

The most unconventional weapon in Syria: Wheat

By Annia Ciezadlo December 18, 2015

BEIRUT

In the fall of 2012, fighters from the Free Syrian Army took over Eastern Ghouta, a semi-agricultural area about eight miles northeast of Damascus. Government forces responded by placing the area under [siege](#), cutting off water, electricity, gas, medical assistance and bread.

The regime's goal was to starve the people of Eastern Ghouta into submission, and it was working: The price of bread and rice went up 50 times. Locals were living on animal feed or sometimes eating nothing at all. "They began to wage war against the people even through their daily bread," says Majd al-Dik, an aid worker for a Syrian humanitarian group called Spring of Life.

Nine months later, the Free Syrian Army mounted a military operation in a regime-controlled area called al-Matahin, the Mills, just outside Eastern Ghouta. [Its objective was a flour mill](#), flanked by two rows of grain silos that housed part of the Syrian government's strategic wheat reserves — a potent weapon in the conflict that now, after 4 1/2 years, has killed at least a quarter of a million people. If the opposition could capture the mill, it could keep the wheat, break the siege, gain a strategic point on the airport road — and perhaps even make some money.

The firefight lasted a day and a half. Before the battle ended on the second day, anti-government fighters sent a message via walkie-talkie to aid workers waiting inside Eastern Ghouta: *We are in partial control of the mill. Come and help us get the flour.* Dik and other volunteers drove toward the mill, taking a back road to avoid government snipers.

When they arrived, they were alarmed to see about 80 people, mostly civilians. Everyone in Eastern Ghouta had heard that there would be flour, and some people were desperate enough to run through shelling and sniper fire to get it. Locals climbed out of their cars and rushed toward the mill, eager to grab the sacks of flour inside the central storage area. The fighters tried to stop them, but they kept coming.

"They explained that they were hungry," Dik says, "and they were ready to die just to be able to eat." Too many of them would make exactly that sacrifice.

Bread is the staple food in the Middle East. Daily bread is "liqmet aesh" — a Levantine idiom that translates as "morsel of life." In addition to its crucial carbohydrates, it is the main source of protein for many people in poor and rural areas. "You can't imagine life without bread," says a Syrian aid worker from Aleppo, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "The calories, the energy it gives you, is equivalent to anything else you eat. Except it's a lot cheaper. So there's a chance for survival."

The Syrian government understands the importance of bread. So does the Islamic State, as well as the constellation of other armed groups vying to control the country's land and its people. Strategically, bread is as important as oil or water. Civilians are dependent on the authority that distributes it, and profiteers are eager to resell it to hungry people at grotesque prices. "When you control bread and fuel," says a Syrian analyst from Damascus who spoke on the condition of anonymity, "you control the whole society."

That's why the Islamic State, other armed groups and the government aren't just fighting over land; they're warring over grain, too. The battles take place at every point in the wheat-production chain: from seeds growing in fields to flour mills, yeast factories and even bakeries.

Already, a third of the country's wheat production lies outside the government's control, according to officials from the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization. (Syrians who work in the agriculture sector believe that the number is probably higher.) The Islamic State holds [the biggest chunk](#), including much of the country's breadbasket, the prime wheat-producing lands that Syrians call the Jazira. It practices the same strategy [in Iraq](#), where the FAO estimated last year that it controlled some 40 percent of all wheat production.

Wheat, like oil, is a fungible commodity. Disbursing it wins the loyalty — or at least the obedience — of civilians. But the Islamic State also sells Syria's stocks to Iraq, to traders in Turkey and even back to the government, all at inflated prices, according to people closely involved with wheat and bread production. Other armed groups have been pursuing similar strategies. The result, as the World Food Program and the FAO [estimated](#) in July, is that almost 10 million Syrians — almost half of the country's prewar population — are "food insecure," meaning that they may go hungry on a day-to-day basis. Of those, almost 7 million need aid just to stay alive. And the black-market [war economy](#) that feeds them is controlled by combatants, who inflate prices — this year, they rose [almost 90 percent](#) — to profit from hunger and even starvation.

