International Day of Action for Peoples' Food Sovereignty | 16 October 2026

The Mortgaged Loaf

In the first four months of Egypt's 2025/26 fiscal year, interest on the public debt exceeded total public revenue. In Gaza, only 232 hectares remained available and undamaged for cultivation. And in Morocco, which holds some 70 per cent of the world's phosphate, wheat falls hostage to the rain whenever the skies run dry. These look like separate crises, but they reveal a single structure: Arab food is governed by decisions taken outside the field, in repayment schedules, currency markets, energy corridors and water-allocation plans, and under occupation where it exists. This essay tests against the figures the thesis that the Arab food crisis is a crisis in the distribution of decision-making power over food, not merely one of scarcity, and proposes practical instruments to reclaim that power.

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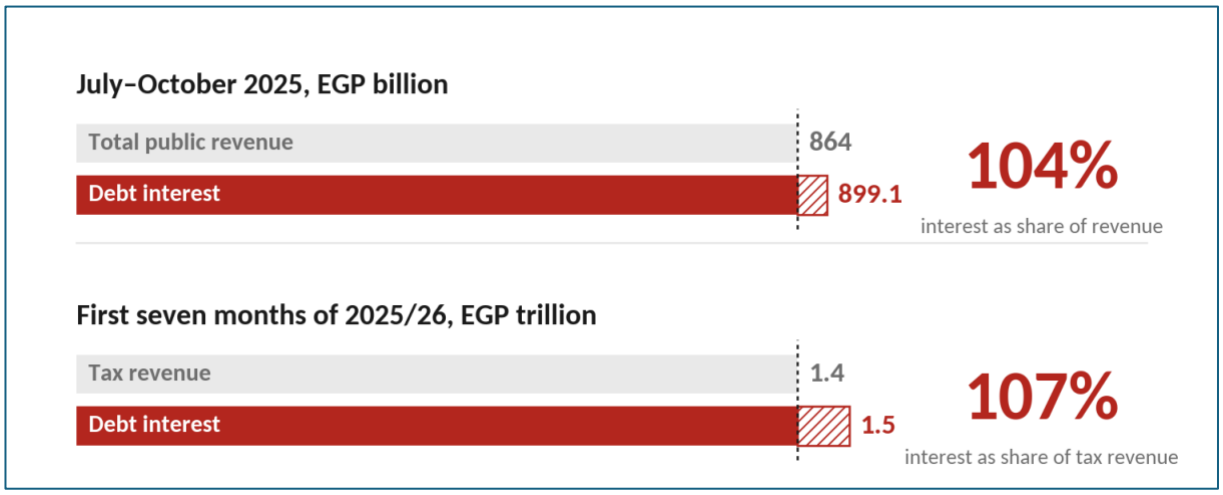
Analytical essay | September 2026

Between July and October 2025, the first four months of Egypt's 2025/26 fiscal year, the state paid EGP 899.1 billion in interest on its public debt and collected EGP 864 billion in total revenue over the same period. Revenue is seasonal, and the ratio will improve as the year unfolds. Yet the picture remains telling: the interest bill alone exceeded everything the Treasury collected in those months, while wages, subsidies, investment and every other function of the state still had to be financed from elsewhere, which meant borrowing once again.

Figure 1 **The interest bill exceeds revenue**



Source: Egyptian Ministry of Finance; Enterprise, March 2026. Revenue is seasonal, and the ratio improves over the year.

That figure does not stay confined to the ledgers of the Ministry of Finance. A year earlier, in June 2024, the government raised the price of the subsidised loaf from 5 to 20 piastres, the first increase since 1988, for a loaf on which some two-thirds of Egyptians depend and whose price, even after the rise, covers only a small fraction of its production cost. The decision came three months after the pound was floated under an enlarged programme with the International Monetary Fund. The dollar had been worth about EGP 15.7 before March 2022; after the float it was worth close to EGP 49. In a country that imports about half of its wheat, this means that the price of bread is now set partly in the currency market, and that the currency market itself is hostage to the state's capacity to service its debt.

Then the fragility moved from the loaf to what precedes it in the field. Part of the gas supply used by Egyptian industry depended on imports from Israeli gas fields. On 13 June 2025, following the Israeli strikes on Iran, Israel halted production at the Leviathan and Karish fields; those supplies were cut, and Egypt's urea plants stopped the same day. A country that exported an average of some 4.5 million tonnes of urea a year between 2023 and 2025 discovered that the operation of its fertiliser plants hung on a security decision taken by an occupying power at war.

Interest that takes precedence over all spending, a currency that prices bread, and a political energy corridor that decides when fertiliser is produced. Three links in a single chain, and none of them passes through the Ministry of Agriculture. This is the starting point of this essay: the Arab food crisis is not merely a crisis of scarcity; it is a crisis in the distribution of decision-making power over food.

On 16 October 2026, peasant movements around the world mark the International Day of Action for Peoples' Food Sovereignty and against Transnational Corporations, and this year the date coincides with the Annual Meetings of the World Bank and the IMF in Thailand. La Via Campesina has chosen a slogan that binds the two together: "Food Sovereignty with Financial Sovereignty, NOW!". This essay takes the slogan as a research question: can a state that does not decide how to finance its food decide what to grow, with which water, and for whom?

