvests on record and has put Syria in a debilitating state. The result has led to rampant food insecurity impacting over sixty percent of the population, or 12 million people according to the UN and the World Food Programme.⁶ In response to decreased domestic supply this past year, Syria has had to import over one and a half million tons worth of Russian wheat following the signing of a bilateral trade deal in 2021.⁷ The precipitous decline of Syria's grain production has been particularly emphasized

² ["Ukraine Agricultural Production and Trade."](#) *The United States Department of Agriculture*, accessed 11 September 2022.

³ Ishtar al-Shami, ["Facing Syria's Food Crisis."](#) *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 14 February 2022, accessed 11 September 2022.

⁴ Kamal Sheikho, ["Syria's Food Basket Struck by Dire Wheat Shortages."](#) *as-Sharq al-Awsat*, 1 August 2022, accessed 12 September 2022.

⁵ ["Special Report: 2021 FAO \(Food and Agriculture Organization\) Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic."](#) *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*, December 2021, accessed 11 September 2022.

⁶ ["Syrian Arab Republic."](#) *The World Food Programme*, accessed 12 September 2022; ["In Syria a Poor Wheat Harvest Adds to Worries."](#) *Reuters*, 21 July 2022, accessed 12 September 2022.

⁷ ["Ukrainian Embassy Says Russia Ships 'Stolen' Wheat to Syria."](#) *Reuters*, 2 June 2022, accessed 12 September 2022.

amongst environmental publications⁸ and outlets,⁹ underscoring Syria's dire situation as well as its deepening dependence on Russia.

The lack of available grain has led to the development of a significant black market, with the government unable to secure considerable reserves of wheat.¹⁰ This has been further complicated by the multiple centers of grain production within Syria, and its significant political consequences. The primary center of Syrian grain production has historically been in the northeast of the country, surrounding the Euphrates River, a territory currently controlled by the majority Kurdish, US-allied, Syrian Defense Forces (SDF). The result has been fierce competition for the spoils of the wheat harvest. While most wheat farmers living in territory under SDF control prefer to sell their wheat to the local government, Damascus has sought to blackmail farmers to sell their crops to the regime. They have also incentivized the purchase of grain from "unsafe areas," regions outside regime control, increasing with a reward of 400 pounds (about 50 US cents) per kilogram of wheat above the standard price of 1700 Syrian pounds.¹¹

With all of Syria's domestic complications, the broader international outlook does not look promising for the war-torn state. The significant decrease of domestic wheat production has forced Syria to be even more dependent on Russian imports, further isolating Syria internationally, following the implementation of significant international sanctions against Moscow.

Russia has also made Syria a primary destination for stolen Ukrainian grain. With global supply severely hindered with countries such as India hoarding their wheat, Syria's situation will continue to be dire.¹² The result will be a continued reliance on Russia, only further underscoring the weakness and disunity of the Syrian state.

⁸ [@fue_green](#), *Twitter*, accessed 22 September 2022.

⁹ [@NatGeo_Syria](#), *Twitter*, accessed 22 September 2022.

¹⁰ Omar Yusef, "[The Lack of Bread: A Severe Crisis that Increases the Suffering of Syrians.](#)" *Al-Jazeera* [In Arabic], 12 August 2022, accessed 12 September 2022.

¹¹ Mamoun al-Bustani, "[Looting from Ukraine's Stolen Wheat, Last Solution Wheat Conflict Portends 'Famine' in Syria.](#)" *Enab Baladi* [In Arabic], 3 June 2022, accessed 12 September 2022.

¹² Mike Ives, "[Food Export Bans in Asia Prompt Fears of More Protectionism.](#)" *The New York Times*, 10 June 2022, accessed 13 September 2022.



This tweet from Al-Rasid1,¹³ a blogger on Syrian and Iraqi affairs, says that “after Putin invaded Ukraine, fears rose of a global crisis that halted grain supplies from Russia and Ukraine and India’s ban on wheat exports. As in other countries in the region, signs of conflict over food are hidden behind fears of a “famine” that could threaten millions of Syrians, transforming Syria into an importing country” (Referencing Syria’s grain imports). The cartoon says “Syria...the price of a loaf of bread has increased tenfold,” with “Putin,” firing a ball into a hold entitled “food crisis.”

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¹³ @ AlRasid1 , Twitter, 24 June 2022.