Syria: Conflict-Driven Hunger

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Thesis: Food insecurity in Syria is caused by the ongoing Civil War, exacerbated by 2017-18 drought, destroying the country’s economy and agricultural production, disrupting trades and markets, blocking humanitarian assistance, diminishing government-sponsored food subsidies, sharply increasing food prices, and causing loss of livelihood and disability.

1. Syrian Civil War has destroyed the country’s economy, especially the agriculture sector.
2. The war has caused labor shortage for the food production.
3. It has caused massive civilian deaths.
4. It has led to displacement of millions of people.
5. The war has destroyed the country’s infrastructure for agricultural production.
6. It has destroyed farmland and irrigation systems.
7. It has destroyed food processing factories and power plants.
8. Syrian Civil War has disrupted trades and markets, blocking humanitarian aid.
9. The war has destroyed the road system in the country.
10. It has blocked the delivery of food from surplus and food production regions to food-deprived regions.
11. It has escalated the food price.
12. The fragmentation of the country even makes the situation worse; that is, some areas are besieged.
13. The war has blocked humanitarian aid agencies.
14. Humanitarian aid agencies can’t access some besieged or hard-to-reach areas.
15. They even have to wait for a deal between various opposition political forces before they can help desperate civilians.
16. Ongoing conflicts, destruction of flour mills, bakeries and wheat collection centers, and sharp decline in government revenue, especially from oil exports, have led to decrease in government subsidies.
17. The government’s revenue from oil has sharply declined.
18. The war has caused damages to oil facilities and pipelines.
19. International sanctions for Syrian government have decreased the oil exports.
20. The war has fragmented Syria and destroyed the country’s infrastructure.
21. The war has caused the closing of some state-owned collection centers.
22. The war has caused devastation of wheat production regions, of transportation infrastructure, below capacity production of flour mills and bakeries due to electricity shortage.
23. Severe drought and late heavy rain in Syria have aggravated the severity of food insecurity in Syria.
24. The drought has caused decrease in food production.
25. The drought has driven the food inflation even higher.
26. Syrians in the drought-impacted region not only lose their livelihood but also their food intake.
27. As a consequence, the ongoing conflict, economic recession, trade disruptions, and climate shocks have escalated food prices, and the soaring food prices then exacerbate the severe food insecurity in Syria.
28. Soaring food prices have worsened Syrians’ suffering.
29. Most of their income is spent on food.
30. They have to use harmful coping strategies to overcome food price escalation.
31. Scarcity of water and soaring water price has made Syrians suffer more.
32. Up to 10% of their income is spent on water.
33. Contaminated water has caused outbreaks of diseases.
34. Syrian Civil War has caused loss of livelihoods for millions Syrians.
35. The Civil War has caused destruction of factories, farms, office buildings, and so on.
36. It has caused loss of jobs.
37. It has caused injuries which results in temporary or permanent disability in people.
38. Therefore, many Syrian have lost their income to support themselves and their families.
39. The War has forced many Syrian children to abandon their education
40. It has destroyed schools and education institutions
41. It has put economic burdens on Syrian children so that they have to work early.

Syria: Conflict-Driven Hunger

In 2019, Syria has entered its eighth year of the Civil War between the Assad Regime and various opposition groups including the Kurds and ISIS. Syrian Civil War has fragmented the country into different regions under the control of different political groups, causing death of hundred thousands of civilians, the largest displacement since World War II, and the widespread food insecurity. According to Humanitarian Needs Overview, there are around 6.5 million food-insecure Syrians, and 2.5 millions are at risk of food insecurity ("Global Report"136). Food insecurity in Syria is caused by the ongoing Civil War, exacerbated by 2017-18 drought, destroying the country’s economy and agricultural production, disrupting trades and markets, blocking humanitarian assistance, diminishing government-sponsored food subsidies, sharply increasing food prices, and causing loss of livelihood and disability.

First, Syrian Civil War has destroyed the country’s economy, especially the agriculture sector. Before 2011 Civil War, GDP was 60.04 billion dollars, and the growth rate of the real GDP was 3.44% in 2010 (“Syria” 18-20). Since 2011, Syria has suffered from the severe economic recession; that is, nominal GDP from 58.9 billion dollars in 2011 dropped to 14 billion dollars in 2015, and the percentage change in GDP dropped to -15 % in 2015 ("Syrian Civil"27- 28). All the sectors of Syrian economy have been destroyed by the war. Among them, the agriculture sector has been severely impacted. The agriculture sector, which made up 17.94% in total GDP in 2007, was devastated (“Syria” 22). According to Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission by WFP and FAO, Syrian food production hit a record low in 2016; that is, compared to pre-conflict average, there is 55% decrease in wheat production to 1.5 million tons, 30% decrease in cattle, 40% in sheep and goats, and 60% in poultry (“Humanitarian Food”1). The war has caused massive civilian deaths and displacement of people, many of them were employed in the agricultural sector; as a result, this has caused labor shortage for the food production. Also, destruction of farmland, irrigation systems, food processing factories, and power plants have led to sharp decline in agricultural production.

