

Facing Syria's Food Crisis

by [Ishtar Al Shami \(/experts/ishtar-al-shami\)](/experts/ishtar-al-shami)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Ishtar Al Shami \(/experts/ishtar-al-shami\)](/experts/ishtar-al-shami)

Ishtar Al Shami is a Syrian writer and activist.



Brief Analysis

In 1974, the UN defined food security as “availability at all times of adequate . . . food supplies.” According to this definition, Syria is facing a major crisis in food insecurity, while the standard of living continues to decline in the face of ongoing conflict.

Bread is the primary food staple in Syria and the only source of sustenance for a large percentage of Syrians who are not able to obtain other food for their children. Lack of adequate sustenance and difficult living conditions are a uniting feature of Syrian life today in a country otherwise split into competing spheres of influence.

At the beginning of 2022, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned that the humanitarian situation in Syria was reaching a point of no return. The plight of Syrians is, of course, nothing new; in his statements over the past two years, Guterres has repeatedly emphasized that 90 percent of Syrians are living in poverty and that 60 percent already experience food insecurity.

International reports have likewise emphasized the food crisis: the World Food Programme reported that 11.1 million people in Syria were in need of humanitarian aid and that approximately 9.3 million were suffering from acute food insecurity. They likewise emphasized that the need for humanitarian aid has continued to rise as the conflict has drawn on in Syria, and that the worst is yet to come, especially since the **UN has fallen short of meeting these needs.** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/humanitarian-aid-and-russian-blackmail-syria>) Without greater international involvement, the country's current policies will likely either continue or worsen the current food crisis. While each ruling body has attempted to tackle the issue differently, real solutions remain elusive.

In areas controlled by the Assad regime, the allocation of bread for one family was set at one bundle for family in 2021, or less than two loaves per person for a family of four. The permitted bread bundles according to the smart card system contain seven loaves, with 1100g weight per bundle, or 275g per person, per day. Bread is the only food available for many families.



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To access these rations, families must use a “smart card” system implemented by the Takamol company—with close connections to Syria’s first lady Asmaa al-Assad. Aside from bread rations, this card also provides access to other necessities experiencing mass shortages, including gas and fuel. Such benefits are only provided to those who have the card and meet certain criteria. This criteria excludes some segments of the population, such as people who own private cars or those who are unable to produce the Syrian equivalent of a social security number. This last requirement in particular excludes the children of most Palestinian refugees living in Syria.

Another requirement excludes those who don’t live in the areas where they are officially registered as residents. This requirement in effect excludes hundreds of thousands of families dislocated by war and who are in dire need of assistance.

The system has also led to the rise of a black market for bread, with prices up to five times the official price. It has become clear over time that the Syrian regime likewise monopolizes the black market to control hard currency and put pressure on its citizens. All the families who have been excluded from government support now must buy their bread and fuel from the black market, where prices are several times higher and continue to rise day by day.

The Assad regime has simultaneously continued to minimize the situation and attribute any hardship to international sanctions, especially the U.S. Caesar Act, denying the fact that the Caesar Act sanctions exempt foodstuffs and basic necessities.

Standards of living are no better in opposition-controlled northern areas of Syria. These areas contain large numbers of refugee camps for internally-displaced Syrians from different regions of the country and have been repeatedly targeted by Russian airstrikes. The camps are overburdened with more people than they are able to absorb, and rely on limited international aid from border crossings with Turkey to meet the needs of this vulnerable population.

As a result, the economic situation in this area is contingent on Turkish political developments and rivalries between different political parties in Turkey, especially since the currency used in this region is the Turkish lira. The region has also been affected by the changing allegiances of the various forces controlling the area, particularly al-Julani’s extremist government which depleted the population as part of its ongoing conflict with other forces that were present in the area.

But the most serious effects have resulted from the economic crisis that Turkey itself facing. Opposition-controlled areas are heavily dependent on products brought in from Turkey, usually bought in the black market, where prices

are skyrocketing. The price of products smuggled from regime-controlled areas has also risen, reflecting the impact of the economic crisis there and the greed of the corrupt circles that peddle even products provided by UN programs.

On November 24, 2021, the Salvation Government in Idlib issued a decision to set the price of a bag of subsidized bread with seven loaves weighing 600 grams at 2.5 Turkish lira, while the price of non-subsidized bread of the same weight was set at 3.5 Turkish lira. One Turkish lira is currently equivalent to 264 Syrian lira. This was applied to the areas controlled by the Interim Government, including factions known as the Syrian National Army, as part of the **power struggles in the area (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syrians-are-increasingly-recognizing-turkeys-disrupting-role-syria>)** that took place at the expense of the daily needs and sustenance of the population both outside and inside the camps, and led to further deterioration of conditions.

The area east of the Euphrates in northeastern Syria is controlled by the Autonomous Administration (AA) and the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. However, continued institutional links with the regime mean that the standard of living in this region are impacted by the situation in regime-controlled areas. Even today, pictures of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad remain on some governmental buildings in AA controlled areas. The water, electricity, post office, cell phone service, automatic bread ovens, fuel, and gas services all remain directly connected to the regime in Damascus.

The AA deals with the needs of citizens via sites for distribution and oversight of basic necessities known locally as 'communes.' The communes are involved in administrative affairs within districts, such as granting permits and gathering extra taxes and fees worth millions, but those fees are then sent to Damascus.

