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Overstating Climate Change in Egypt's Uprising

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The possible link between climate change and political upheaval in the Middle East has attracted increasing media attention and is generating a new wave of academic research seeking to demonstrate the link. An influential study that put forward this thesis was the 2013 report The Arab Spring and Climate Change, published by the Center for American Progress in Washington DC.[1] Featuring images of angry protesters, parched fields and people carrying water, the report asserted that while climate change did not cause the Arab uprisings, it acted as a "threat multiplier," which exacerbated "environmental, social, economic, and political drivers of unrest." In other words, human-induced changes in climatic conditions, through their impact on water supplies and agricultural production, can interact with and even accelerate social and political causes of dissent and rebellion.

The case of the Syrian civil war features prominently among many proponents of the view that climate change is acting as a "threat multiplier" in regional unrest. A number of scholars have argued that the severe drought in northeastern Syria in 2007 through 2010, linked in part to climate change but also to natural variability, resulted in crop failures and mass rural-to-urban migration, which contributed to political instability and ultimately helped spark the civil war.[2] In terms that mirror the "threat multiplier" discourse, the contention is that climate change acted as a catalyst, compounding deteriorating socioeconomic conditions and people's dissatisfaction with the authoritarian state.[3] Politicians such as President Barack Obama and Sen. Bernie Sanders, as well as attention-grabbing newspaper headlines, have reinforced and helped popularize the belief that climate change was consequential in the Syrian rebellion.

The alleged linkage between climate change and civil war in Syria, however, has been increasingly questioned by a number of scholars. Critics claim that there is no clear and compelling evidence to back up each step in the argument: that climate change was a major factor in the Syrian drought; that the drought actually caused large scale rural-to-urban migration; or that this migration contributed to civil war.[4] Others have highlighted the depoliticizing effect of a narrow focus on the drought itself as the source of unrest rather than on the far more numerous political and economic grievances against the Assad regime articulated by its opponents. Moreover, this narrow focus draws attention away from the mismanagement of natural resources by the Assad regime in agricultural regions, which may have been more of a trigger of unrest than the drought itself.[5] Nevertheless, the Syria case continues to be cited as a supposedly powerful example of the link between climate and conflict in the region.

Egypt is another case where climate change is alleged to have played an important and overlooked role in producing the political unrest of 2011.[6] It is also another case where caution and more careful examination are needed regarding this linkage. The proposed climate-related factor behind the Egyptian uprisings of January 2011 was not a change in climatic patterns within the country, as claimed in the case of Syria, but rather a climate-related shock thousands of miles away. Drought in central Eurasia, so the narrative goes, impacted the price and availability of bread, which contributed to popular unrest, underscored by the Egyptian protestor's rallying cry for "bread, freedom and social justice."

In a widely cited article, for example, Troy Sternberg argues that a severe drought in 2010/11 in the major wheat producing countries of China and Russia led to a failure of the winter crop and limited the availability of wheat on the world market, leading to an increase in global wheat prices.[7] Because Egypt is reliant on imports for about half its wheat supply, this had a profound impact. In particular, Sternberg claims that Russia's ban on wheat exports in 2010 due to concerns about domestic shortages led to a decrease in Egypt's wheat imports, which stressed local wheat supplies and produced bread shortages and 300 percent price increases, enhancing pre-existing grievances. Echoing the "threat multiplier" framework, Sternberg's suggestion is not that a climate shock (perhaps related to climate change, although he does not explore this connection) caused the Egyptian revolution, but rather that it was a "contributory factor" in the civil unrest.

There are a number of critical questions that could be raised about this linkage between climate and revolution in Egypt. For example, does the timing of the drought, the failed wheat harvest in Russia and the outbreak of the political unrest

support the linkage? Did the 5 percent decline in wheat imports have a significant impact on Egyptian bread production? How price sensitive or source specific are Egypt's imports? Without further evidence, it is difficult to fully judge the broader thesis about distant climate shocks and Egypt's revolution. There is, however, enough evidence to question whether the most directly meaningful aspect of the proposed link between climate and popular grievances associated with bread—dramatic price increases and bread shortages—were actually related to dynamics in the global wheat trade and therefore, climate change.

While climate change is a major global concern, the rush to link climate change with recent upheavals in the Middle East, such as Egypt's 2011 revolution, is both simplifying and depoliticizing.

It was not the case that prices escalated for all, or even the most consumed, types of bread available in Egypt in 2011. Many breads circulate within the country, among them the flat, round, dark-brown and bran-rich loaves of government subsidized bread, known as aish baladi or aish al-tamween; the similar but sometimes slightly larger and whiter breads known as aish siyahi; the very white round breads, made from refined flour, known as aish shami; various kinds of dried bread, like aish miladin or aish sinn; soft white rolls called fino; the cracker style bread known as roqaaq; or the fenugreek-flavored betaw; as well as a number of regionally-specific homemade breads. The price of the bread that the vast majority of Egyptians eat—the government-subsidized baladi bread—did not increase at all. In fact, the price of baladi bread has not changed from 0.05LE per loaf since 1989. Thus, while the price of other breads and flour-containing foods did indeed go up, the price of the bread eaten by an estimated 90 percent of the population on a daily basis remained the same.[8] Far from the Egyptian government having "failed to grasp the social repercussions of escalating bread prices," as Sternberg asserts, Mubarak's government was acutely aware of what might happen if baladi bread increased in price. This is why it ensured that it did not.