Hafez al-Assad, the father of Syria's current president, Bashar al-Assad, understood the importance of agricultural power better than any other of his generation's strongmen. In 1977, he presided over the opening of ICARDA, a scientific research organization that promotes agricultural development. Over the years, he and his son funded the group generously. Its scientists worked to develop seeds that would allow Syria (along with other countries, such as Iran and Uzbekistan) to produce enough wheat to feed itself.

For the Assads, controlling wheat and bread was an excellent way to keep unruly peasants and bedouins — or anyone else who posed a threat to central state power — in line. Even today, Syrian farmers in regime-controlled areas are required to buy seeds, fertilizer and water from the government. Officials set the prices and buy back the crops after the harvest. Because the government controls every stage, farmers who step out of line can be easily punished. A rebellious farmer might, for example, find the government unwilling to extend a loan or buy his crops. "Some of the farmers are encouraged to keep farming," says a Syrian agronomist, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to talk about retributive government policies. "In some certain areas, not."

Syria was such a successful producer that it became a net exporter of wheat for the better part of two decades — almost unheard-of in a region where most governments imported cheap wheat from abroad. According to ICARDA Director General Mahmoud Solh, the increased productivity netted the Syrian government more than [\\$350 million a year](#). The country also kept a strategic reserve of wheat — usually about 3 million metric tons, enough to get it through a lean year or a price spike. In this most stable of dictatorships, nobody dreamed of a war.

But all that productivity came at a price. To produce these remarkable gains, Syria's agricultural sector "[mined](#)" groundwater to irrigate farms. Experts predicted that this would lead to [severe water shortages](#). When a four-year [drought](#) struck in 2006, devastating 60 percent of Syria's agricultural lands, the country's groundwater was already [depleted](#).

The resulting crisis forced [about 1.5 million rural peasants](#) to leave their land and migrate to the outskirts of cities such as Aleppo and Daraa. Unemployment was rampant. By early 2010, 80 percent of the people in the most severely affected areas were living on nothing but [bread and tea](#).

Things got much worse when the uprising began in the spring of 2011. As the war progressed, the Free Syrian Army and other armed opposition groups tried to seize control of various parts of the bread production chain: a yeast factory in Eastern Ghouta, a government-run bakery in Zabadani, and the flour mill and grain silos of al-Matahin, among others. In most cases, the regime was able to take them back. But when opposition groups managed to hang on to sites such as silos and flour mills, they had to run them: Seeds and wheat, for example, had to be kept cool and dry to avoid spoilage. "The opposition made a lot of mistakes," said a former official in the bakery workers association who spoke

on the condition of anonymity. “They started to take control over the silos without any idea how to manage them, and they gave the regime an excuse to blame them for the whole thing.”

After a while, a system emerged. Often, when armed groups were able to keep control of wheat-related infrastructure, they would cut a deal with the regime: Workers could pass from one side to another to keep the production chain going. Agricultural experts in Islamic State-held Raqqa, for example, are allowed to come to Damascus for government training. “The militias are always interested to keep the expert because they know that the expert will take care of the system and keep it running,” says Adam Vinaman Yao, the deputy representative of the FAO in Damascus. “Where people really understand that they should make a deal is when it comes to [food]. They know that without wheat they will not survive.”

These informal agreements allow farmers to keep producing wheat, which can then be trucked out of opposition-controlled areas — for a price. Wheat shipped out of Raqqa, for instance, is subject to a “tax” (in grain or in cash) of 20 to 25 percent imposed by the Islamic State or other armed groups. Those costs are eventually passed on to civilians, which has led bread prices to spiral up by [87 percent this year](#).

Most of Syria’s wheat is produced in the northeast; most of the demand for it is concentrated in the west. As the wheat travels across the country, each armed faction [takes its cut](#). “If [the armed Islamist group] Ahrar al-Sham wants something,” says a Syrian engineer from Raqqa, “and the government wants 200 tonnes of wheat from this area, the government negotiates with the sons of the area. And the money goes into their pockets.” But when these agreements break down — over a price or territorial dispute, for example, as in the Battle of the Mills — the result is siege, starvation and fighting. The wheat-production chain is hostage to Syria’s warlords and profiteers.