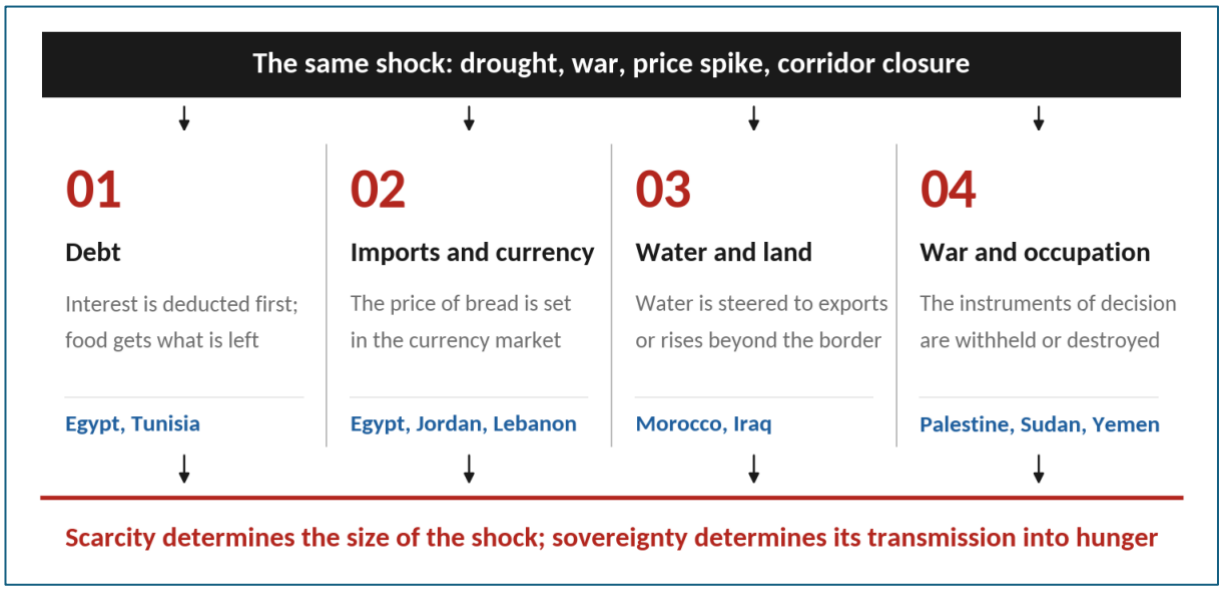
The Hunger the Statistics Do Not Show

Food security is usually measured by production, availability and purchasing power, and its crises are explained by drought, war and price volatility. These factors describe the shock well, but they say little about the structure that determines where the shock lands and who pays for it. Behind every loaf lies a chain of decisions that neither consumer nor farmer sees: who sets the exchange rate at which wheat is bought; who decides that interest takes precedence over irrigation in the budget; who owns the silos, the ships and the supply contracts; who prices the electricity that runs the well pump; and who decides that groundwater in Souss-Massa goes to export avocados before local wheat.

There are well-established tools for reading this structure. Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael described "international food regimes" as political arrangements for distributing power over food across borders, and Jennifer Clapp analysed the financialisation of food and the conversion of agricultural commodities into financial assets. In 2023 the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems described a vicious circle that begins with dependence on dollar-denominated imports of food, fertiliser and energy, deepens state indebtedness, weakens the capacity to invest in food, and so reinforces dependence.

The Arab case adds a layer to this literature that is less prominent in studies of the Global South: direct colonial control over land, water and revenue in Palestine, alongside the war economies of Sudan and Yemen and the monetary collapse in Lebanon. Within a single geography, four patterns of lost decision-making sit side by side: food systems governed by debt; systems governed by imports and the exchange rate; systems governed by the allocation of water and land; and systems governed by war or occupation. Two or more patterns often coexist in one country, but setting them side by side allows the thesis to be stated more precisely: scarcity determines the size of the shock; sovereignty determines the coefficient by which it is transmitted into hunger.

Figure 2 **Four patterns of lost decision-making over food**



Analytical framework by the author. More than one pattern may coexist in a single country.

UNCTAD's report A World of Debt 2025 estimates that net interest payments on public debt in developing countries reached USD 921 billion in 2024, that 61 developing countries allocated a tenth or more of their public revenue to interest, and that 3.4 billion people live in countries that spend more on interest than on health or education. In the region, agriculture's share of government spending is no more than a third of its share of the economy: FAO's Agriculture Orientation Index for government expenditure stood at 0.31 for Western Asia and Northern Africa in 2024, against 0.45 globally, the index equalling one when the two shares match. And while the number of hungry people worldwide fell to about 645 million in 2025, according to The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2026, the previous year's report had recorded rising hunger in Western Asia, at 12.7 per cent of the population, or more than 39 million people in 2024, in a statistical region that also includes non-Arab countries. The world is eating slightly better; our region is moving in the opposite direction.

The Ministry No One Heads

There is no IMF document that says: cut spending on agriculture. That is why the effect of debt on food is hard to see; debt issues no agricultural decrees. It works at a distance, through several channels that ultimately converge on the field and the loaf.

The first of these channels is pre-emptive deduction. When interest takes precedence over every other item, agricultural spending becomes whatever is left once creditors have been paid. In Egypt, interest on the debt for 2025/26 was estimated at about EGP 2.298 trillion, while the plan for the same year allocated EGP 144.8 billion to investment in agriculture and irrigation, of which only EGP 17.5 billion was public investment. The comparison is illustrative rather than accounting-based: interest is a current item paid in full, while investment is a capital item that excludes wages, input subsidies and the current spending of the ministries of agriculture and irrigation. But it reveals the order of priorities clearly: the interest bill

is roughly 16 times total planned investment in agriculture and irrigation, public and private combined, and roughly 130 times its public component alone.

The second channel runs through input prices. Liberalising the prices of fuel, electricity and water raises the cost of pumped irrigation, transport, cooling and gas-based fertiliser. In Jordan, the fiscal roadmap for the water sector under the IMF programme includes annual tariff increases of 4.6 per cent since 2023, with the aim of containing the sector's losses at about 0.4 per cent of GDP. The argument is understandable from the standpoint of utility sustainability, but it inserts the logic of fiscal discipline directly into the cost of irrigation in one of the most water-scarce countries in the world.

Then comes the exchange rate. "Exchange rate flexibility" is a fixed pillar of IMF programmes, and when a large share of wheat, oils and feed is imported, devaluation passes quickly to the table. Urban inflation in Egypt peaked at 38 per cent in September 2023, and food and beverage inflation exceeded 70 per cent in the summer of that year. The exchange rate was not the only factor, since grain prices after the war in Ukraine and a shortage of hard currency compounded it, but it was the main channel of transmission.

The last channel is slower and deeper: the reorientation of agriculture towards hard currency. When earning dollars becomes a priority for servicing debt, export agriculture is rewarded, while local wheat and rain-fed farming are treated as less efficient. This logic needs no austerity programme to operate; it is enough for hard currency to become the yardstick of agricultural policy's success.

Through these channels combined, debt service becomes what might be called "the invisible ministry". It has no headquarters and no minister, and it answers to no parliament, yet it draws the boundaries of every other ministry.