Furthermore, Syrian Civil War has disrupted trades and markets, blocking humanitarian aid. There is around 2.2 percent of the total length of inner-city road in the cities of Aleppo, Dar'a, Hama, Homs, Idlib, and Latakia directly damaged; among them, Aleppo accounts for 49.8% and Homs for 18% ("Economics" *37*). The destruction of roads has blocked the delivery of food from surplus and food production regions to food-deprived regions. And even if the food is able to reach the food-deprived regions, the food price would escalate due to the expensive transport cost. The situation becomes dire when the country has been fragmented into different regions under control of the Assad regime or various opposition forces such as the Kurds and ISIS (Gobat 7). Among these regions, many areas are besieged or become hard-to-reach where food deliveries from outside or humanitarian aid cannot reach besieging Syrians. In the article “Besieged Syrian Town of Madaya Finally Gets Aid ” Rebecca Collard notes that there are 400,000 people living under besieged areas in Syria where hunger become a war weapon; she describes the desperate situation of Syrians in Madaya, Syria, a besiege rebel-held region; Madaya villagers haven’t eaten for days; their village are surrounded by landmines, and they are scared of being shot if they try to leave; and the transport of humanitarian aid to the starving civilians in Madaya could only be allowed to enter the village after a deal between opposition forces and the government was reached (Collard). Indeed, the delivery of food across regions in Syria become much more difficult due to the fragmentation of the country, dangers of military attacks, and political blockades. Especially, millions of besieging civilians are locked in their own home towns with no or little access to food or assistance from outside. Even the humanitarian aid agencies can only reach the starving people after some kinds of agreement between different political forces in Syria are made. In the article “Besieged Syrians are Desperate for Help” Niall McCarthy points out that among 3.8 million besieging civilians in Syria in 2017, only 8.1% of them were reached by humanitarian aid in September, 2017 (McCarthy).

In addition, many Syrians meet their basic needs through government-subsidized food; however, ongoing conflicts, destruction of flour mills, bakeries and wheat collection centers, and sharp decline in government revenue, especially from oil exports, have led to decrease in government subsidies. Wheat in form of bread accounts for 40% of Syrian major calorie intake, and the supply of wheat, flour, and bread is mainly under control of the Assad government; the regime subsidizes the wheat production in form of the payment of premium prices to farmers, and subsidize its citizens with bread at a lower price than the market ("Syria 2025" 11). However, Syrian government increased the price of bread from 25 to 35 Syrian pounds on January 17, 2015 (Martinez). The reason for the increase in the subsidized bread price is partly due to sharp decline in the oil production. Before 2011 Syrian Civil War, oil accounted for more than 50% of exports and 35% of government revenues; with the revenue from oil, the government is able to provide citizens with universal subsidies, public-sector jobs, and free health and education in return for limited democracy. Since the Civil War, oil facilities and pipelines have been damaged, coupled with international sanctions, the country oil production has dropped from 368,000 barrels of oil per day to less than 40,000 barrels in 2016 ("Economics" 25-39). Furthermore, ongoing conflicts have led to the closing of 100 in 140 state-owned collection centers ("Syria 2025" 11). Clearly, the increase in price of subsidized bread was caused by loss of oil revenue, currency depreciation, devastation of wheat production regions, of transportation infrastructure, below capacity production of flour mills and bakeries due to electricity shortages.

However, the Syrian government is also considered to use hunger as a weapon in the Civil War; in other words, hunger in Syria now is partly caused by the government as a war tactics. In the article “Assad’s Bread Problem” José Ciro Martínez claims that the Syrian government have used starvation and hunger as a weapon like barrel bombs and chemical weapons; food is used to placate loyal citizens and punish oppositions. Martinez also notes that the Syrian government has blocked food supplies to rebel-controlled regions and directed much of humanitarian assistance to their own regions (Martinez). Indeed, the Assad government has used food as a war weapon to attract starving civilians and to weaken opposition forces.

Moreover, severe drought and late heavy rain in Syria have aggravated the severity of food insecurity in Syria. The worst drought in 30 years, followed by heavy rain and high temperature, together with constant conflicts, have made the wheat production hit its record low in 30 years ("Global Report"138). The largest impact of the drought is on north-east Syria, Al-Hasakeh Governorate, which accounts for 50-75 percent of national wheat production before Civil War ("Humanitarian Needs" 27). The climate shocks even have exacerbated the severe hunger in Syria, as they decrease wheat production. Wheat is Syrians’ main source of calorie consumption. As a consequence, it drives the country food inflation even higher. Furthermore, people in Al-Hasakeh are severely suffered from the drought. More than 60% of Al-Hasakeh civilians are employed in agriculture and animal husbandry ("Humanitarian Needs" 27). The climate shocks not only badly affect their livelihood but also their food intake.

