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## Does food security matter for transition in Arab countries?

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### ABSTRACT

Expectations are high that transition in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen will bring about more freedom, justice, and economic opportunities. However, experiences from other world regions show that countries in transition are at high risk of entering conflicts, which often come at large economic, social and political costs. In order to identify options on how conflict may be prevented in Arab transition countries, this paper assesses the key global drivers of conflicts based on a dataset from 1960 to 2010 and improved cross-country regression techniques. Results show that unlike in other studies where per capita incomes, inequality, and poor governance, among other factors, emerge as the major determinants of conflict, food security at macro and household-levels emerges as *the* main cause of conflicts in the Arab World. The high exposure of Arab countries to global food price variations proves to be an important source of vulnerability for a peaceful Arab transition. If history is also a guide to the future, improving food security is not only important for improving the lives of rural and urban people; it is also likely to be the key for a peaceful transition. The paper concludes with a set of policy options on how to improve food security at macro and household-levels, including safeguard mechanisms against excessive price volatility, exported and pro-poor growth, the creation/expansion of social safety nets and targeted nutrition programs.

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### Introduction

Civil conflicts inflict considerable human and economic costs and pose the risk of trapping countries into vicious cycles of violence (World Bank 2011). In order to prevent such conflicts and related negative consequences for development, scholars have long attempted to identify the roots of civil wars (Blattman and Miguel 2010). Such analysis seems particularly relevant in periods of political transition such as in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Experiences from other world regions show that countries in political transition are at high risk of entering prolonged phases of conflict (Hegre et al., 2001; Collier and Rohner, 2008). In Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa power vacuums have often led to a disruption of the transition process, an increase in civil wars, and imposed high costs and losses on countries and people (Duffield, 2001; Kaldor, 2006; Keen, 1998). Collier (2007) estimates that for each year of conflict, economic growth may fall by 2.3% and that it may take a total of 17 years before the country catches up with its preconflict position. In addition to lost economic output,

conflict has a severe impact on human health, education, and nutrition (Chamarbagwala and Moran, 2011; Akresh and de Walque, 2008; Shemyakina, 2011) and often destroys physical as well as political capital (Collier, 1999). This developmental cost is likely to be even higher in the Arab World (ESCWA, 2011). One year of civil war in an ESCWA country leads to an average loss of 3.5% of per capita GDP.<sup>1</sup> The non-income-related effects of conflicts are also substantial. One year of conflict may throw countries 5–10 years back in social outcome indicators such as life expectancy and immunization rates (ESCWA, 2011).

While it is clear that the socio-economic costs of conflict are high, designing policies that are conducive for peace and development requires insights into the key causes of conflict. Globally, food insecurity played a role in political unrest and conflict (Brinkman and Hendrix, 2011; Pinstrup-Andersen and Shimokawa, 2008). In particular, increases in food prices have been found to strongly exacerbate the risk of political unrest and conflicts (Arezki and Brückner, 2011; Bellemare 2011; Berazneva and Lee 2013). Other more commonly cited causes of conflict are related to socio-economic factors, geography, and institutions. More specifically, many studies show that poverty; underemployment of young

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<sup>1</sup> These countries include Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

men (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; De Soysa et al., 1999; Taeb, 2004); inequalities in income, land, and natural resources (Auvinen and Nafziger 1999; Macours, 2011; Stewart, 2000), often combined with population pressures (Ostby et al., 2011), geographic characteristics (for example, mountainous terrain), and poor governance (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon et al., 2010), are all key drivers of conflict.

These findings are based on global studies and history and recent trends suggest that food security also plays an important role for conflict in the Arab World. Food riots have often occurred as the response to higher food prices in Egypt during the 1970s and Jordan and Morocco during the 1980s and 1990s (McDermott, 1992; Walton and Seddon, 1994; Adoni and Jillian, 1996). Shortly before the revolutions, Bahrain, Yemen, Jordan, Egypt and Morocco saw demonstrations about food in 2008 (The Economist, 2012). Food insecurity is also widely believed to be among the key factors that have sparked the Arab awakening, which started early 2011 in Tunisia and then subsequently spread to other Arab countries such as Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen. All these countries (and in fact all Arab countries) are *net food importers* and the vast majority of people are net consumers of food, which made countries and people highly vulnerable to the global food price spikes in 2008 and 2011. While other vulnerable Arab countries were able to cushion the negative effects of food price spikes, for example through short-term measures such as increase in subsidies and public sector wages, food insecurity in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen has increased since 2008; and in combination with the lack of freedom, justice and jobs triggered the revolutions and the ongoing civil war in Syria (Breisinger et al., 2011; Zurayk, 2011; Harrigan, 2012; Sternberg, 2013).