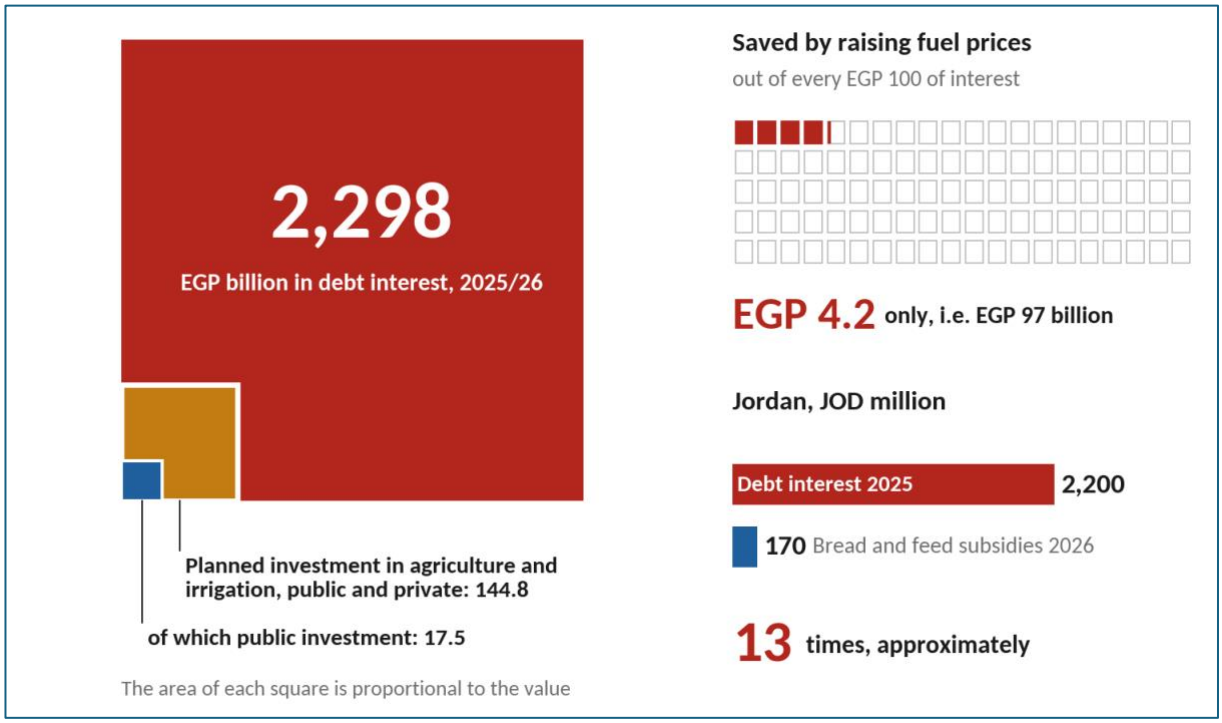
Debt service is an invisible ministry: no headquarters, no minister, yet it sets the ceiling for every other ministry.

The case made by the international financial institutions is not a flimsy one, and it deserves to be stated in its strongest form before it is questioned. The IMF argues that universal energy subsidies go mostly to the rich: a 2025 IMF working paper shows that the poorest tenth of households worldwide receive 3.5 per cent of fuel subsidies, against 25 per cent for the richest tenth, about seven times as much. The World Bank adds that more than half of households in Egypt's richest quintile benefit from food subsidies, and that in Tunisia a rich person receives three times as much in food and energy subsidies as a poor one. Cost-reflective prices, in this logic, create room for targeted cash transfers and encourage investment in energy. And Egypt's macroeconomic results appear to support the argument: urban inflation fell to 11.9 per cent and food inflation to 1.9 per cent in January 2026, and reserves rose.

Yet the argument stops short of its most important question: where do the savings go? The IMF's Country Report No. 26/69 on Egypt projects that fuel price increases will cut subsidies by about EGP 97 billion, or

half a percentage point of GDP, in 2025/26. That sum is equivalent to about 4.2 per cent of the interest bill for the same year. The reform borne by the farmer at the pump and the worker on the bus does not widen the space for spending on food; it plugs a small gap in the wall of interest. The budget also targets a primary surplus of close to 4 per cent of GDP, meaning that the state collects more than it spends before interest and that almost its entire deficit stems from the cost of debt, as the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights observes. None of this makes universal subsidies the ideal alternative, nor targeted transfers worthless. But it moves the debate from the question of how to reform subsidies to a sharper one: why does interest remain beyond any negotiation, while food is the first thing placed on the table of austerity?

Figure 3 The order of priorities: interest versus agriculture and subsidies



Sources: Egyptian budget and Ministry of Planning, 2025/26; IMF Country Report No. 26/69; Jordan Times. Comparisons are illustrative, not accounting-based, and the two Jordanian years do not coincide.

The question has a long memory on the Arab street. In January 1977, mass demonstrations broke out in Egypt after the announcement of cuts to subsidies on bread and basic goods under reforms negotiated with the international financial institutions, and the government backed down within days. Between December 1983 and January 1984 Tunisia saw the "bread uprising" after increases in the price of bread and cereal products, until President Habib Bourguiba reversed the decision. Morocco saw protests in Casablanca in June 1981 and in the northern cities in January 1984; Jordan saw the Ma'an uprising in April 1989 after price increases linked to an agreement with the Fund, and the Karak protests in August 1996 after a rise in the price of bread. And in December 2018, after the price of bread tripled, the protests that ended with the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir began in Atbara.

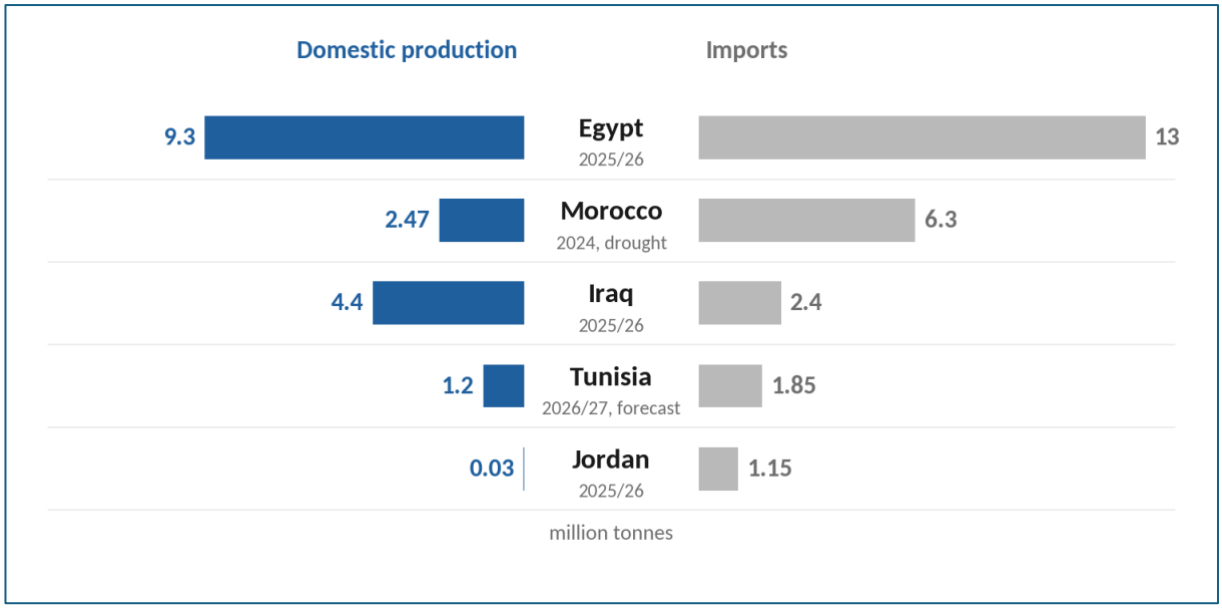
This memory preserves what technical debates about subsidy rationalisation ignore: bread in the region is an implicit social contract, and when the state cannot honour it because its financial priorities were set

elsewhere, political legitimacy suffers before nutrition does. Governments have therefore learnt to reprice in stages, breaking one large decision into small ones, none of which alone provokes the street. The difference from the past is that protest could once restore the old price. When interest approaches the size of revenue, the margin for retreat itself narrows.

