



Food as a political question: Arab Reform Initiative publishes new dossier on food sovereignty in the Middle East and North Africa

Ten studies from Tunisia, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria, with concrete recommendations for governments, donors and civil society.

16/10/2026 On the occasion of World Food Day, the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) is publishing [*Cultivating Sovereignty: Struggles for Food Justice in the Middle East and North Africa*](#), a dossier edited by Julia Choucair Vizoso and produced by ARI's Environmental Politics Programme. Drawing on research across six countries and fieldwork with farmers, unions, cooperatives and civil society, the report identifies barriers to transforming food systems and outlines priorities for research, collective action and policies that advance the rights and livelihoods of food producers. The report argues that hunger and food dependence in the region are not simply problems of supply. They are questions of power: who controls land, water, seeds and imports, who sets agricultural policy, and who bears its costs.

Why ARI is studying food

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is the world's most food-import-dependent region. According to the FAO, hunger in Arab countries in 2022 was 76% higher than in 2000, 59.8 million people (almost 13%) are undernourished, and four of the world's fifteen largest wheat importers are in the region: Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria. The dossier's introduction states that hunger and famine are "not caused by insufficient supply but by political decisions and geopolitical machinations," most starkly where food is a weapon of war: in July 2025 the UN declared 98.5% of cropland in Gaza unfit for cultivation, and starvation has been used as a tool of control in Palestine, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. The food system also drives an estimated 26 to 34% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

In 2023, ARI launched a research agenda to ask what food sovereignty can mean given the region's political conditions. While approaches emphasizing food security tend to focus on whether there is enough food, the concept of food sovereignty asks who decides, who owns and who benefits. ARI's work tests the concept against realities that global debates have not always accounted for: occupation, war, debt, donor influence and a changing climate.

What is inside

- **Regional synthesis** (Julia Choucair Vizoso): why food sovereignty has gained ground, what it means, and how to adapt a concept born in Latin America to a “non-sovereign present” shaped by war, occupation and Gulf agribusiness.
- **Tunisia** (Imen Louati): how the shift from self-sufficiency to market-dependent food security hit small farmers and deepened rural poverty, and the case for agroecology.
- **Jordan** (Mariam Al Jaajaa, Lisa Shahin, Gabriella Neubert, Aya Bseiso): land, water, finance and labor in a country importing over 95% of its wheat and barley.
- **Palestine** (Abdalaziz Alsalehi, PENGON): 30 interviews across the West Bank and Gaza on civil society, starvation as a tool of war and donor-driven programming.
- **Lebanon** (Zeead Yaghi): land tenure, farm labor, cooperatives and the political organization of farmers.
- **In the spotlight:** donor-driven agricultural policy in Lebanon (Kanj Hamade); Iraqi farmers and technocratic climate adaptation (Taif Alkhudary); Syria’s seeds and the politics of care, a materialist feminist interview with Ansar Jasim by Rula Asad; quiet seed resistance in rural Tunisia (Yasser Souilmi); and the political geography of seed sovereignty across MENA (Julia Choucair Vizoso).

What we hope it will do, and who we hope reads it

ARI hopes the dossier will move food from a technical or humanitarian problem to a political question of rights, power and accountability; give policymakers and donors an evidence base grounded in farmers’ experience; give researchers, journalists and advocates comparable material across countries; and equip unions, cooperatives and civil society with arguments for their own advocacy. Its intended readers include ministries of agriculture and economy, UN regional offices, the European Union and other donors; journalists, think tanks and universities; farmers’ organizations; and anyone seeking to understand why food is one of the region’s defining political issues.

Policy recommendations from the dossier’s experts

- **Redirect subsidies and public investment to smallholders and agroecology.** Shift subsidies toward agroecology in Tunisia, phase out export-focused, elite-captured subsidies in Lebanon, reallocate support to smallholders in Palestine, and restore input subsidies and price controls in Jordan.
- **Secure land and water for those who farm.** Lebanon: a national land registry and land bank, inheritance law reform and land access for youth, women and small farmers. Jordan: formal recognition of tenure rights and published water allocation data.
- **Protect farmers’ right to save, exchange and breed seeds.** Amend Article 11 of Iraq’s Law No. 15 of 2013; legally recognize community seed systems and build a national seed bank network in Lebanon; create community-owned seed banks in Jordan; protect heirloom seeds from future enclosure in Syria.
- **Recognize and fund farmers’ organizations.** New cooperative legislation in Lebanon, freedom of association for all producer categories in Jordan, a national cooperatives fund in Palestine, and direct representation of small farmers inside Tunisian unions.
- **Shield farmers and workers from shocks.** Public agricultural insurance and risk funds, fair producer prices, enforcement of agricultural workers’ rights in Jordan, and wartime contingency plans for farming in Palestine.

- **Donors: from short-term projects to long-term public investment.** Align aid with national and local priorities, offer flexible funding free of political conditions, screen external projects with communities, and buy from local producers.
- **Civil society: build power, not pilots.** Put small-scale farmers at the center, build farmer-led alliances and regional networks, and link food sovereignty to water justice and to the politics of militarization. As the Lebanon study puts it, “food insecurity is not a technical crisis but fundamentally a political one.”

Notes to editors

The dossier is available at <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/cultivating-sovereignty/>

A launch webinar will take place on 19/10/2026 - registration: <https://tinyurl.com/rjj7mp8s>

Julia Choucair Vizoso and contributing authors are available for interviews.

About the Arab Reform Initiative

ARI is an independent think tank working in the MENA Region to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice, based on diversity, impartiality and gender equality. It has offices in Paris, Beirut and Tunis.

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