The longer flour is in transit, or the more checkpoints it has to cross, the higher its price rises. In Eastern Ghouta, smugglers bring food aid from private donors through several checkpoints. At each, traders and militiamen take a cut. The price of a kilo of flour starts out in Damascus at about 27 cents. By the time it reaches its destination, it’s up to \$4.50 — far too much for many of the unemployed, besieged civilians. “It’s hardest on civilians who have to feed their children,” Dik says. “These profiteers, they know the need of people.”

This spring, several senior government employees in the bread sector told me that the regime was facing a supply crisis. Flour shortages were forcing bakeries to use the whole grain of the wheat. Normally, whole wheat requires a longer processing time and more yeast. But slowing down the production line would worsen bread shortages, which would lead, as they inevitably do, to more political unrest. According to FAO estimates, this year’s harvested wheat area was the smallest since the 1960s.

The regime is increasingly relying on wheat from Iran and Russia, according to the FAO; because of the insurgents’ taxes, it’s cheaper for Damascus to import grain from those countries than from northern Syria. Meanwhile, the price hikes are putting pressure on the poor, many of whom were malnourished even before the war.

In 2012, the city of Raqqa was still under government control. But much of the countryside, including wheat fields and all-important grain silos, was in opposition hands. When the main opposition groups fragmented later that year, each militia seized a piece of the chain: wheat, flour or bakeries. “They stole the bread and sold it at high prices,” says the engineer from Raqqa. Inside the city, bread became scarce. If a bakery opened at 8 a.m., hundreds of people would start lining up at 1 in the morning.

When the Islamic State took over Raqqa in March 2013, it immediately tried to systematize bread production and distribution. It set up a strict rationing system: People still stand in line for bread, but now there are two lines, one for men and one for women. Every person takes a number. Each person can buy only a dollar’s worth of flatbread — about 20 small pieces. Black-clad militants stand at the head of the line and look hard at every face to make sure nobody double-dips.

Unlike the previous patchwork of players, the Islamic State has made sure to seize all the resources from opposition and government forces. “Daesh controlled everything,” says the engineer, using an Arabic acronym for the group. “The wheat, the mills, the bakeries.” The militants have consolidated their control in this way elsewhere, too.

At first, the Islamic State allowed Raqqa’s farmers to sell wheat to the government with its blessing — and its 20 percent tax. This year, however, Islamic State officials bought most of the harvest directly from the farmers, paying slightly more than the government would have. The Raqqa engineer suggests they are planning to become more vertically integrated — perhaps someday, like the Syrian government, self-sufficient in wheat. “They’re buying it because they consider themselves a government,” he says.

The Islamic State is also selling grain across the border in Turkey, where prices are much higher. One of the ironies of this trade is that international donors are purchasing vast amounts of wheat in Turkey — possibly helping to keep the price high — and sending it into Syria as humanitarian aid. Inside Syria, the opposition militias that control these donations often sell them at war-inflated prices.

“Maybe it’s not a big deal, in your country, to think about bread,” said Abu Sharif, the nom de guerre of the head of the independent bakery committee in al-Waer, a suburb of Homs that was under government siege for about three years. “But here, it’s a very big thing.”

Just as Majd al-Dik drove up to the mill, regime forces opened fire with 23mm machine guns mounted on a nearby Shilka anti-aircraft tank. Dozens of people died immediately. He watched as one man was decapitated by an artillery shell. People inside their cars were burned “into charcoal.”

Some of the volunteers had driven trucks with which to liberate the flour. Dik and the other volunteers tried to pick up as many bodies as they could and load the injured into the trucks. At the same time, people were scrambling to grab as many bags of flour as possible — he estimates that they got about 5 percent.

As the volunteers piled the injured on top of the bags, blood soaked into the flour. When the trucks got back to Eastern Ghouta, a crowd of starving civilians — women, children and the elderly — surrounded them.

At this point in the story, Dik had to pause before he could finish. “This was the most difficult moment,” he said.

The starving people were so desperate that they took the flour — even if it was soaked in blood. “After that, the entire operation failed,” Dik said. A few days later, the regime was back in complete control.

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