A Region That Exports Fertiliser and Imports Bread

Few regions in the world are richer in food inputs than the Arab region. Morocco holds about 70 per cent of global phosphate reserves, according to the United States Geological Survey, and about a third of global urea exports, most of them from Gulf producers, pass through the Strait of Hormuz, according to FAO's assessment of the 2026 war. Yet domestic production covers about half of Egypt's wheat needs, about 28 per cent of available wheat in Morocco in the drought year of 2024, and less than 3 per cent in Jordan.

Figure 4 Where does the wheat come from? Domestic production versus imports



Sources: USDA for Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia; FAO for Iraq; Moroccan government data and Milling Middle East for Morocco. Years are not uniform; the figure compares relative volumes and does not rank countries.

A region that exports production inputs and imports food: that is the first paradox. A second, less visible, is that phosphate and urea wealth does not automatically translate into strength for small producers in the same country, because fertiliser pricing and allocation follow global markets and export contracts more than they follow the local growing season. Moreover, exposure concerns not only the volume of imports but also their source. In 2024/25 two-thirds of the milling wheat imported into Egypt came from Russia alone, and before the war in Ukraine Lebanon imported about 80 per cent of its wheat from Ukraine, two years after the silos at the port of Beirut were destroyed. Diversifying suppliers reduces the risk of disruption, but it does not confer bargaining power. A state that buys in dollars, through short-term tenders and without adequate stocks, remains a price-taker whoever the seller may be.

The Gulf war of 2026 added a fourth lesson: money does not guarantee that food arrives. FAO's Chief Economist, Máximo Torero, wrote in June 2026 that the closure of Hormuz had cut tanker traffic by more than 95 per cent, and that the Gulf states most dependent on food imports found themselves cut off from their sources of supply. Exposure therefore affects creditor and debtor alike, and food sovereignty cannot be reduced to the ability to pay; it is also diversity of sources, routes and stocks.

All these paradoxes converge in Egypt, the region's largest wheat importer, where the first two patterns meet: debt, and dependence on imports and the exchange rate. The United States Department of Agriculture estimates wheat imports in 2025/26 at about 13 million tonnes, while domestic production of about 9.3 million tonnes covers between half and slightly more than half of requirements. The current IMF programme was enlarged in March 2024 to USD 8 billion and extended to December 2026. Macroeconomic indicators improved, but the fiscal structure remained unchanged. Interest allocations in the 2026/27 budget rose to EGP 2.419 trillion, and principal repayments to EGP 2.808 trillion. In the first seven months of 2025/26, interest payments rose by 40.9 per cent to EGP 1.5 trillion, exceeding tax revenue for the same period of EGP 1.4 trillion.

What changed was who buys the wheat. In December 2024 the Future of Egypt Agency for Sustainable Development, the development arm of the armed forces, replaced the General Authority for Supply Commodities in importing wheat, adopting direct deals instead of public tenders, while the private sector imported 69 per cent of wheat in the first eight months of 2025. The purchasing hand passed from one institution to another; the constraints on what can be spent on growing wheat stayed exactly where they were.

Egypt shows what debt does to a country that has the Nile and extensive farmland. Jordan poses the opposite question: what remains of the thesis when scarcity is real and beyond dispute? Jordan produced about 30,000 tonnes of wheat in 2025/26 against imports of 1.15 million tonnes, according to the United States Department of Agriculture, meaning that domestic production covers about 2.5 per cent of available wheat, while rainfall in the main farming areas was between 46 and 68 per cent of average. No policy can make Jordan self-sufficient in wheat.

But Jordan also shows that the cost of debt, unlike rainfall, is negotiable. Interest on public debt amounts to about JOD 2.2 billion in 2025, close to 17.6 per cent of public spending, against JOD 170 million for bread and feed subsidies in the 2026 budget. When the government replaced high-cost Eurobonds with concessional loans and sukuk in 2025, the annual increase in the interest bill fell from JOD 396 million in 2024 to JOD 90.9 million in 2025. The Ministry of Industry, Trade and Supply says wheat stocks are sufficient for about ten months. In a water-scarce country, fiscal space for food is made by managing the cost of debt and building stocks, not by the illusion of self-sufficiency.

Many Doors to Losing the Decision

Jordan negotiates the cost of its debt from within the programme. Tunisia chose the opposite path, and its experience tests a question many avoid: is it enough to say "no" to the creditor? In April 2023 President Kais Saied rejected the conditions of a USD 1.9 billion agreement with the IMF, which included cuts to food and energy subsidies and a reduction in the public wage bill, declaring that foreign diktats that lead to further impoverishment are unacceptable. Since then Tunisia has financed itself from reserves, markets and the central bank. After about USD 2.3 billion in direct financing during 2024 and 2025, the 2026 finance law authorised the central bank to lend the state TND 11 billion, about USD 3.7 billion, within a budget of TND 63.5 billion.

Yet wheat cannot be bought by sovereign decree. For 2026/27, despite a wet season, the United States Department of Agriculture projects wheat production of about 1.2 million tonnes against imports of about 1.85 million tonnes. The Office des Céréales, the official import monopoly, buys its cargoes through tenders won by international grain traders. Rejecting conditionality did not remove the constraint; it moved it from the Fund's office to the currency market and the central bank's balance sheet. Financial sovereignty is not measured by the sharpness of one's stance towards the creditor, but by a productive and financing base that makes it possible to do without him.

