War in Ukraine and Russia sanctions threaten food supplies in Middle East and North Africa

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The US-NATO provoked war in Ukraine threatens food supplies around the world, not least in the Middle East and North Africa where food is already unaffordable for millions thanks to the decades-long wars of US imperialism.

Russia and Ukraine account for nearly one third of the world's grain exports, one fifth of its corn trade and almost 80 percent of sunflower oil production.

Exports from both Russia and Ukraine have virtually ground to a halt because of sanctions imposed by Washington and the European powers on Russia's banks, shipping and airlines. The northern Black Sea ports, a key battleground in the war and through which most of Russia and Ukraine's grain exports are shipped, have closed because of the fighting, halting dozens of cargo vessels. Ships are not available for chartering. Flight bans are causing cargo planes to divert around Russian airspace, increasing costs and travel time.

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the price of wheat increased 80 percent between April 2020 and December 2021 as the pandemic took hold and geopolitical tensions mounted, while wheat prices have jumped 37 percent and corn prices 21 percent so far in 2022.

Price rises are due in part to investor speculation, about which little is said, the diversion of arable land to ethanol production, droughts and climate change in key-producing countries, including Iran, which has suffered its most severe drought in 50 years, Syria, Morocco, Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt. The wheat carry-over—what's left from past crops—is at its lowest since 2008, when food prices surged, triggering food riots in more than 60 countries. Even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, geopolitical tensions had roiled global food markets, with dire consequences for countries reliant on imports from the Ukraine, including Lebanon and Yemen where more than half the population already suffer from acute food insecurity.

The UN's World Food Program (WFP), which provides food for the Middle East and North Africa's poorest and most food-vulnerable countries such as Syria and Yemen, is dependent on Ukrainian wheat. WFP chief David Beasley told the BBC World Service that the number of people facing potential starvation across the world had already risen from 80 million to 276 million in the four years before Russia's invasion, due to what he called a "perfect storm" of conflict, climate change and the pandemic.

Egypt, the world's largest wheat importer, gets around 86 percent of its imports from Ukraine and Russia and has been unable to find significant alternative supplies. Turkey sources 75 percent of its wheat imports from the two countries. Lebanon imports 60 percent of its total wheat consumption from Ukraine, Tunisia nearly 50 percent, Libya 43 percent and Yemen 22 percent.

The US Department of Agriculture expects that Iran, Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Egypt will together have to increase grain imports in the 2021-22 agricultural year to 35.5 million metric tons, or 17 percent of the world total, up from 25.9 million tons in 2020-21 when it constituted 13 percent of the total.

Bread prices are particularly sensitive in Egypt, where 30 percent of the population lives on less than $1.50 a day and relies on subsidized bread for one third of their calories and 45 percent of their protein. The ruling elite is acutely conscious that attempts to raise the price, unchanged since the 1980s, set off food protests in 1977 and demonstrations in 2008, and was a major factor in toppling President Hosni Mubarak in 2011. Since then, protests have taken place in 2017, 2019 and 2020 over the soaring cost of living. Last year, President Abdel Fatteh el-Sisi announced he would raise subsidised bread prices, a move yet to be implemented, but with Egypt's bread subsidies already costing $3.2 billion a year, the Finance Ministry estimates it will have to budget an additional $763 million in 2021-22.

In Lebanon, where prices have soared by 1,000 percent in less than three years, there is only a month's worth of supplies on hand. Amid a collapsing economy, in March 2020 the government defaulted on its international debt and has reduced subsidies on a range of goods, including bread, some types of which now cost five to nine times more than three years ago.

Yemen has faced a catastrophic war following the US-backed Saudi invasion of the country in April 2015 to put down the Houthi-led insurgency that had ousted the Western-backed government. It is highly dependent on bread, which accounts for more than half of the calorie intake for the average household. Rama Hansraj, Yemen's director of Save the Children, said, "In Yemen, 8 million children are already on the brink of famine. Families are exhausted. They've faced horror after horror through seven years of war. We fear they will not be able to endure another shock, especially to the main ingredient keeping their children alive." She warned of a global "ripple effect" that could unleash "additional horrors" in other vulnerable countries.

Tunisia, where President Kais Saied dismissed parliament last summer amid unrest over unemployment and soaring inflation, was already struggling to pay for grain imports. While the government controls the price of bread, it has for months failed to reimburse the bakeries for the cost of flour, leading bakeries to close early or ration supplies. Saied is desperate for an IMF loan to cover international debt, whose conditions require cuts to public sector wages and subsidies.

Sudan is also dependent on wheat and vegetable oil imports from Russia and Ukraine. Its foreign reserves have plummeted to less than $3 billion this month and faces the threat of renewed US sanctions after the mass killing of pro-democracy activists. Sudan's deputy leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo flew to Moscow to offer Russia a naval base on the Red Sea in a bid to pre-empt sanctions.

The cost of fertilisers for domestic production is likewise soaring. The price of gas and potash, used in production, have risen, after the European Union announced sanctions on Belarus, a leading producer of potash, and Russia—which supplies about a quarter of the key nutrients used in European food production—along with China, took steps to safeguard their own supplies. Yara International, the Norwegian chemical company, told the BBC that a shortage of fertilisers could hit crop yields, leading to "a global food crisis."

There is a further issue, as Frank Fannon, former assistant US secretary of state for energy told the *Financial Times*, "Commodities have been weaponised for a long time… it's always a question of when does a state pull the trigger."

Washington and the major powers see the war in Ukraine as a foreign policy "opportunity" to force their client states into line and reorder the world economy in their interests. In the context of wheat, other exporting countries such as the US, Canada and Australia—while they cannot make up the shortfall—stand to benefit from a surge in demand.

The world's ruling elites are acutely conscious that the food price crisis will stoke social instability, migration and political unrest as was the case with the Arab Spring revolutions in 2011.

Last month, anti-government protests and food riots broke out in Morocco. This week, truck drivers struck for three days in protest at spiralling fuel costs and called for a cap on prices and profiteering by the distributors.

Exorbitant food price increases and expanding global hunger, alongside the danger of nuclear war, pose the urgent necessity for the international working class to fight, not for war on the side of one or other capitalist regime, but for an international socialist revolution to reorganise production on the basis of social need not private profit as a matter of life-and-death.