

Protests against hike in food and fuel prices across Middle East and North Africa

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The surging cost of living and the unavailability of basic goods are triggering mass protests around the world.

The Middle East and North Africa has been ravaged for decades by US-led wars and economic sanctions. This situation has been made much worse by Washington's sanctions and exclusion of Russia from the international payments system, the disruption caused by the war in Ukraine, and repeated droughts brought on by climate change and the mismanagement of water resources, all while the countries' corrupt elites have plundered the economy.

The impact on global food supplies, particularly of corn, wheat, barley, sunflower oil and seeds, and on prices is immense. Russia and Ukraine, whose April planting season has been affected by the destruction of machinery and equipment and the flight of farmworkers, together normally produce one-third of the world's wheat. Grain's global price rose 21 percent in the 10 days from the start of the war in Ukraine in last February.

The Middle East and North Africa is home to some of the largest humanitarian and refugee crises in the world. It imports 50 percent of its wheat from Russia and Ukraine, with countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Jordan, and Palestine, already battered by inflation or humanitarian crises, among the worst affected. Some countries were battling severe levels of hunger and malnutrition well before the war.

According to the World Bank 20 percent of the region's people were food insecure in 2020. Now food and fuel prices, at their highest level in decades, are expected to keep rising, making it impossible for even those in work to buy such food as is available.

World Bank Chief economist Carmen Reinhart commented, "I don't want to be melodramatic, but it's

not a far stretch that food insecurity and riots were part of the story behind the Arab Spring."

Corinne Fleischer, the World Food Programme's regional director for the Middle East and North Africa, said, "This crisis is creating shock waves in the food markets that touch every home in this region. No one is spared."

In Iran, protests that began May 5 in the oil-rich province of Khuzestan have spread across the country after the government cut food import subsidies, leading to up to 300 percent price hikes for some flour-based staples. It also raised the price of basic commodities such as cooking oil and dairy products.

The subsidies were put in place in 2018 when the Trump administration unilaterally pulled out of the nuclear agreement with Tehran, reimposing economic sanctions that targeted Iran's vital energy exports on which it depends for much of its revenue. The government's mismanagement of the pandemic and the rise in world food and fuel prices has compounded Iran's already difficult financial position.

With inflation running at between 40 and 50 percent and nearly half of Iran's 85 million population below the poverty line, angry protesters have burned down shops. The rallies have seen calls for the country's top leaders to step down. Protesters have raised demands for greater political freedom and an end to the Islamic Republic.

The government has responded by mobilizing its security forces, with unconfirmed reports that at least four protesters have been killed. It is offering palliatives in the form of cash handouts for two months and thereafter electronic coupons that will allow some Iranians to buy a limited amount of bread at subsidized prices.

On Monday, bus drivers in Tehran went on strike to

demand their unpaid wages and the 57 percent wage rise approved by the Supreme Labor Council more than two months ago, with mechanics and other workers at bus terminals taking part. On Tuesday the police was using around 700 of the city's buses to transport its own staff, while Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) vans were being used to transport passengers across the capital and IRGC drivers were being trained to drive the city buses.

The police have arrested more than a dozen strikers, including one of the union organisers, while the government has tightened censorship rules for state-controlled media covering the protests. It announced the closure of all schools and workplaces, not just in Tehran but elsewhere where there are strikes and protests.

The protests follow strikes and demonstrations by teachers that have been ongoing in several cities over the last year demanding the implementation of recent legislation that pledged to improve their pay.

In Turkey, 2022 started with a wave of wildcat strikes. Earlier this month doctors went on nationwide strike demanding better wages and benefits. It follows repeated days of strikes over the last six months.

In North Africa, teachers on fixed-term contracts in Morocco went on strike again last week over their lack of job security in a bitter struggle that has been ongoing over the last four years after Morocco's education ministry ended permanent contracts for public school teachers. While Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch had promised prior to his election last September to address the long running dispute, he has done nothing to address their grievances.

In Tunisia, thousands of people took to the streets on Sunday in opposition to President Kais Saied, who suspended parliament and the government last summer and assumed executive powers. With the country facing bankruptcy and without the foreign currency reserves to pay food suppliers, leading to shortages, Saied is in talks with the International Monetary Fund that will require further austerity and repression for any bailout package.

The protesters demanded a return to democracy, rejecting his replacement of the independent electoral commission with one he named himself. They chanted, "The people want democracy" and "Saied has led the country to starvation" at the main rally in Tunis city. It

was the largest protest in months and follows a far smaller demonstration supporting him a week ago.

It is not just the region's most impoverished countries that are facing strikes and protests. The rising cost of living has sparked growing unrest in the oil-rich United Arab Emirates (UAE), the playground of some of the world's richest people, involving the poorest workers—typically migrant workers from South Asia and the Philippines.

Last week fast-food delivery workers employed by Talabat, the Middle East arm of German food delivery company Delivery Hero, braved the UAE's draconian laws that outlaw unionized labour, ban strikes and imprison or deport striking workers, and stayed home. The workers organised the illegal strike via social media, calling for an increased rate for deliveries over and above their current rate of \$2.04 per delivery. It follows a walkout by Deliveroo delivery drivers that forced the company to increase the rate per delivery from \$2.04 per delivery to \$2.79.

The strike comes after the global rise in fuel prices sent the cost of fuel and other basics through the roof, slashing the take-home pay of riders who must buy their own petrol and making it difficult for them to send home money to their families who depend on the remittances, and themselves face rampant inflation.

Saudi Arabia and Oman were at pains to reassure people that there was no shortage of wheat supplies after India announced a ban on the export of wheat to preserve its supply and ensure food security within the country—although it stressed that all irrevocable contracts for wheat exports would be honoured, allowing Egypt and some other countries exemption from the ban.

As workers in the Middle East and North Africa enter into struggle alongside workers all over the world, they must unify and organize their efforts on an international basis, demanding that the cost of this crisis be borne by the global financial elite and fighting to reorganize production to meet social need, not private profit.



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