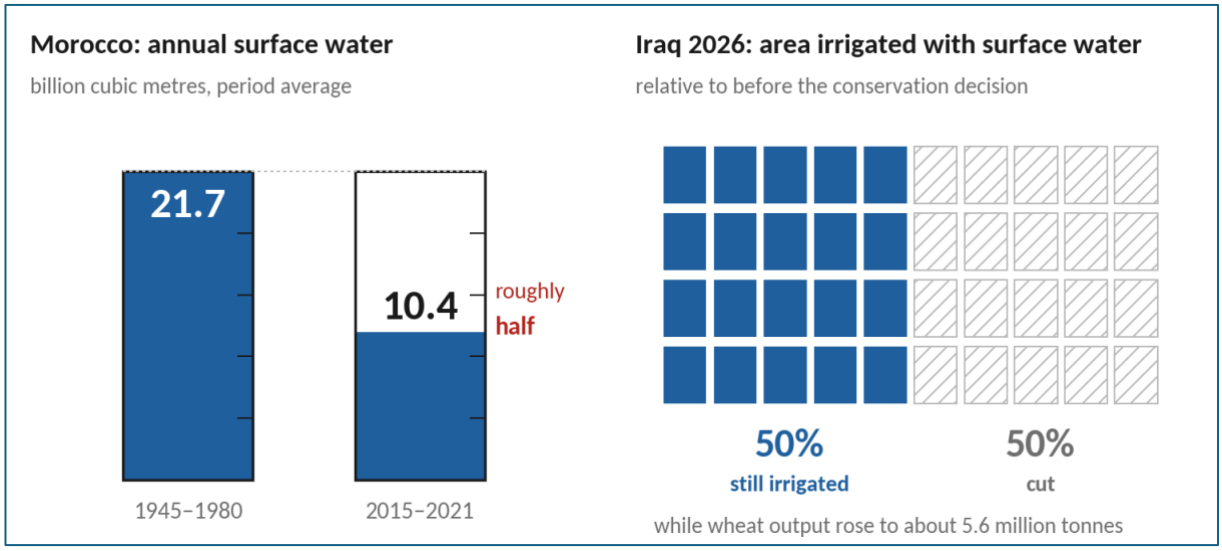
If Tunisia shows that rejecting the creditor is not enough, Morocco shows that the absence of fiscal distress is not enough either, and it is the case that prevents this essay from reducing the crisis to debt. Morocco has phosphates and an agricultural export sector that earned MAD 86.2 billion in 2025, and in 2024 it paid a wheat import bill of MAD 17.83 billion for 6.3 million tonnes. The decisive constraint here is neither a shortage of hard currency nor a shortage of fertiliser. Even so, wheat production fell in 2024 to 2.47 million tonnes, the lowest since 2007/08. Surface water declined from an annual average of 21.7 billion cubic metres in 1945–1980 to 10.4 billion in 2015–2021, and agriculture lost 720,000 net jobs since 2019. When the rains returned in 2026, the cereal harvest nearly doubled to about 9 million tonnes, and the government reimposed duties on soft wheat imports to protect producers.

The question in Morocco is who decides where the water goes. The Green Morocco Plan and then the Generation Green strategy rewarded tomatoes, avocados and red berries destined for Europe, crops that draw heavily on groundwater in Souss-Massa and the Gharb. The virtual water exported in these crops is part of the mounting pressure on water resources for which cereals, grazing and rain-fed farming also compete. The state is sovereign over its resources, but the smallholder in the rain-fed areas has no say in how they are allocated. Here the difference between national sovereignty over resources and the food sovereignty of producers and communities becomes visible.

Iraq offers the mirror image of Morocco: money is available, and it is the water that comes from outside. In 2024 the state bought domestic wheat at a guaranteed price of IQD 850,000 per tonne, about USD 650 and more than twice international prices at the time, according to FAO. Official production reached 5.2 million tonnes outside the Kurdistan Region, covering most requirements and bringing the country close to self-sufficiency, financed by oil rent. The harvest then fell to 4.4 million tonnes in 2025; the government

restricted irrigated areas and banned rice cultivation in Najaf because of water shortages, and import requirements rose to about 2.4 million tonnes in 2025/26. When rainfall improved in 2026, production rose to about 5.6 million tonnes, but the government halved the area irrigated with surface water to conserve water, according to FAO. The state had the money but not the water: the Tigris and the Euphrates rise beyond its borders, and part of their flow is decided in other capitals. Money alone does not create sovereignty when the water crosses borders.

Figure 5 **Receding water**



Sources: AGBI citing official Moroccan data, 2026; FAO GIEWS, Iraq Country Brief, September 2026.

At the far end of this spectrum, the instruments of decision themselves collapse. In Lebanon, after the financial collapse that began in 2019 and the destruction of the port silos in 2020, food inflation remained at 19 per cent in 2025. With renewed military escalation, 1.24 million people, nearly a quarter of the population covered by the analysis, faced acute food insecurity between April and August 2026. In Yemen, 5 million people, 47 per cent of the population in government-controlled areas, face Crisis levels or worse, amid eroding purchasing power and a sharp decline in assistance. In Sudan, 19.5 million people, two in every five, face acute food insecurity, after famine was confirmed in El Fasher and Kadugli in September 2025. Here war is the prime driver, and analytical honesty requires acknowledging that some Arab hunger is made by weapons before it is made by debt.

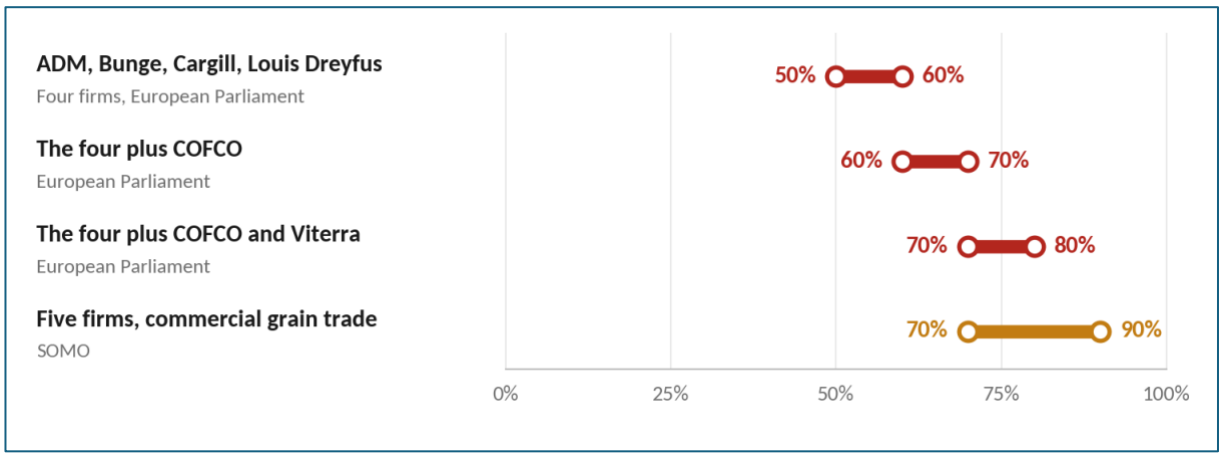
Few Hands on Many Levers

Between the constrained state and the exposed farmer stands a third link that rarely appears in public debate: the corporations that trade grain and sell seeds and pesticides. The useful question is not only how large they are, but how their concentration turns into a constraint on the choices of states and farmers.

