



(Enab Baladi, 2019)

Fires in the Farmland: Food Insecurity and Continued Fighting in Syria

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Across Syria, fires have blazed the vital agricultural land that many civilians still survive on for their livelihood. Many of these fires are taking place in, or near conflict zones, while others have been reported in areas where no fighting is taking place. Some of the worst fires were recorded at the end of May near Hama and Al-Salamiyah. Other, more recent fires have been recorded between the 1st and 6th of June in Idlib, on the offensive lines of the fighting, and in other Kurdish areas in northern Syria, where fires continue into today after battling the fires all week. While many different regions are being targeted throughout Syria, the significance of these fires is that they are almost solely targeting the wheat fields, a vital commodity in Syria, and a staple in the main source of food: bread.

The regions that are most affected are those that have yielded one of the most prosperous crops of the last few decades. The harvest typically lasts until the middle of June. This year

the harvest is supposed to be the biggest one in decades, Many of the fires around the country are taking place in the north of Syria, also known as “Syria’s food basket”, however there are also fires in the south of the country, outside of the Kurdish controlled region. Farmers have faced extremely hostile consequences of their bountiful crop, as political actors on the side of the government and the rebels are trying to exploit the wheat as a political weapon.

The Syrian regime has blamed the hot temperatures and cigarettes for starting these fires, although these accusations seem to be unreasonable, as the only places that are experiencing these fires are areas where wheat is grown. This inaccurate assessment of the cause of the fires identifies the underlying notion of the lies that the regime is giving to the people through national news sources. Within the borders of Syria, local sources have also identified potential geopolitical explanations for the fires in Syria, pointing to Russian involvement in the agricultural industry, and local competition between the Syrian regime and the Kurds. Both the Syrian government and the Kurds are fighting for the wheat in a bidding war. The regime has said they will invest 170 million Syrian pounds into the harvest and the Kurds said they will invest 250 million Syrian pounds. However, the Kurds are trying to monopolize on the wheat in the areas that they control by not allowing the wheat that could potentially be exported, to leave their borders. The effects of this have raised tensions between the regime and the Kurds, but the land owners, farmers, and civilians who buy the wheat are the ones who will pay the highest price.

Causes of the fires differ, and some of these reasons are still unknown. Groups on all sides of the conflict have been blamed for setting fire to the agricultural land. Turkish forces in Syria, The Islamic State (IS), Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and government backed militias have been blamed for the fires throughout the country. International news sources have contradicted the local and individual reports coming from within Syria. Reports coming from individuals in the region have pointed to pro-government forces as the culprits of the fires, while the international news has reported that armed groups such as ISIS and the SDF have been identified as the attackers. The lack of clarity on who is carrying out the attacks on the farmlands of Syria ultimately demonstrates how the fires are being used as a tactic in the conflict, to affect actors on all sides, including civilians.

One of the most significant consequences of the fires is the destruction of agricultural land, which provides food to Syrians and to other countries in the region. Prior to 2011, Syria produced enough wheat (4 million tons per year) to provide for the needs of the Syrian people, as well as export the surplus (1.5 million tons per year). In 2017, wheat production fell to only 1.8 million tons per year, not even enough to meet the Syrian demand. Since the domestic production has not been sufficient to meet the local demands, Syria has looked towards its partners to develop trade deals to import wheat. One of these local partnerships is with its close ally, Russia, who has agreed to sell nearly 600,000 tons of wheat through three different companies to the Syrian government. The prices of the wheat varies by the three

different companies, but the project will be financed by the Syrian Central Bank to import the wheat. Understanding who is setting the fires, and why may relate to some of the underlying geopolitical factors of why the Syrian regime has been accused of setting the fires, and why they are working with their Russian allies to import wheat instead of trying to control the fires that are ruining the crops within their borders.

The economic impact of these decisions could affect wheat prices in the long-term, if wheat must be imported at a higher price. There are fears that this will increase the food insecurity in Syria. Prices of wheat have already risen in the past days, and over the last month prices of other agricultural commodities and food have risen throughout country. The long-term consequences of these fires, and the food-insecurity that could ensue, may devastate the people of Syria in the coming months.

The people of Syria are the ones that are affected most by events like this, as prices of food continues to rise and access to food within Syria wane. The complexities of the conflict in Syria make gathering factual information difficult, as much of the information that is presented internationally, does not mirror the events that are taking place at a local level. The groups that are setting the fires in Syria are channeling an agenda that is meant to impact the portrayal of the conflict in the international media, this concept in itself should not be ignored, as the effects of these fires comes to fruition in the following weeks.

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