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Food Security in Qatar: Threats and Opportunities

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Food security can be outlined by the availability, accessibility and reliability of food supplies. These factors are influenced by the “capacity of interconnected social, economic and biophysical systems to meet people’s nutritional requirements” (EIU 2018). A country’s food security can be threatened by political turmoil or natural disasters. Such threats include droughts, floods or fires and are most detrimental in major food exporting countries like Australia or Russia.

Similarly, food price shocks add another layer of uncertainty when analyzing food insecurity. Globally, food price indices increased by over 60% from 2007 to 2008 (FAO 2013). This sharp and sudden spike in food prices imposed “severe hardship on many households” because they did not have time to “adjust to higher prices”. This pushed 105 million more people into poverty. The less severe spike in food prices that occurred in 2010–11 impoverished an additional 48.6 million people (World Bank, 2012). Such price volatility impose difficult challenges for central governments, especially ones with weak institutional structures and scarce financial resources.

Qatar’s food security risks stem from the harsh geo-climatic conditions the small country faces. A large portion of Qatar’s food supply and other goods are imported and must pass through the narrow chokepoints of Hormuz and Bab Al Mandab straits. The threat of Iran, Somali Pirates and the continuous Yemen war can make passage through these narrow shipping lanes dangerous, thus impeding the safe delivery of much needed food and other supplies to Qatar.

A country that is dependent on imported foodstuffs is always at risk of supply disruptions. The Syrian civil war that started in 2011 deprived the Gulf

states, including Qatar, of a major supplier of fresh fruits and vegetables. The affected states managed to find alternative suppliers and supply routes, but at a higher cost. However, in June 2017, Qatar had to deal with the consequences of sudden geopolitical shifts and of a trade blockade by neighboring countries which posed an existential threat to this small country. The water-poor, but gas-rich country, has long been concerned about its vulnerable food supply routes.

Well before 2017, the government had decided to lease or purchase arable lands in countries like Kenya and Ghana, where it would produce food for the people of Qatar. Domestically, Qatar invested in hydroponics and other innovative farming technologies in order to produce food that would not be vulnerable to supply disruptions or price volatility.

Most Arab countries are located in arid to semi-arid geographies, and have been experiencing rapid population growth as well as improvements in people’s quality of life. Collectively, these factors have been increasing the pressure on agricultural systems, lowering the carrying capacity of the land, and forcing many Arab countries, especially in the Gulf region, to import greater quantities of their food needs.

The Arabian Peninsula receives 50 mm to 250 mm of precipitation per year. However, in Qatar the average amount of rainfall is only 75.2 mm (3 inches). To contextualize, it takes up to 650 mm of rainfall to produce rain-fed wheat in hot climates. This, and Qatar’s miniscule area of arable land, only around 1 percent of its landmass, have long prevented traditional farming from thriving. These factors play into the need for Arab countries, like Qatar to rely heavily on water imports.

The policy of outsourcing food production, while environmentally sensible, makes Qatar vulnerable to foreign political pressure. The financial endowments of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have helped them

secure a high level of food security for their people, with Qatar having the highest food security index score (Table 1).

*Table 1.
Global Food Security Index for the GCC countries, 2015 and 2018*

	2015 score*	Global Food Security Rank	2018 score*	Global Food Security Rank
Bahrain	nd	nd	67.8	41
Kuwait	75.5	24	74.8	28
Oman	nd	nd	74.4	31
Qatar	nd	nd	76.5	22
Saudi	72.8	30	72.4	32
UAE	75.6	23	72.5	31

nd: No data for that year. *Score is per 100. Source (EIU, 2018).

In 2008, the Qatar National Food Security Program (QNFSP) was established to consider strategic risk scenarios, and develop a system that would improve the country's resilience to water and food supply shocks. In the area of food security, the program sought to expand food storage capacity, diversify food supply chains, and increase domestic food production. Qatar's production of red meat and poultry skyrocketed from 10,792 tons in 2012 to 183,988 tons in 2016. This is supported by the fact that 54% of the cropland was dedicated to producing fodder in 2016. On the other hand, the production of grains, fruits and vegetables did not change much between 2012 and 2016 (Qatar, 2016). After ten years, however, the QNFSP appears to have become inactive or been folded into another government agency.

Grand geopolitical maneuverings rarely yield to well-considered suggestions. In an effort to collaboratively tackle the regional challenge of food security, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) minister for food and agriculture, Dr. Rashid Ahmed Bin Fahad advocated in 2014 for the development of an integrated approach by Arab countries that would maintain the required stockpile of food (UAE

2014).