Estimates of concentration in the grain trade vary, and the variation is itself instructive. A 2024 study for the European Parliament's Committee on Agriculture estimates that four companies, ADM, Bunge, Cargill

and Louis Dreyfus, handled about 540 million tonnes in 2022, between 50 and 60 per cent of world trade in grains, oilseeds and protein crops. The share rises to between 60 and 70 per cent with China's COFCO, and to between 70 and 80 per cent with Viterra, which later merged with Bunge. The estimate by the Dutch organisation SOMO of between 70 and 90 per cent covers five companies and measures what it calls the commercial grain trade. The figures differ according to how the market, the commodities, the period and the companies are defined, but the robust conclusion is the same: a highly concentrated market. The ETC Group notes that the storage capacity of just three companies matches the combined annual wheat consumption of the United States, the United Kingdom and Turkey, with no obligation to disclose stocks. In inputs, four companies, Bayer, Corteva, Syngenta and BASF, control 56 per cent of the commercial seed market and 61 per cent of the pesticide market, according to GRAIN and the ETC Group.

Figure 6 Few hands on the grain trade: why do estimates differ?



Sources: study for the European Parliament's Committee on Agriculture, 2024, 2022 data; SOMO. Estimates vary with the definition of the market, the commodities and the firms covered.

This concentration becomes a constraint in ways familiar to anyone who has negotiated a wheat shipment. A state constrained by hard currency buys through short-term tenders, often at the worst moment to negotiate. Traders know the state of crops, stocks and shipping before supply ministries do. In the field, hybrid varieties do not pass on the traits of their first generation stably to the seed they produce, so farmers usually return to buying new seed every season to obtain the same performance, and this seed is often marketed in packages with pesticides and fertilisers. Nor is concentration always foreign: it is also Gulf capital in fertilisers and trade, and domestic state or military capital in imports. In all these relationships the smallholder stands at the weakest end.

The seed in this region has a story that goes beyond the market. In autumn 2015 the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Norway recorded the first withdrawal in its history. The requester was the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, ICARDA, which had left Aleppo because of the war and sought to rebuild its collections of wheat, barley and lentils in Lebanon and Morocco. Those seeds were, in origin, the fruit of selection by farmers in the Fertile Crescent over thousands of years: a living archive returned to its owners by way of the Arctic. The distinction between types of seed matters here. Registered commercial seed is protected by plant breeders' rights; hybrids do not retain their traits when replanted; local seed is saved and exchanged outside the market. Article 9 of the International Treaty on

Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture recognises farmers' rights to save, use and exchange seed, subject to national legislation, and the scope of these rights is determined in practice by domestic laws and the trade agreements each state joins. Seed sovereignty is therefore a low-cost adaptation policy rather than nostalgia, built on community seed banks and participatory research that treats the farmer as a partner in producing knowledge.

Land Withheld, Revenue Withheld

Everything above assumes a state that holds the instruments of decision and is then constrained in using them by debt, currency, water or the market. In Palestine the equation is reversed: the instruments themselves are withheld. Palestine shares with the rest of the region a first layer of economic dependence, from importing wheat and feed to volatile world prices and corporate concentration. But above this layer rest two others with no parallel in the other cases: institutional trade restrictions, and direct colonial domination over money, land and water.

The story begins with revenue. Israel collects more than two-thirds of Palestinian fiscal revenue and then decides whether to transfer or withhold it. According to UNCTAD's 2026 report, clearance revenue was withheld in full from May 2025 to mid-2026. The World Bank records that the Palestinian Authority's public debt reached USD 4.8 billion at the end of 2025, to which arrears of about USD 2.85 billion to public employees and USD 1.82 billion to the private sector must be added, and that the deficit rose to 7.7 per cent of GDP. There is no national currency and no central bank that issues money, and banks, according to UNCTAD, face restrictions on converting shekel banknotes into digital balances, threatening the financing of fuel, medicine and food imports. Talk of fiscal space to support farmers loses its meaning when the space itself is in someone else's hands.

From revenue to the crossings. Under the 1994 Paris Economic Protocol, Palestine operates within a customs envelope set by Israel, and its imports are subject to "dual-use" lists that restrict the entry of agricultural and industrial inputs. These are contractual and security restrictions, not mere market exposure. In Gaza the crossings narrow to the point where all trade is hostage to a single gate.

From the crossings to the land. An assessment by FAO and the United Nations Satellite Centre in August 2025 found that 98.5 per cent of Gaza's cropland was damaged, inaccessible or both, leaving only 232 hectares available and undamaged for cultivation in a territory of more than two million people. In the West Bank, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs recorded in October 2025 the highest monthly number of settler attacks since documentation began in 2006, more than 260, and between October and November of the same year it documented 178 attacks linked to the olive harvest. The olive tree here is a living title deed, and preventing the harvest is a way of transferring land from one hand to another.

Figure 7 Land withheld, revenue withheld



Sources: FAO and UNOSAT, August 2025; World Bank, May 2026; UNCTAD, 2026.

From the land to the water. Control of the aquifers, restrictions on drilling and repairing wells, uprooting of trees and destruction of irrigation networks and greenhouses deprive the land that remains in its owners' hands of the conditions for cultivation. When denial of access to land combines with denial of access to water, the land loses its productive function even when rain is plentiful.

This essay proposes the concept of "occupational desertification" to describe this process. By it we mean the degradation of land and the loss of its productive function as a result of policies of control, not of climatic or natural factors alone. The concept is a proposed analytical tool rather than an established term in the literature; its value lies in separating what is usually attributed to drought from what is in fact produced by control.

Land whose owner is barred from tilling it year after year turns to desert by political decision before it does so by climate.

At the end of this chain stands food. In August 2025 famine was confirmed in Gaza Governorate, the first official confirmation of famine in the Middle East. After the ceasefire of October 2025 the most severe indicators eased, but the July 2026 analysis still classifies 1.4 million people, 67 per cent of the population, in Crisis or worse, with a single commercial crossing open. Without land, wells or crossings, food becomes aid to be awaited rather than produce to be made.

