

Kurdistan's Food-Security Challenges



One of the Iraq's wheat farms in harvest time. Photo Credit: Iraq's Ministry of Agriculture

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The Covid-19 containment measures and restrictions showed the food security weakness of Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and Iraq, since they depend heavily on importing most of food items. The disruption in the international trade and supply chain failure may threaten the food availability in Iraq, and with the current economic crisis in the country, more than anytime, both KRI and Iraq have to take steps forward to rebuild their agriculture sector, and their failure will not just create a weak economy, but also unload many other long-term problems and dependencies, which will threaten the political and social stability of Iraq in both short and long term. This article is an attempt to explain what food security is, and what are the natural endowments and challenges that KRI has to do to rebuild its agriculture sector. And finally, what is needed to be done to make both KRI and Iraq more self-sufficient when it comes to food security.

As a concept, food security in the national level means secured food for a certain population in a geographical area to avoid the threat of hunger. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) defines [food security](#) as providing healthy food with high nutrition quality for all the individualsⁱ. It implies countries' capacities in providing food and

agricultural products in their national boundaries for all citizens or importing products that can't be produced in a sufficient amount. It basically means allowing everyone an access to food items as a universal right. The term does not only imply the availability of food items but also the purchasing power of the individuals to afford buying required food. This concept is used as a standard to evaluate food shortages and hunger because of draught, war, or any other human or natural reasons.

Basically, food security has several aspects:

- 1- ***Moral Aspect***: Since food is essential for human survival, it must be the priority of the governments and stakeholders; therefore, sources of food should be protected in a way that does not affect individuals' lives, now and in the future. It is a universal right for everyone to have access to food regardless of political, religious, and social backgrounds. In addition, avoiding food-***dependency***, market monopoly should be part of policy priority in addition to guarantee anti-fraud policies and setting up a strict quality control measures and enacting the law of protecting local producers.
- 2- ***Social Aspect***: Protecting the society through providing food for all individuals and controlling population growth scientifically can be compatible with country's resources and economy.
- 3- ***Political Aspect***: Any country that does not have food security, its political and national security is under threat, and it can be easily pressured and even destabilized by foreign entitiesⁱⁱ.

Major Objectives of Food Security:

Any food security policy is aiming to achieve the following main objectives:

- 1- ***Availability***: Food items should be available to a point that suffices all individuals' needs within a strategic food-storage plan. Availability does not mean accessibility and here the income decides which people have accessibility.
- 2- ***Food safety***: Food items and agricultural products should have information tags on them which explain the quality of the food and its expiry date. Food safety is actually a questionable area in KRI and the whole Iraq due to the chaotic imports through dozens poorly controlled border crossings. In addition, this includes the food items produced in Kurdistan, especially the agricultural products for which farmers use several types of pesticides. Products that requested usage of certain

pesticides should not be supplied to market after a certain time, known as Safety Period, which regards protecting consumers' health. Because agriculture sector in Kurdistan is weak and there is no supervision from Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources (MAWR) over the farmers, there is nothing called food safety in the region.

- 3- **Accessibility:** All individuals, regardless of their incomes, must have access to food products.

Ensuring these three objectives and controlling challenges that hinder achieving them are the main factors to enjoy food security. Another greatest threat on food security is lack of water due to strong connection between food security and water security. Exacerbated by the global warming, KRG and Iraq are facing constant draughts and less flow of the main rivers into Iraq. This will not just damage the agriculture sector and make achieving food security a wishful thinking, but it can easily paralyze the country in many aspects and cause great migration influxes within Iraq or to the rest of the region. To avoid major crises in the future, Iraq's food security level must go higher than it is now.

There are the following three Levels of food security:

- 1- **Absolute food security** can be achieved when a country provides enough or more than the demanded amount of food items. This has been described as self-sufficiency. Here, the country is able to export food products.
- 2- **Relative food security** means a country has the capacity of producing sufficient amount of some products, but it still needs to import some products to meet local demand due to lack of production capacity or unavailable conditions for producing certain products. Then, it has to depend on imports to meet the local demand with some consideration of prices of local products.
- 3- **Food insecurity** is the situation when a country does not have enough agricultural infrastructure, or it may have sufficient infrastructure without a solid plan to achieve food security. This condition leads to food dependency, and there are two types of food dependency which are short term and long term.

Closely looking at level of food security in Iraq generally and KRI specifically, it is clear that the region suffers from long term food insecurity. In fact, Kurdistan looks like a market

for imported food products as it depends on few countries to provide food items for the sake the interest of few groups and families.

