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JUNE
2017

FOOD SECURITY IN IRAQ: Politics Matter

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*This article has been published previously in *Arab Food and Nutrition Security Blog*

It's politics, stupid! In few countries of the world food security has been so much affected by political developments as in Iraq. The rise (and fall) of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is only the latest event in a string of political impacts on food security. Iraq is not alone: Large n-studies reveal that agriculture and food security are not only **affected by conflict globally**; their deterioration also has a contributing effect on conflict itself. This relationship is **particularly pronounced in the Middle East**.

The multilateral UN embargo on Iraq caused great harm between 1990 and 2003. Food security deteriorated. After 1996 the Oil for Food Programme granted some embargo relief by allowing monitored oil exports to import food, but the food security situation was still worse than before 1990. After the fall of the Saddam regime some improvement set in over the 2000s. In a **socio-economic survey at the end of 2007, the World Food Programme (WFP)** attributed an improvement of food security to a reduction of conflict and violent civilian deaths, improved macroeconomic indicators and humanitarian aid. The survey of the **Iraq Knowledge Network (IKN)** and **World Bank studies** then saw further improvement until 2011/12.

In contrast to these socio-economic surveys, Iraqis have reported mostly deteriorating living conditions in the representative Gallup World Poll surveys from 2008-2015, especially after 2012 (see Table). After a brief improvement from 2008 to 2009 people who reported that they had not been able to buy enough food over the past year increased from 12 percent in 2009 to 48 percent in 2015. Negative perceptions of adequate shelter, household income and general economic conditions also rose steeply between 2008 and 2015. Dissatisfaction with water quality remained on constantly high levels of 50 to 71 percent and the share of respondents who contemplated to immigrate permanently to another country spiked at 28 percent in 2015.

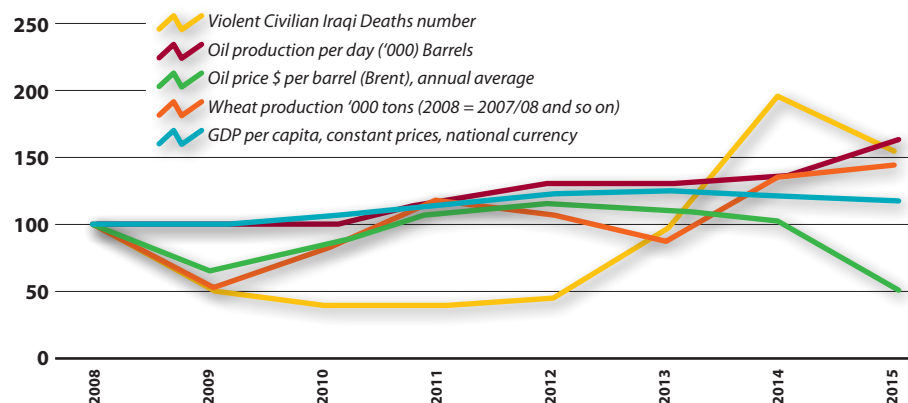
**Table 1 Perceived Living Conditions of Iraqis Iraq 2008–15
(% of respondents)**

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Not enough food in past 12 months	25	12	16	18	22	41	44	48
No adequate shelter in past 12 months	19	27	22	31	33	41	48	48
Very difficult to get by on present household income	11	12	18	24	16	32	30	36
Economic conditions getting worse	24	19	27	31	27	50	50	64
Dissatisfied with quality of water	64	71	50	64	67	50	51	66
Would like to move permanently to another country	19	16	16	16	26	28	26	28

Source: Gallup (2016). *Gallup World Poll. Iraq data 2008-2015*.

Over the same period when Iraqis reported deteriorating living conditions, Iraq increased its oil production by over 50 percent and oil prices remained high most of the time (see Figure). After a short lived correction in 2008/09 they only fell below \$100 per barrel in the second half of 2014. Hence the revenue situation of the heavily oil dependent Iraqi economy was relatively comfortable over the period. GDP per capita showed considerable growth, only declining slightly in 2014/15 and production of wheat, the country’s most important staple crop, rose steeply after the drought in 2009 and production incentives of the Iraqi government.

**Figure 1: Factors Influencing Iraqi Food Security 2008-15
(2008=100) Table**



Source: Eckart Woertz, "Food security in Iraq: results from quantitative and qualitative surveys", *Food Security 2017*.

Thus perceived food security in Iraq decreased since 2009, despite improved economic macro indicators, most likely because of the deteriorating security situation and related political factors. This is also borne out by a **qualitative online survey that we conducted among 152 Iraqi experts** from academia, ministries and NGOs. Iraqis overwhelmingly identify political instability and bad governance as major challenges to food security. **Strategies to enhance food security**, such as safety nets, family planning, education, agricultural production and rural livelihoods and reduced exposure to market volatility via storage and hedging policies are crucial in Iraq as they are in the Middle East at large. Yet political factors play an overwhelming role in Iraqi food security, its past challenges and its current deterioration. It is unlikely that mere technocratic policy prescriptions can improve food security in the absence of political stability and improved governance.