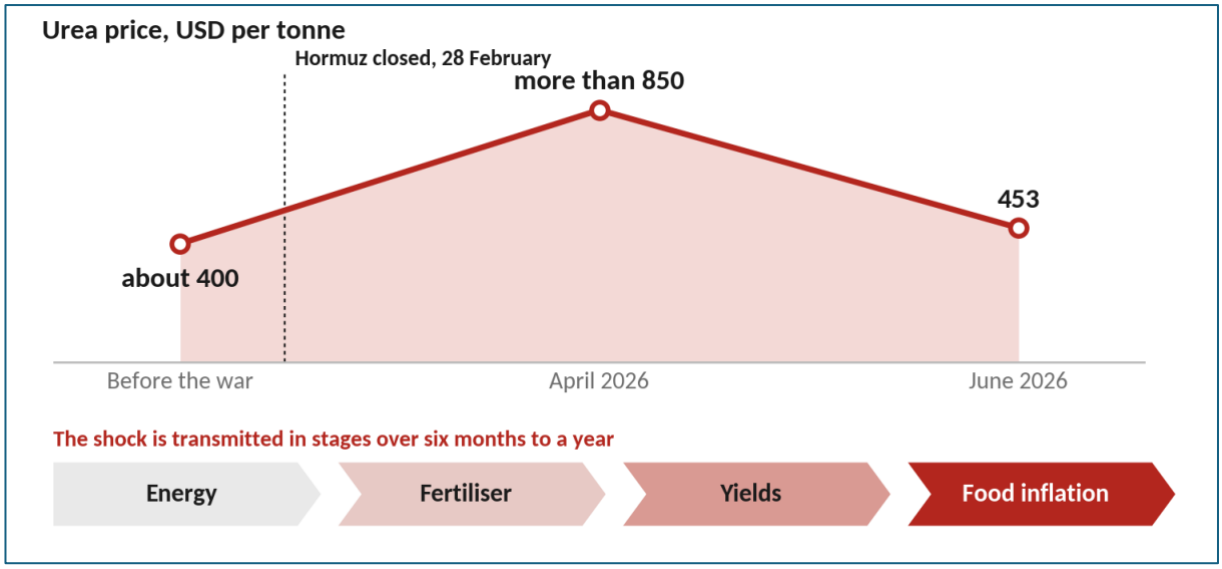
The fiscal constraint in Cairo or Amman narrows the margin of decision. Colonial control strips the decision itself from society. Palestinian food sovereignty therefore cannot be reduced to agricultural "resilience" programmes; it is a question of liberation, meaning access to land and water, control over

the crossings and revenue, and protection of native seeds and of farmers' knowledge, with farmers recognised as producers of knowledge and innovators, not recipients of aid.

One Shock, Different Outcomes

The Arab region is among the most vulnerable in the world to climate change. But that sentence, true as it is, does not explain why the same shock passes through one country and devastates another. After war broke out in the Gulf on 28 February 2026 and the Strait of Hormuz was effectively closed, the price of urea jumped from about USD 400 a tonne to more than USD 850 in April, before falling back to USD 453 in June, according to the World Trade Organization. Torero described what happened as one of the fastest and most severe disruptions to commodity flows in recent memory, and FAO warned that the shock is transmitted in stages, from energy to fertiliser to yields to food inflation, over six months to a year, with a high probability of a return of El Niño.

Figure 8 The Hormuz shock: from fertiliser price to the table



Sources: World Trade Organization, July 2026; FAO, 2026.

At this point climate, debt, water and trade meet in a single equation. A state with fiscal space can temporarily subsidise fertiliser, finance stocks, insure farmers and provide seasonal credit. A state that deducts interest first passes the shock in full to the farmer, who uses less fertiliser and harvests less, or borrows. The IPES-Food report cites Norwegian Church Aid to the effect that, in a group of countries that reported their climate spending, debt service was equivalent to 32 times that spending. Water harvesting, drought-tolerant seed, extension and agricultural insurance are slow-yielding investments, and for precisely that reason they are the first to be postponed when interest becomes non-negotiable.

When the farmer borrows, the logic of the invisible ministry moves into the home. La Via Campesina's 2026 call documents peasant households forced to borrow from private lenders and microfinance institutions at high interest to cover food and medicine, and cases of harassment by debt collectors, and it links household indebtedness to women's constrained ability to leave violent environments. The region

lacks regular, comparable data on women's land ownership and access to agricultural credit, and this absence is part of the problem, not merely a gap in knowledge. Any serious food sovereignty programme must therefore pass through specific questions: who owns the land, who obtains credit, and who decides how the season's earnings are spent.

Has the thesis withstood the evidence, then? Partly, and in a more precise form than it began with. Water scarcity is real and decisive in Jordan, Morocco and Iraq, and war is the prime driver in Sudan. But the cases taken together bring us back to the formulation with which the essay began: scarcity determines the size of the shock; sovereignty determines the coefficient by which it is transmitted into hunger. A state that is short of water but independent in its decisions can import, store, negotiate and protect its producers; a state rich in resources but mortgaged in its decisions may see hunger spread despite its abundance. What unites the four patterns is exposure to choke points that societies do not control, from the Hormuz corridor to the tenders of the major traders to a gas pipeline shut by military decision.

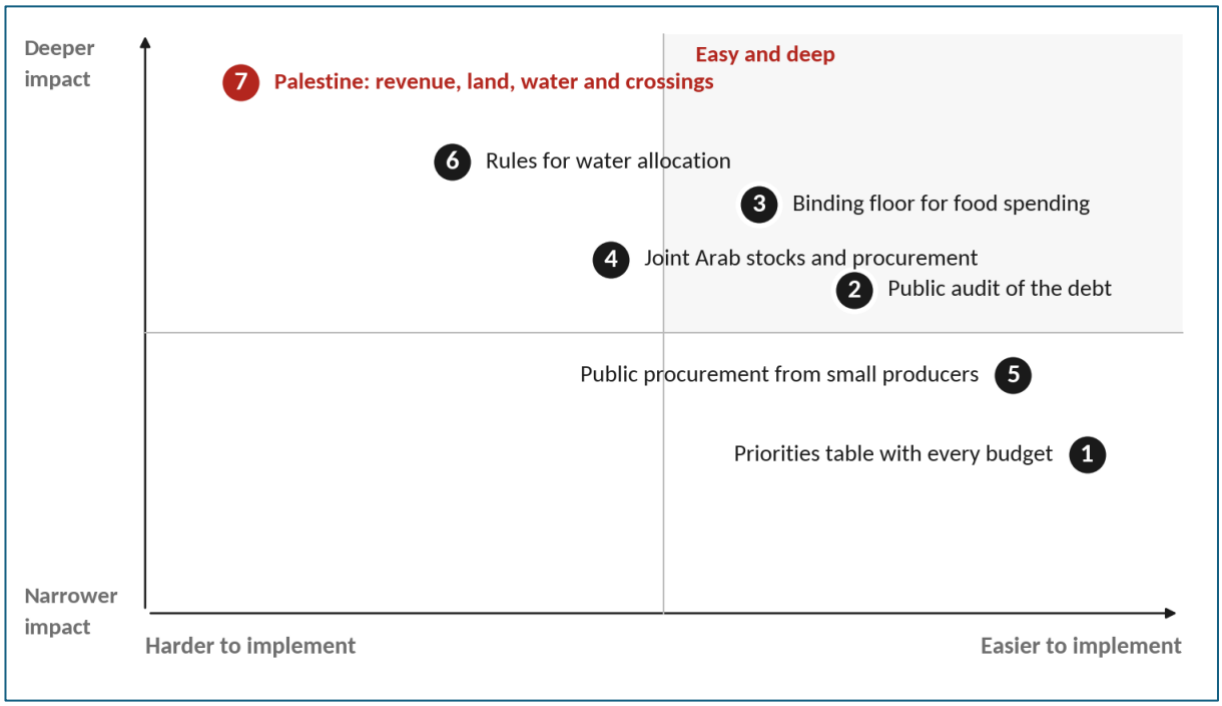
Honesty requires two further observations. The first is that debt is not entirely external. In Egypt, domestic budget-sector debt stands at about EGP 11.07 trillion against EGP 3.89 trillion of external debt, according to the Ministry of Finance's Annual Borrowing Plan, meaning that a large share of interest goes to domestic banks and bondholders. The deeper tension therefore lies between financial rent, domestic or international, and production and labour. The second is that the absence of published, consistent Arab data on public spending on agriculture, and on what actually reaches small producers, is itself a sign of lost sovereignty: what is not measured cannot be governed, and what is not published cannot be held to account.

