Conflict Factsheet

Food Price Inflation and Revolt in Tunisia

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<th>Type of conflict</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
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Conflict Locality
- Northern Africa

Countries
- Tunisia

Resources
- Agricultural / Pastoral Land, Water

Conflict Summary

In Tunisia, food price inflation and declining living standards - exacerbated by strong volatility in international food prices - contributed to strong grievances against the authoritarian regime of President Ben Ali, who was eventually ousted in January 2011.
Conceptual Model

Climate Change
- More Frequent / Intense Extreme Weather Events
- Demographic Change
- Economic Development

Environmental Change
- Natural Resource Scarcity
- Land Use Change

Intermediary Mechanisms
- Change in Access / Availability of Natural Resources
- Livelihood Insecurity
- Volatile Food Prices

Fragility and Conflict Risks
- Anti-State Grievances
- Eroded Social Contract
- High Unemployment

Social and Economic Drivers
- Food Import Dependency
- Trade restrictions
- Agricultural / Pastoral Land, Water
- Economic Development

Context Factors
- Natural Resource Scarcity
- Livelihood Insecurity
- Volatile Food Prices
- Anti-State Grievances
- Eroded Social Contract
- High Unemployment
Conflict History

In December 2010, the young Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi committed suicide by self-immolation in the small city Sidi Bouzid to protest against his harassment by the Tunisian authorities. The event sparked nationwide protests, which were fuelled by substantial long-term grievances over high unemployment rates, corruption and rising food prices (Andoni, 2010; Freedom House, 2012; Mabey et al., 2013). The protests were met with a brutal security crackdown (Maktabi, 2011). In January 2011, thousands of government opponents took the streets of Tunis to demand the removal of President Ben Ali, who eventually fled the country with his family on 14 January. During the month-long uprising over 200 people were reported killed and over thousands injured, mainly by police gunfire (Human Rights Watch, 2012).

The fact that the Tunisian revolution coincided with a record high on the FAO global food price index during the winter of 2010/2011 has led several experts to draw a connection between the two events (FAO, 2016; Lafi et al., 2011; see also Global Food Price Shocks). And whilst it is important not to overstate the role that food prices played in bringing about the Tunisian revolution – which was ultimately driven by dire job prospects and longstanding frustrations with the corrupt regime of President Ben Ali – it is fair to say that soaring prices on global food markets served to aggravate existing political tensions in Tunisia (Houdret & Elloumi, 2013).

A fragile political situation

In 2010, the political situation in Tunisia was already volatile. High unemployment rates - mostly in rural areas and especially among young people - were an important source of anti-state grievances. In 2009, the overall unemployment rate in Tunisia was 13.3%, with a rate of more than 30% among Tunisia’s aspiring youth, who make up almost a third of the total population (IMF, 2010; World Bank 2010; World Bank 2014a). This situation was further compounded by high levels of corruption and meagre economic prospects for those who lacked the necessary political connections. In particular young and well educated people saw few opportunities on the job market (Anderson 2016; Drine, 2012; World Bank 2014a).

Another source of grievances was the set of structural adjustment policies that Tunisia, along with several other North African countries, had initiated in the late 1980s on the advice of the International Monetary Fund. The economic reforms included a wave of privatizations, market liberalizations and cutbacks in public spending, increasing economic pressures on vulnerable groups and thereby deepening social inequalities (Gana, 2012). In the agricultural sector, the policy changes became manifest in decreasing farm subsidies, higher production costs and conditional access to land, resulting in the marginalization of small-scale farmers (Gana, 2012; Rosenberg, 2011; Zotian, 2012). A rising necessity to use technical equipment, which many farmers could simply not afford, exacerbated these disparities (Ayeb, 2012).

Dependence on food imports

Moreover, the reforms encouraged Tunisia to focus on producing crops with a high export value, mostly vegetables and fruits, and to import cheap grain for local consumption. This shift towards export-oriented
farm production made Tunisia highly dependent on global food markets; a risky strategy in view of a rapid population growth and rising domestic demand for food (Ayeb, 2012; Cincotta, 2014; Gana, 2012; Mabey et al., 2013).

The global food price crisis as an aggravating factor
Rising food prices were among the main concerns of those demanding the departure of President Ben Ali, even though the Tunisian government did comparatively well in protecting local consumers through food subsidies and price controls (Cincotta, 2014; Randeree, 2011). Yet, these measures could not make up for years of economic mismanagement, corruption and social marginalization (Gana, 2012).

Indeed, local consumer prices for food had gradually increased in the years preceding the 2010 global food price crisis, corresponding to a growing number of Tunisians who did not have enough money to buy food (Breisinger et al., 2011; Cincotta, 2014; Silva et al., 2012). Between 2005 and 2011, wheat imports increased by more than 200%, which made the measures to keep local consumer prices low extremely expensive. The additional spending had the effect of dramatically raising government expenditure, further undermining public trust in the viability of Ben Ali’s economic policy (UNECA, 2012; FAO, 2015).

Moreover, according to the FAO, most of these expensive measures failed to reach low-income families and therefore did not protect particularly vulnerable groups. The perception of being treated unfairly among those who were not protected against the rising food prices certainly contributed to their anger towards the government (FAO, 2015).