A resident of this region attested that they were paying double taxes, both to the AA and again to the al-Assad regime. However, the resident claimed they still had not been provided with basic necessities, reporting that the region suffers from constant power outages despite households paying doubled electric bills and fees every month. Furthermore, they stated that there are documents indicating that each week, bags of money are taken to the airport en route to Damascus. In these circumstances, the AA functions as tax collector and guardian of the Assad regime and an instrument of its oppressive policies.

Another resident questioned how people were benefitting from the U.S. and French presence, when the presence of these forces only ensured the presence of hired guns and the conscription of destitute youth (<http://www.apple.com>). The reality is that many families have lost the young men who they needed to provide for them. The resident also asked why international actors could not support development in the region and prevent the Assad regime from seizing funds that could instead go towards solving local crises. People in these regions seem to expect more involvement in developmental activities from the international community, especially the United States and France, arguing that such involvement will grant further legitimacy to the U.S. and French military presence, and to the local allies as well.

Flour has also become an important smuggling item from AA controlled regions into those controlled by the regime. The price of a kilo of flatbread in stores has jumped to more than 1700 Syrian lira, while bakery bread is sold for 250 Syrian lira. A family of five to seven people would therefore need at least 5,000 Syrian lira in order to buy their daily bread in the countryside of the AA controlled portion of **Deir Ezzor (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/qassem-soleimanis-ghost-deir-ezzor>)**.

Scorched Earth

Before the war, Syria was one of the of the Middle East's most important agricultural producers; 40 percent of Syria's population worked in agriculture or livestock and the country was able to meet the food needs of its population. However, the country's agricultural sector has since been seriously damaged by the destruction of land and burning of crops, particularly the wheat harvest, and through Russian airstrikes that targeted all vital services in opposition

regions.

As a result of the the regime's siege tactics and forced demographic shifts—bolstered by Russia and Iranian-backed militias—agricultural production has ground to a halt. Furthermore, **[desertification and climate change \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/regional-water-cooperation-middle-east-and-north-africa-transitioning-conflict\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/regional-water-cooperation-middle-east-and-north-africa-transitioning-conflict)** has eliminated what was left of arable land, which has further reduced Syrian production of wheat. Wheat production levels had previously been close to 4 million tons per year, with half stored or exported while using the other half to supply bread and other food products domestically. Now, according to UN estimates, the country produced 1.05 million tons in 2021.

As a result, the regime in Damascus must import wheat from its partner Russia. Yousef Qasem, the head of the regime's Grain Establishment, said that the organization had signed import contracts for quantities of wheat “close to a million tons from #Russian sources.” He added that “there will be further announcements for new contracts dependent on need” and that the preference was always for Russian wheat in these tenders.

Acknowledging the Potential of Syria's Breadbasket Regions

The Jazira and Euphrates regions in northeastern Syria have always been considered the country's breadbasket—especially in terms of wheat production. This area, now under AA control, has enjoyed a period of relative stability under U.S. protection. In contrast to other regions, its agricultural lands have been relatively undamaged by acts of war. However, it has nevertheless also experienced a decline in agricultural production due to drought, problems with sowing seeds, and conflicts between Arab and Kurdish entities in the region.

The harvests have also recently been targeted by arson. Though the identity of the arsonists is not known, there are many with an interest in setting such fires: the Russian occupation has clear motives, while it is also in Iranian interests to cause widespread famine in Syria allowing them to continue to grow their **soft power (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/qassem-soleimanis-ghost-deir-ezzor)** via material aid. This policy focuses on families claiming to be descendants of the prophet (*ashraf*), due to their social and tribal standing, drawing on the same social connections that Syria has relied on for decades. With Iranian aid to the region often provided through the Ashraf, this has allowed them to expand their own influence as well as that of their Iranian benefactors.

The Assad regime likewise continues to have a particular stake in setting fires and destroying harvests because of its ambitions to regain military control throughout Syria. It has used siege and starvation tactics to control the population both prior to and during the Syrian war. It has also exploited these crises to put pressure on the international community to obtain certain concessions and privileges. ISIS should likewise not be overlooked given its own history of targeting and destruction, especially as the group has a long history of using arson as a means of extortion and intimidation against farmers in Iraq and Syria.

Despite the attacks on this breadbasket region, there is an opportunity to properly utilize the area's oil reserves—some of the largest in the country—to boost the potential of agricultural land there were the United States to provide support. This would help Syria avoid a massive food security crisis and reduce pressure on the UN, which is experiencing major obstacles to providing humanitarian aid to Syria due to **Russian veto power in the UN Security Council (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/humanitarian-aid-and-russian-blackmail-syria)**. Moscow has stipulated that aid must be provided via the Assad regime, and has blocked aid to Syria in order to push for its own interests and to keep the regime afloat. The regime continues to steal Syrian resources and food, even after millions of Syrians have already been displaced, and remains the main driver behind all these crises whose repercussions are felt around the world.

Providing systematic support to the residents of the Euphrates and Jazira regions, and pursuing development

through creating small-, medium-, and large-scale agricultural projects and light industry for agricultural development will help begin to address the famine across Syria. The region has the human and natural resource capacities to meet approximately 60 percent of Syria's food supply needs. Returning a reliable domestic food supply to Syria would likewise diminish the opportunities for interference from neighboring countries and help bring about stability, which would in turn encourage internally-displaced Arabs and Kurds to return to work their land and promote self-sufficiency. The success of this initiative could then serve as an example that could be copied in other regions in Syria with fertile land and resources. ❖

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