Usually, the food insecurity happens in countries or regions that lack sufficient land and water resources, but this is not a case in KRI, which has gigantic agricultural lands and water resources. But small portion of the lands and water resources have been invested or directed to provide food security, which is a clear indicator of poor governance and mismanagement of resources. Therefore, the rate of dependency of imported food in Iraq, including KRI, is the fifth in the world which is 81.5; following Lebanon with 82.5 and Kuwait at 93.5. This means that with any conflict in the region or any global crisis, Iraqis will have difficulty in providing food on their table even if they have income. The food availability and accessibility has always been a great issue for Iraqis whenever the country faced any crisis, as after 1991 with the international sanctions and 2014 with the rise of ISIS. Iraq does not have any flexibility when it comes to food security and it has always had this problem despite a great oil wealth and natural endowment.

Key factors behind food dependency could be poverty, unemployment, low production capacities, low human resources, overcrowding labor market of army and armed groups, neglecting the agricultural [experts and skilled labors](#), youth migration, and monopoly of the market by the vicious circle of ruling elites and families. Most of these factors are working to hinder food security in KRI and the whole Iraq. Iraq has a pile of challenges to overcome in achieving long term food security and with the current situation in the country; a great political will and strength are needed to tackle some if not all of these challenges.

To achieve food security, certain natural and human conditions are required. Most of these conditions are available in Iraq and Kurdistan, but they are not properly used and mostly wasted to miss-management and lack of suitable policies, as they are pointed out below:

- 1- ***The water resources:*** There are still enough surface and underground water resources in KRI in spite of losing huge amount of it to pollution and dams built in Iran and Turkey. However, the main problem is still poor water-management as the water resources are used wastefully and unscientifically. Having such a great water resources, can lead to provide food security and boost agriculture sector if properly managed. Ultimately, it is going to help economic growth in the whole country.
- 2- ***Availability of agricultural lands, grazing areas and forests:*** Kurdistan has tremendous agricultural lands which are mostly fertile fields and can help easing

the ongoing economic crisis in the region in few years if they are utilized fully. However, what is happened in Kurdistan is utilizing the land unscientifically and limiting them to change their purpose from agriculture for commercial and residential use that only benefit few.

- 3- ***Having good climate:*** despite the misuse of the resources and changes in Kurdistan's environment, the region still enjoys suitable land and climate for planting and producing most of products, especially the strategic products that can realize self-sufficiency and boost productivity to the level of importing certain food items, wheat for example.
- 4- ***Having human resources and engaged private sector:*** As for this factor too, there are no major challenges except for proper policy to reform the agriculture sector. With a great and cheap labor hand, there is a big potential for growth in the region's agriculture, and introducing new policy and technology can help resolving the region's high unemployment rate. Then, the burden on the government will be relaxed if the agriculture sector will be prepared to attract local and foreign investments. Again, this could happen once the ongoing monopoly will be broken and allow private sector boost through food industry and agriculture projects; which means limit political elite's grip in the region's economy.
- 5- ***Having livestock and fishing resources:*** supporting the livestock and fishing areas is very important component to agriculture in a way to limit dependency on imported food items.

Again, KRI has proper infrastructure and lots of potentials to revive its agriculture sector and provide food security. However, there are some obstacles that hinder achieving food security, and they need to be taken to consideration.

- 1- Lack of sovereignty; it means sovereignty in providing security of food, water, and natural resources. Natural resources are considered permanent and future strategic infrastructure anywhere, and it is part of the future generations' rights. Moreover, food security will not be achieved without having sovereignty over these resources. According to UN Article No 1803: "States and international organizations shall strictly and conscientiously respect the sovereignty of peoples and nations over their natural wealth and resources in accordance with the

Charter of the United Nations and the principles contained in the resolution." Thus, the authority that runs an area has to have decisions and take its responsibility in protecting and utilizing these resources. Unfortunately, the KRI's ruling elite lacks any adequate governance, and they have fully surrendered to the regional powers' interests such as Iranians and Turkish ones. The neighboring regional powers have taken advantages of the weak ruling elite and manipulated KRI's resources, trying to keep it as a market for their imported agricultural products.