As a consequence, the ongoing conflict, economic recession, trade disruptions, and climate shocks have escalated food prices, and the soaring food prices then exacerbate the severe food insecurity in Syria. Consumer price index (CPI) has sharply increased from 4.8% in 2011 to 89.6 % in 2013 and 25.8% in 2015 ("Syrian Civil"30). In particular, according to REACH in Northern Syria, 37% increase in the median cost of a Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket in May 2016, which includes the minimum amount of food and nonfood items needed for a Syrian household to survive; particularly, 38% increase in the median price of bread in Syrian pounds, 82% increase in the median price of bulgur, and 121 % increase in the price of sugar over 8 month period (“MENA”36). On average, the percentage of food expenditure is 80% of an unskilled worker monthly income, and 50-80% of service employee income ("Global Report" 138). Furthermore, the depreciating Syrian currency make imported inputs such as seed, fertilizers, and imported food more expensive which in turn drive food prices even higher. Moreover, the conflicts have destroyed water treatment plants and water pipe, causing the skyrocketing price of clean water in Syria. Households have to spend 10% of their incomes on water; among them, 3% of Syrians spend 20% of their incomes on water and can be as high as 40% in some cases; households in informal settlement spend over 50% of their income on water ("Humanitarian Needs"26). The expenditure of water for a family of seven for 15 days is 15$ which is unaffordable for many vulnerable families ("Syria 2025"8). Also, the contaminated water caused outbreak of diseases. Limited access to clean water and sub-optimal living conditions have caused localized outbreaks of measles, acute bloody diarrhea, and typhoid fever ("Humanitarian Needs"70). Due to the war, while most of Syrians have lost part or all of their incomes, food prices become much more unaffordable than ever. Indeed, the food price escalation has worsened the suffering of Syrians. As a consequence, many of them have to use harmful coping strategies such as using up their savings, taking informal loans, buying food on credits, selling their assets, reducing daily food intake (“Humanitarian Needs” 26). More seriously, some of Syrian families have to choose to feed one child a day if they can’t feed all their children (“Global Report” 138).

Finally, Syrian Civil War has caused loss of livelihoods for millions Syrians. Unemployment rate increased from 14.9% in 2011 to 52.9% in the fourth quarter of 2015 (“Syrian Civil” 31). The Civil War has destroyed infrastructure, factories and farmlands and disrupts economic activities, resulting in loss of jobs for many Syrians, pushing them into poverty. According to Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR), the overall poverty rate has reached 83% in 2014 from 12.4% in 2007 (Gobat 7). Many Syrians can’t afford to buy food even if the food is available in the market. Moreover, conflicts has caused physical and mental injuries in millions of Syrians which then result in temporary or permanent disability. As a result, they may lose their ability to work, so they and their families lose sources of income. Furthermore, Syrian Civil War has destroyed many schools and education institutions, together with economic burdens, preventing many Syrian children from receiving education. As a result, the Civil War has deteriorated the country labor market, as the children now would be the main labor force of the country in the future. In particular, the deprivation young children of education could lead to a large number of unemployed population in the future, as they don’t have skills and knowledge needed by the labor markets. Also, many of them might work as unskilled workers with low productivity which prevent the economy from thriving in the future and with minimum income which might trap them in poverty. According to World Bank, Syrian have lost 7.2 billion dollars as the accumulative economic cost of lost school years in basic education and 16.5 in all education levels in 2015 ("Syrian Civil" 33) .

In conclusion, food insecurity in Syria has been caused mainly by Syrian Civil War. Syrian Civil War has had direct devastating impacts on food security of Syrians. On one hand, the war has destroyed agriculture production, killing hundred thousands of Syrians and displacing millions of them, blocking trades and humanitarian assistance, diminishing food subsidies. On the other hand, Syrian Civil War has caused loss of livelihood for millions of Syrians in term of loss of jobs or loss of the ability to work due to disability. Also, the war has impoverished future generations of Syrians in that many Syrian children are forced to abandon their education because of either the destruction of the education system at all levels or economic burdens. However, there is hope. Since the start of Syrian Civil War, various humanitarian groups have been supporting Syrians and Syrian refugees to lessen their sufferings. In “WFP Syria Country Brief March 2019”, World Food Program reports that the organization have delivered 47, 173 million tons of food to food-insecure Syrians in all 14 Syrian governorates, especially to 251,000 people in 56 hard-to-reach locations (“WFP Syria”). With international supports, the country would be able to rebuild the country once the war is over.

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