Ironically, three years later, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt initiated an intense diplomatic dispute with Qatar, the worst that the Gulf region has seen since Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 (Kerr and Pitel 2017). In June 2017, these countries severed diplomatic relations with Qatar, expelled its nationals, and imposed an economic blockade on this peninsula-shaped country that is located on the edge of the much larger Arabian Peninsula. They accused Qatar of supporting terrorism, a charge that it vehemently denies. The use of such comprehensive pressure tactics during the holy month of Ramadan, which happened to be in June, required Qatar to recalibrate its food security calculus.

Saudi Arabia's closure of the Salwa border gate, Qatar's only land route to the Middle East region, has effectively turned Qatar into a landlocked country. Qatar is now virtually an island (or *jazeera* in Arabic). This political decision cut off 38 percent of the food supply that arrives to Qatar through this crossing point (Bloomberg 2017).

The total boycott of Qatar by developments rattled the 2.7 million residents who then started a cycle of food and supply panic-buying. Qatar's Ministry of Economy and Commerce

(QMEC) reacted by fixing the prices of most consumer goods and food products. The QMEC also issued occasional visual announcements showing supermarket shelves stocked with food. The country's foreign minister said that since the 2014 diplomatic turmoil with fellow Gulf states, Qatar has maintained strategic food reserves for emergencies. It has up to a year's supply of essential food items like rice, sugar, milk, and cooking oil (Qatar Tribune 2017), and is able to import its fresh food needs.

Given their proximity, religious similarities, political leanings and geopolitical weights, Turkey and Iran offered to supply Qatar with food. Two days after the blockade came into effect, Turkey responded by immediately shipping dairy products and chicken which were placed on Qatar's supermarket shelves with non-Arabic labels because they were produced for retail inside Turkey (Khatri, 2017). Soon after, Iran used planes and ships to send some 440 tons of food and supplies to Qatar, and announced that these shipments will continue until the blockade is lifted.

During the first two weeks of the blockade, Qatar's state-controlled media explained that the country is not under total siege because certain sea lanes and air routes remain open. This reassurance to the general public was at a time when news coverage of rising regional tensions created a feeling that an extreme emergency has befallen the country. Some media outlets made it seem like the drums of war were beating. It is worth remembering that blockades are often a *casus belli* between states.

In addition to rapid air and sea imports, the government of Qatar announced an equally urgent call for a

massive and diverse expansion of food production within national borders. This was largely focused on self-sufficiency in fresh produce and dairy products.

Access to meat, milk, cheese and poultry are important indicators of food security. Before the trade embargo, Qatar used to import its fresh milk and dairy products from Saudi Arabia. Within weeks of the blockade, Qatar's Baladna Farm flew in 3,400 Holstein cows using state-owned Qatar Airways Cargo Boeing 777 planes. Today, this farm is home to 14,000 cows which were imported from Europe, Australia, and the U.S. The farm also houses 5,000 goats and 40,000 Awassi sheep who are able to tolerate the extreme temperatures and produce high-quality milk.

Qatar's central government helped farmers increase production of livestock and breeding. The country now has about 1.5 million livestock "which include 40,000 cows and 70,000 camels." In the fall 2018, six animal complexes that house some 350,000 livestock were provided with electricity connections from Qatar General Electricity and Water Corporation (Kahramaa) (Mohamed, 2018). Livestock are mostly kept in warehouse-like complexes that are equipped with cooling systems due to the extreme outside elements. The self-sufficiency in milk products shot from 28 percent before May 2017 to a peak 84 percent in August 2018 (Mohamed, 2018).

This blockade was a severe stress-test to the resilience of Qatar's supply chain. It forced Qatar to relocate its regional trans-shipment hub away from Dubai in the UAE. The geographic location of the port of Sohar in Oman made it a logical alternative for Qatar, which went on to sign many new trade agreements with Iran, Turkey and India.

As a result of the crisis, trade between Qatar and these countries has skyrocketed since the summer of 2017.

Food security is high on Qatar's political agenda, and has the attention of the head of state. The Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, recently said that his country will pursue economic diversification that would ensure food and water security, while also strengthening its already impressive energy sector (Knecht, 2018). Due to Qatar's necessity to import most of its food from places like Brazil, Australia and Syria, as well as the fact that food prices can fluctuate wildly, Qatar's food supply will continue to be vulnerable to interruptions. A study by the University of Ottawa, Canada, that was published one month before the crisis of 2017, argued that Qatar's "food supply is insecure" due to its vulnerability "to geopolitical shocks. In the event of conflict in the region, food supply could be choked off at the Strait of Hormuz or at its border with Saudi Arabia and militarized states in the region could cut off air supplies of food to Qatar as well" (McSparren 2017). Being a peninsula within a larger peninsula, and having hydro-climatic and regional geopolitical challenges that it does, Qatar is between the proverbial rock and a hard place. While the country has successfully leveraged its financial power and modern technology to maintain its supply of perishable and non-perishable food supplies, its food security will continue to be tested in the short and medium terms.

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