



War In Ukraine Will Echo Through The Middle East

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Ask any Middle Eastern observer about the current conflict between Russia and the West over Ukraine, and you're liable to get a quizzical look. Throughout the region, the growing likelihood of a large-scale Russian invasion of the former Soviet republic remains a distant matter – an object of curiosity rather than of serious concern. In the Gulf, government officials are busy trying to parse Vladimir Putin's strategic intentions, while in Israel (home to a large and not necessarily anti-Kremlin Russian diaspora), there currently isn't much concern over the Russian President's foreign policy adventurism. Yet there should be, because war in Ukraine might end up having a major impact on the Middle East.

The reason has everything to do with food. Ukraine has long been called the "breadbasket" of Europe, and for good reason. The country currently provides the EU with roughly half of the continent's corn, as well as a quarter of its cereal and vegetable oil imports. But Ukraine is a major player in food security in the Middle East as well; according to estimates by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, fully half of its barley and 40% of its wheat flour production was sent to the region in 2020. In turn, Middle Eastern nations have become deeply dependent on Ukraine for their food security.

Take Israel. A Russian invasion of Ukraine has the potential to be downright ruinous for the Jewish state, historian Shimon Briman explained in a recent article for the *Ha'aretz* newspaper. Ukraine "has been Israel's main grain supplier for more than a decade," he notes. "Deliveries from Ukraine account for almost 50 percent of Israeli consumption of grain and other cereals. To understand what the loss of Ukrainian grain would mean, simply break off half of your child's sandwich or half of the loaf of bread you bought for breakfast and hide it away out of reach. Because you won't have it any more."

The same could hold true for other Middle Eastern nations as well. Egypt, for instance, ranks as the world's largest consumer of Ukrainian wheat, and imported more than 3 million tons – nearly 14% of Ukraine's total wheat production – in 2020. Current Russo-Ukrainian tensions have already hiked the global price of that commodity by nearly 10 percent, forcing the Egyptian government to raise domestic prices. If a full-blown war takes Ukraine offline as a supplier, we could witness rising food insecurity – and potential social unrest – along the Nile.

Lebanon is arguably in an even worse situation, because Ukraine currently provides more than half (55%) of its total wheat. These are supplies that the country (currently in the midst of a protracted national economic meltdown), can scarcely do without.

Ukraine likewise is the source for 43% of war-torn Libya's total wheat imports. And in Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey, Ukrainian wheat accounts for nearly a quarter of all grains consumed. Kyiv has even emerged as a notable source of grain to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia over the past several years.

All of this isn't simply academic. A conflict with Russia – especially if it becomes a protracted one – will inevitably call into question Ukraine's ability to continue to serve as a reliable supplier for the Middle East. In turn, a removal of Ukrainian exports could create a real food shortage, forcing regional governments to scramble to find alternate sources. As a result, world food prices, which are already at a ten year high, could soar higher still.

The consequences are potentially profound. The last time global food prices reached comparable levels, a little more than ten years ago, the Arab Spring broke out in the Middle East and North Africa. The Arab Spring revolutions "started in 2011, after Russia banned [grain] exports in 2010," food expert Andrey Sizov of SovEcon tells *Politico* magazine. "It was definitely not the biggest driver and the only driver, [but] it was a trigger."

Could the same dynamics surface today? A great deal depends on the direction a prospective Russian-Ukrainian conflict might take. But it's enough of a worry that regional nations would do well to start thinking about what happens in Ukraine as more than a distant matter.