From Slogan to Programme

The move from slogan to programme begins with a distinction that is often neglected. Food security asks whether food is available and within people's reach, and is indifferent to who controls it; a country may therefore be deemed food secure while importing 97 per cent of its wheat, as long as it has dollars. Self-sufficiency moves the question to the place of production, asking whether we produce what we consume; for wheat in Jordan the answer is impossible, and imposing it on groundwater is environmentally and fiscally costly, as Iraq's oil-financed wheat shows. Food sovereignty, as formulated in the 2007 Declaration of Nyéléni, moves the question to where it belongs: who decides? With this shift the dilemma of water-scarce countries dissolves. A country can import its wheat and remain master of its decisions if it buys on its own terms through joint procurement and strategic stocks, protects its water, rangelands and native seeds, and makes farmers partners in shaping policy rather than its object. Food sovereignty is not opposed to trade; it is opposed to unmanaged exposure.

The final figure places seven instruments on two axes: ease of implementation, and depth of impact on the structure of decision-making. The assessment is qualitative, drawing on what the preceding cases have shown, and its purpose is to organise the debate, not to settle it.

Figure 9 Seven instruments to reclaim the decision: ease of implementation versus depth of impact



Qualitative assessment by the author, based on the cases discussed in the essay.

1. A priorities table with every budget. It sets the interest bill alongside actual spending on small-scale agriculture, irrigation, seeds and stocks. It can be implemented by administrative decision at negligible cost, and its effect is to change the terms of public debate. The risk is that publication remains without accountability, and that finance ministries resist it.

2. A public audit of the debt. An independent audit with parliamentary and civil society participation exposes unproductive loans and improves the terms of future borrowing. It requires legislation; its cost is political rather than financial; and the risk is that it becomes a formality under pressure from governments and some creditors.

3. A binding floor for food spending. A minimum level of spending on food and small-scale agriculture in any programme with the IMF, which already uses floors for social spending. It protects rural investment from austerity, but it requires adjustment in other budget lines, and there is a danger that the floor becomes a ceiling.

4. Joint Arab stocks and procurement. They give states bargaining power and reduce their exposure to the corridors. Technically feasible but politically difficult, with costs borne by national budgets, and exposed to the risk of mismanagement and opposition from trading intermediaries.

5. Public procurement from small producers. At guaranteed prices announced before the season, already partly in place in Egypt and Iraq. It stabilises rural incomes and ensures a minimum level of production, but large farmers may capture it, and it may put pressure on groundwater.

6. Rules for water allocation. They give priority to staple food and rain-fed farming over water-intensive export crops. They protect groundwater reserves, but their cost appears in the hard-currency balance, and they collide with the interests of export agricultural capital.

7. Palestine: revenue, land, water and crossings. Release of withheld revenue, revision of the Paris Protocol, and lifting of restrictions on land, water and inputs. Implementation depends on real international pressure; there is no legitimate cost, since this is the restoration of rights; and the risk is that withholding continues as an instrument of collective punishment.

The easiest instruments are not the most radical, and the most radical are the hardest. Any realistic strategy therefore needs two tracks moving together: immediate, low-cost measures that protect spending on food, seeds and stocks, and long-haul work on the structures of debt, trade, inputs and water, including Arab food cooperation treated as an instrument of sovereignty rather than a slogan in closing communiqués.

Who, Then, Governs the Loaf?

It is not governed by the farmer who grows the wheat alone, nor by the consumer who buys it, nor by the Ministry of Agriculture that is supposed to tend it. Sharing in its governance are a repayment schedule that precedes the budget, an exchange rate set in a market the producer cannot reach, a grain trader who knows the state of stocks before the supply ministry does, a sea lane closed by military decision, an occupying authority that withholds revenue and land, and a domestic decision that directs water to export crops before people's food. Scarcity is real, and it will not disappear. But it does not write budgets, set exchange rates, withhold revenue or decide where water goes. These are decisions, and every decision has an owner.

In this sense, food sovereignty means neither owning food nor being able to buy it, but the capacity to control its terms: the terms of its financing and production, the allocation of its water, the safeguarding of its seeds, its trade, and its delivery to those who need it. It is a capacity that promises neither self-sufficiency nor isolation. Jordan will not grow all its wheat, Egypt will not do without imports in the foreseeable future, and Morocco will remain at the mercy of the rain in many seasons. But the distance is vast between a country that imports while holding stocks, a negotiating position, local seeds and protected water, and a country that imports because its other decisions were taken elsewhere. The first manages its exposure; the second is managed by it. In the first, farmers sit at the decision-making table as holders of knowledge; in the second, they are summoned as recipients of programmes whose terms they were never asked about.

That distance is not crossed by technique. It is crossed by a budget whose priorities are published, a debt whose cost is negotiated, water that is reallocated, and an occupation that ends where it exists. And on 16 October the question remains open before every Arab government, and before everyone who lends to it or negotiates with it: if a state cannot decide how to finance its food, protect its farmers, and use its land, water and seeds, can it truly be called food sovereign?

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