Resolution Efforts

Improving domestic production capacities
As extreme weather events in important food-producing regions are expected to become more frequent in future, it is critical to avoid overreliance on volatile markets and strengthen local food production capacities (Gana, 2012; IPCC, 2014; see also general case on Food Price Volatility in the MENA Region). Compared to other countries in the MENA region, Tunisia has achieved remarkably high degrees of self-sufficiency in some products, e.g. vegetables, fruits and dairy products. Nevertheless, dependence on imports of staple foods remains high (Cappellazzi, 2013; European Commission, 2014). The Tunisian government has therefore increased incentives to cultivate grain, raising subsidies for both the production costs of grain and the selling price of particular seeds. Moreover, producers are guaranteed a minimum price for their harvests (UNECA, 2012).

Additional investments in agricultural research and development could further sustain the agricultural sector. In particular if the knowledge gained is actually brought to the farms, the expansion of these investments would certainly pay off in the long-term (FAO, 2015).

Improving water use efficiency
Nonetheless, food production in Tunisia is complicated by limited water resources and inefficient irrigation systems. Water management reforms therefore have the potential to bring improvements. Supported by the African Development Bank (AfDB), the World Bank and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) among others, Tunisia has initiated a range of projects to improve water use, e.g. by optimizing the agricultural use of sludge and wastewater (AfDB 2012; GiZ, 2015; World
Bank, 2014b). More such initiatives could support the development of the food producing sector (European Commission, 2014).

**Protecting local consumers**

Having faced repeated global food price fluctuations in 2008 and 2010, the Tunisian government has augmented its efforts to control local consumer prices for food. In 2008, these included a reduction of taxes on grain imports as well as the strategic subsidization of staple foods, such as bread, sugar and semolina. These policies were accompanied by social policy measures such as food distribution and targeted cash transfers (UNECA, 2012).

In reaction to the upheavals in 2010 and 2011, the Tunisian authorities nearly doubled food and energy subsidies, but these measures failed to calm the situation (Mabey et al., 2013). Since then, expenditures on food subsidies have steadily increased, reaching USD 94 million in 2014 (Chapman, 2015). It is questionable whether subsidies are cost-efficient and actually reach the most vulnerable households. In contrast, well-directed cash transfers have proven to be more purposeful. (FAO, 2015, Silva et al., 2012).

Recently, the IMF approved a four-year Extended Fund Facility amounting to USD 2.9 billion, committing Tunisia to social and economic reforms, including a reduction of subsidies for food and energy, and the strengthening of social safety nets (IMF, 2016). However, critics fear that such reforms may lead to further deterioration in living conditions among the most disadvantaged and thus reinforce the crucial drivers of the 2011 revolts (Rosenberg, 2011; Houdret & Elloumi, 2013).

To strengthen food security, Tunisia further plans to increase the level of wheat stocks. On the one hand, higher storage capacities might be helpful to counter-steer developments in global food prices. On the other hand, storeages are expensive to maintain and especially in Tunisia their cost is comparatively high (World Bank & FAO, 2012; FAO, 2015).

**Trade and cooperation within the MENA-region**

Finally, optimizing south-south trade and cooperation is considered important to secure food supplies in the future (UNECA, 2012). Several regional and sub-regional integration agreements have been established. Tunisia is a member of the Greater Arab Free Trade Agreement (GAFTA) and the Agadir Agreement for the Establishment of a Free Trade Zone between Arabic Mediterranean Nations (AGADIR). While GAFTA was found to have only minor effects, AGADIR has significantly increased trade among participating states (Freund & Portugal-Perez, 2012). Moreover, a ministerial commission of the Maghreb states responsible for food security has been created to develop a common agricultural strategy. Apart from trade issues, the cooperation aims to further develop common fields of scientific research, the exchange of ideas, and the more efficient use of natural resources (UNECA, 2012). The effects of these policies have yet to be seen.
## Intensities & Influences

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## Resolution Success

### Reduction in Violence
- Violence has ceded completely.

### Increased capacity to address grievance in the future
- The capacity to address grievances in the future has increased.

### Grievance Resolution
- Grievances have been mostly addressed.

### Causal Attribution of Decrease in Conflict Intensity
- Decrease in conflict intensity at least partially the result of conflict resolution strategies.
Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

Reducing dependence on specific supplies
Various steps towards reducing dependence on food imports have been taken, such as increasing incentives to cultivate grain, raising subsidies, and guaranteeing producers a minimum price for their harvests.

Containing (effects of) price volatility
Policy measures, including the subsidization of staple foods and targeted cash-transfers, have been set in place in an effort to control local food prices and protect vulnerable households. Recent plans will consider social and economic reforms as proposed by the IMF four-year Extended Fund Facility, as well as increasing the level of wheat stocks.

Reducing trade barriers
Tunisia has taken part in several regional and sub-regional free trade agreements, including the Greater Arab Free Trade Agreement (GAFTA) and the Agadir Agreement for the Establishment of a Free Trade Zone between Arabic Mediterranean Nations (AGADIR). Among other goals these aim to achieve food security in the MENA region.

Improving resource efficiency
Several programs were initiated to improve water use efficiency with support from international actors such as the World Bank, the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). Among others, Tunisia has initiated a range of projects to improve water use, e.g. by optimizing the agricultural use of sludge and wastewater.

Resources and Materials

Conflict References
Global Food Price Shocks
Food price volatility and fragility in the MENA region

References with URL


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Maktabi, R. (2011). At least 19 killed in riots in Tunisia, government official says. CNN.


World Bank (2014b). Water: Tunisia’s Other Development Challenge.


Further information