It was the case, on the other hand, that bread shortages–specifically baladi bread shortages as opposed to shortages of bread in general—were significant and a major source of discontent. People were angry about having to wait in long lines for their subsidized bread and bakeries sometimes running out. Yet the link between baladi bread shortages and the 2010/11 drought in major wheat producing countries is tenuous. Sternberg, for example, implies that the bread shortages were supply induced—not enough bread was being produced because there was not

enough wheat due to shortfalls and high prices on global wheat markets. Research within Egypt suggests, however, that shortages in the supply of baladi bread were linked not so much to the lack of wheat but to issues of "leakage" (bakers siphoning off subsidized flour to the black market) and "wastage" (grain being lost due to bad storage).[9] The bread shortages that animated the protestors' rallying cries, therefore, were not due to it being too expensive or limited as a result of drought in distant wheat producing countries sending flour prices skyrocketing, but an outcome of a complex set of factors surrounding the operation of the baladi bread subsidy program.

The one area where climate-related increases in global wheat prices did have an indirect impact, though not explored by proponents of the climate change as "threat multiplier" thesis, relates to the demand side of the bread shortages. With higher flour prices rendering other breads like shami and siyahi increasingly expensive, more people bought the cheap baladi bread, creating additional pressure on supplies—a dynamic similar to that seen in response to increased food prices during the 2007/8 global food crisis[10] and following the 2016 currency devaluation.[11] But again, this is just one of a number of factors that shape the demand for baladi bread. High consumption was linked to the absence of any limits on the amount of baladi bread that people could purchase at this time and, relatedly, to people sometimes using the cheap bread as feed for their livestock. Placing the blame for the baladi bread shortages on climate induced drought obscures other entrenched social and political problems that shape both the production and circulation of wheat and the transformation of wheat into bread.

While climate change is a major global concern, the rush to link climate change with recent upheavals in the Middle East, such as Egypt's 2011 revolution, is both simplifying and depoliticizing. The link between climate, bread, and protest erases important social, material, and cultural nuances, distorts the allocation of responsibility, and ultimately, obscures more than it illuminates. That bread was a central feature in the Egyptian revolution of 2011 was not only literal but also symbolic—a broader reference to livelihoods, to people's grievances that their basic social and economic needs were not being met. Climate-related changes may increasingly be an important factor in understanding regional political and social dynamics, but the most important "threat-multipliers" of social unrest continue to be the autocratic rule, poverty, inequality and corruption that were the primary sources of Egyptian anti-government protest in 2011 and remain consequential today.

Endnotes

[1] Caitlin Werrell and Francesco Femia, eds., The Arab Spring and Climate Change: A Climate and Security Correlations Series (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2013), p. 51.

[2] Peter Gleick, "Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria,"Weather, Climate, and Society 6/3 (2014) and Caitlin Werrell, et al., "Did We See It Coming? State Fragility, Climate Vulnerability, and the Uprisings in Syria and Egypt," SAIS Review of International Affairs 35/1 (2015).

[3] Colin Kelley, et al., "Climate Change in the Fertile Crescent and Impacts of the Recent Syrian Drought," Proceedings of the National Academy of Science 112/11 (2015).

[4] Jan Selby, et al., "Climate Change and the Syrian Civil War Revisited," Political Geography 60 (2017).

[5] Francesca De Chatel, "The Role of Drought in the Syrian Uprising: Untangling the Triggers of the Revolution," Middle Eastern Studies 50/4 (2014).

[6] Caitlin Werrell and Francesco Femia, eds., The Arab Spring and Climate Change; Werrell, et al., "Did We See It Coming"; and Shiloh Fetzek and Jeffrey Mazo, "Climate, Scarcity, and Conflict," Survival: Global Politics and Strategy 56/5 (2014).

[7] Troy Sternberg, "Chinese Drought, Bread and the Arab Spring," Applied Geography 34 (2012).

[8] Habiba Hassan-Wassef, "The Politics of Bread in Egypt," CIHEAM Watch Letter 23 (December 2012).

[9] Oday Kamal, Half-Baked, the Other Side of Egypt's Baladi Bread Subsidy: A Study of the Market Intermediaries and Middlemen in the System (Barcelona: CIDOB 2015).

[10] Habiba Hassan-Wassef, "The Politics of Bread in Egypt," CIHEAM Watch Letter 23 (December 2012).

[11] Neil Ketchley and Thoraya El-Rayyes, "On the Breadline in Sisi's Egypt," Middle East Report Online, March 29, 2017.

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