If food insecurity was indeed a cause of conflict in the Arab World, then continued food insecurity may complicate ongoing transition processes and trigger more food-related conflicts in the future. In fact, food insecurity is likely to become an even more difficult challenge for many Arab countries if no action is taken. On the food demand and supply sides, challenges are likely to become bigger because of a unique combination of rapidly rising populations (second only to Sub-Saharan Africa), limited agricultural potential, growing water scarcity and expected severe impacts of climate change. In addition, the existing pattern of economic growth is not conducive for achieving food security and does not trickle down well to the poor, while existing social safety nets are often not well targeted to those who need them most (Breisinger et al., 2012).

Against this background, this paper investigates the role of food security for conflicts in the Arab World. Section 2 first provides a comparative analysis of major conflict-related development indicators as identified by the literature following three aggregate determinants of conflict: motivation, opportunity, and polity. We then explore the main correlates of conflicts in the Arab World compared with the rest of the world using improved cross-country regression techniques. In particular, Section 3 expands the model of Collier and Hoeffler (2004) using an updated panel dataset and better controlling for country unobserved and observed heterogeneity. We introduce each possible determinant of conflict in separate models to assess which variables matter more in the Arab World compared to the rest of the world. The identification of Arab-specific factors will then be the main motivation in Section 4 to identify a causal relationship between food insecurity indicators and conflicts in the Arab World, exploiting the high exposure of Arab countries to variations in international food prices as an instrumental variable. Section 5 concludes and formulates policy recommendations.

## Food security and conflict

The literature and anecdotal evidence suggest an important role of food security for conflicts. To further explore the potential

relationship between these and other conflict-related factors in the Arab+ region, we first group the main drivers of conflict in three areas: motivation, opportunity, and polity (Table 1). *Motivation* is embodied in the grievance of some groups and more broadly relates to inequality and discrimination. Whether or not individuals/groups engage in conflict also depends on their *opportunity* cost of doing so, which is largely determined by the socio-economic conditions prior to the onset of conflict, including levels of unemployment, the education deficit, and/or poverty. In addition, food insecurity has been singled out as a source of conflict by Brinkman and Hendrix (2011) and Pinstrup-Andersen and Shimokawa (2008), especially in the presence of ill-defined political regimes, a *youth bulge*, stunted economic development, slow or falling growth, and high inequality among different groups of society. The *polity* dimension relates to the ability of the state to provide services to the people and to include them in policy- and decision-making processes. At the other end of the spectrum, it is also related to the capacity of the state to repress any form of contestation or uprising. Although this grouping of the determinants helps in guiding the discussion, it is important to note that some factors may not exclusively fall into one of these three categories. In fact, several determinants may interact with each other and make the categorical divide less clear. For instance, the lack of inclusion induced by institutional dysfunctioning (polity) may feed into grievances (motivation). Such grievances may lead to increasingly unstable political conditions, for example under increased economic openness to the rest of the world (opportunity).

### Opportunity cost and conflict

Among the most striking differences between the Arab+ region and other parts of the world is the region's high dependence on oil exports. Oil exports as a share of GDP are about ten times higher in the Arab+ region (18.4%) compared to Asia & Pacific (1.7%); eight times higher compared to the Americas and the Caribbean (2.4%), three times higher than in Europe and Central Asia (6.0%), and still more than twice as high as in Sub-Saharan Africa (7.8%). In terms of the number of conflicts, the ranking of regions is quite different. The region with the lowest dependence on oil exports (Asia) shows the highest number of major conflicts between 1960 and 2010 (Table 1). The Arab+ region comes second, followed by Sub-Saharan Africa, America and the Caribbean and Europe & Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> While this cross-regional comparison does not suggest a direct link between oil export dependency and conflict (Cotet and Tsui 2013), the literature provides several explanations for the potential indirect relationship between conflicts and natural resource wealth. On the one hand, oil revenues are likely to increase the capacity of the state to reduce the risk of conflict, either by strengthening repression or redistributing resources to "pay for peace", which may explain the absence of conflicts in rich, oil-exporting countries. On the other hand, oil production tends to be associated with rent seeking behavior and bad governance, which in turn can be a driver of conflict.

<sup>2</sup> As pointed out in the variable description in Appendix A, the Arab+ region includes all 22 members of the Arab League of States plus Iran and Turkey. The rationale to include Iran and Turkey is that the former is included in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region defined by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, whereas the latter is included in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) group used by the United Nations organizations. However, empirical results presented in Sections 3 and 4 are largely unaltered when Iran and Turkey are excluded from the Arab group of countries. For consistency reasons with the empirical analysis presented in Sections 3 and 4, major intrastate conflicts are defined using the Armed Conflict Dataset of the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP) for the incidence conflict events with more than 1000 deaths a year (Gleditsch et al., 2002; Themnér and Wallensteen, 2011).

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