- 2- Lack of a serious political willingness from the KRI's ruling elite to invest or redirect resources into agriculture sector. Since 1992, the agriculture sector has been neglected, while there is a huge bureaucracy, within the region's Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources (MAWR) with the main task to provide capital investment in the agriculture sector and incentivize farmers and investors to increase their productivity. Facing double economic sanctions from UN and Saddam Hussein Regime, the KRI's agriculture sector in 1990s experienced a bit of resurrection for two reasons. First, the people had no labor-market choices except for agriculture due to UN economic sanctions against Iraq. Second, as a result of the sanctions and Iraq's devaluated currency and deteriorated economy people could not afford expensive imported goods. This is a clear example to see how the sector can be grown if there are enough reforms and policies to incentivize agricultural activities and productivities.
- 3- Migration to city centers: this will cause great damage if not solved as it is happening in the KRG. This problem has not been addressed yet and will need great efforts to rebalance the rural areas' population. In 1970s and 1980s, the Saddam Hussein Regime forcefully displaced a great portion of farmers in Kurdistan for political reasons and demographic changes in certain areas; however, in 1990s and even after 2003, KRG had a chance to encourage farmers' return to their villages and revitalize those areas and achieve food security. After 30 years, this is impossible because of generational life-style changes and adopting to urban centers' economy. Thus, to protect the environment, reviving the agriculture sector and achieving food security, new policies and legislations are needed to reform agriculture sector. Many farmers have received financial

support without having any agricultural projects or used the aid in other sectors due to lack of supervision by MAWR.

Therefore, a strong government has to have firm decisions and regulatory capacity on land owners to plant their fields at least up to 75 percent annually. This needs proper supervision, and if they did not follow this regulation the government has to take back agricultural lands from the owners. Most of the lands were taken from the land lords during the agricultural reform in 1958. However, the continuation of the current situation will cause deep food security issues in the future and this makes the government's role meaningless.

- 4- Lack of government supports for farmers; in most of the developed countries governments support farmers and meat production projects through providing planting seeds, poultry and livestock food, and supporting them to market their products. Trying to encourage local production and limiting imports of basic goods, they also protect national wealth through rotating the money spent on foods in the local market. However, these steps have not been taken in KRG and in many cases; the farmers have thrown away their products as a form of protest against the KRG's ruling elite.
- 5- Weak agricultural guidance: reviving the agricultural sector needs a strong guidance system which directs farmers to use their resources in the best manner; without this, it is impossible to increase farming productivity and then achieve food security. In fact, MAWR does not do its job in this regard and needs a push to retake its responsibilities.
- 6- Private sector: reviving the agriculture sector and achieving food security requires an active participation from private investors in many aspects, such as food manufacturing, marketing, exporting and providing some other services. Unfortunately, the private sector in KRI has been monopolized by the ruling elite. If the agricultural sector, similar to other sectors, would be used for the ruling elite's narrow interests, it will be hard to expect much productivity. It is very crucial to attract private and foreign investors into the KRI's agriculture and parallel to that monopoly and misuse of political power to gain wealth should be uprooted, because if investment comes to the sector with the current market and political condition, it will only help the political elite become richer and control more

resources while the rest of the population will become poorer. Breaking this monopoly will unlock a great potential in the KRI's economy that can create many job opportunities and makes the region better secured.

- 7- Desertification and unorganized grazing in many areas of Kurdistan are the real threats, especially in the dry regions like Garmyan. If proper steps will not be taken to address these issues, KRI will lose invaluable resources forever.
- 8- Expansion of the cities on the agricultural lands and changing the nature of these lands from agricultural to commercial, real estate and residential.
- 9- Employing the rural people in public sector, especially within in the security forces, without any plan after 2004.
- 10- Not having a balancing plan between agriculture and other sectors such as industrial and energy. The KRG has been investing heavily in oil and gas sector, while ignoring agriculture. The policy led KRI to a point of weak security, lots of environmental damage, and desperate need of Green Revolution.
- 11- Lack of new technology and capital investment for food industry: this is a major challenge in front of agriculture sector, and so far no government institution neither policy has been used to push towards introducing new technology in KRI's agriculture. The new technology is crucial to improve productivity in the sector, and it has proved to be key deterrent in boosting productivity in most of the advanced economies. Therefore, the KRI needs to deploy the top edge technologies in all aspects of agricultural activities such as irrigation, storing, manufacturing, and packaging food products.

To achieve food security, both Federal Government of Iraq (FGI) and KRI must undergo a set of reform policies, and more than anything they have to take the food security out of their political context. The task looks impossible for both Iraq and KRI, but taking any steps forward will change the direction of this country and will help even the future generations.

It is time for Iraqis not to just limit their demands within a political structure and get monthly salaries, but also to make this country better for everyone, and the place to start is agriculture sector. This will not just secure the source of food for Iraqis, but it will revitalize the economy and push the country forward in many aspects. The reforms and steps ahead needs a great public support that will not leave these issues to politicians



and work and pressure the stakeholders not just revitalize the sector but also create a fairer society and limit the concentration of wealth into few hands.

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