Analysis

PUTIN AND ASSAD, PARTNERS IN CRIME

WHY RUSSIAN FORCES STEAL WHEAT FROM UKRAINE

| JONAS HEINS |

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Cover page photo: a Russian serviceman standing guard in a field near Melitopol, Zaporizhzhia region, southeastern Ukraine, 14 July 2022 (EPA/Sergei Ilnitsky/Scanpix)

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Introduction

Amidst Russia's ongoing unlawful war against Ukraine, the two warring parties—with the help of other nations and under U.N. supervision—struck a deal to allow the export of the much-needed Ukrainian grain via the Black Sea. With both countries being the world's leading providers of agricultural produce, Ukraine's exports were severely restricted by Russian aggression, whereas Russia was reluctant to export in an attempt to subjugate Ukraine.

The Black Sea Grain Initiative saw Ukraine and Russia both sign separate agreements with Türkiye and the U.N. enabling the safe passage of ships carrying grain through the Black Sea. Since 22 July, dozens of vessels have already set sail from three Ukrainian ports—Odesa, Chornomorsk, and Pivdennyi—carrying more than 375 000 tonnes of grain.[1] First was the bulk carrier 'Razoni', bound for the Lebanese port of Tripoli with 26 500 tonnes of corn. However, the initial buyer in Lebanon—who could not be identified—appeared to have changed their mind and rejected the delivery, forcing 'Razoni' to set sail for Türkiye instead.[2] Although the practice is quite common in commodity trading, the buyer's anonymity invited some suspicions that the cargo might have been originally intended to reach Syria via Lebanon.

Food trade with Syria does not directly violate the western sanctions imposed on Damascus over the Assad regime's brutal crimes against the Syrian population during decades of Civil War. However, sanctions have impacted the banking sector and transfer payments, which renders trading with business partners in Syria a 'blight' of sorts. Since the economic sanctions were introduced in 2011, the Syrian government has started using smaller ships and paying higher prices to import comparatively modest quantities of wheat. Lebanese traders frequently act as middlemen in such transactions to help conceal the ships' final destination, as larger banks, shipping companies, and grain traders are wary of the Assad regime's machinations.

The connection between Lebanon and Syria in these endeavours, nevertheless, remains crucial. For instance, the Ukrainian Embassy in Beirut accused Russia of plundering 100 000 tonnes of Ukrainian wheat stolen from the temporarily occupied territories.[3] *Refinitiv*, an American-British company providing financial market data, documented 'Matros Pozynich' load wheat at the port of Sevastopol in annexed Crimea, with a May 19 departure date and Syria indicated as the discharge location. Satellite imagery from *Planet Labs PBC* showed the same vessel docked in the Syrian port of Latakia ten days later.[4]

With that being only one example of such illegal conduct, this paper aims to describe the magnitude with which Russian forces—currently occupying Ukrainian territory—steal grain in a deliberate and calculated effort. It studies the goals such actions pursue and analyses the purpose of the theft and subsequent transport to Syria in particular, but also to Türkiye and Lebanon. It explains the intricacies and significance of wheat in the Syrian Civil War, as well as connects it to the Russian geopolitical strategy and state doctrines. The purpose of this paper is to answer the following question: is the theft of wheat from temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories carried out systematically and, therefore, in line with Russia's declared geopolitical goals in Syria in particular and the Middle East more broadly, as a means in its struggle for the multipolar world order. This paper adds to the body of literature about the cooperation between Russia and Syria and Russian geopolitical policy.

1. Burning the Breadbasket

Russia's invasion has brought many challenges to the Ukrainian agricultural sector—one of the country's primary revenue generators—that has otherwise been growing rapidly in the last years. Before the outbreak of the full-scale war in 2022, agriculture had accounted for 11% of Ukraine's GDP while employing up to 20% of the country's labour force. In 2015, the share of the agro-industrial complex rose to 27% of the total export volume, outperforming even Ukraine's metallurgical production.[5]

1 Emiko Terazono, Samer Al-Atrush, and Roman Olearchyk, "Ukraine´s first Black Sea food shipment sails through sea of troubles," *The Financial Times*, 12 August 2022.
2 Terazono et al, "Ukraine's first Black Sea food shipment."
3 "Ukrainian embassy says Russia ships 'stolen' wheat to Syria," *Reuters*, 2 June 2022.
4 Reuters, "Ukrainian Embassy says."
5 Olha Yatsenko, Vitalii Nitsenko, Nataliia Karasova, Harvey S. James, Jr., and Joe L. Parcell, "Realization of the potential of the Ukraine–EU free trade area in agriculture," Journal of International Studies 10, no. 2 (May 2017): 258-277, doi:10.14254/2071-8330.2017/10-2/18; USAID, "Agriculture Fact Sheet," last modified 29 July 2022.

The war has already devastated many agricultural enterprises, destroyed their assets and property, damaged their farmland, and obstructed fieldwork.[6] In the Russia-occupied territories, not only theft but also illegal expropriation of grain and crops, fertilizer and oil have been recorded.[7] There are mounting reports of Russian forces confiscating and exporting local agricultural produce. The Ukrainian Agriculture Ministry claims that several hundred tonnes of grain have already been stolen. More specifically, over 500 000 tonnes of grain and oil seeds were stolen from the occupied territories in Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Donetsk, and Luhansk regions.[8] The confiscation of grain presented an impossible challenge to overcome for those farmers who were determined to proceed with the sowing campaign this year.[9] Fortunately, Ukraine had managed to reap a historic harvest (up to 86 million tonnes of grains) in 2021, having thus guaranteed food security at least in the government-controlled territories.[10]

The UN-brokered Grain Initiative serves as evidence that the international community has acknowledged how essential Ukraine is for food security in the Global South

However, the seaports of Kherson, Skadovsk, Mariupol, and Berdyansk were seized after the invasion, effectively bringing agricultural exports via the sea to a halt. Shipping comparable volumes to Europe via railroad is not feasible, as the border-crossing capacities in the neighbouring countries were not designed to process such volumes. Furthermore, Ukraine and the EU countries use different track gauges, which complicates the logistics.

With Russia's three-day 'special military operation' ravaging the country for nine months, the UN-brokered Grain Initiative serves as evidence that the international community has acknowledged how essential Ukraine is for food security in the Global South.

When analysing deliveries of stolen food commodities to Syria, it is important to remember how dependent the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is on wheat from Ukraine and Russia—the world´s 5th and 1st largest exporters of wheat respectively. MENA countries rely overwhelmingly on both Ukraine and Russia for their food supplies, specifically cereals. Ukraine used to export as much as 40% of wheat and grain to the Middle East. This year, the ongoing Russian aggression has triggered serious disruptions in the supply chains, as well as spiking food prices and rising domestic production costs.[11] Some countries—such as Lebanon which used to import up to 80% of its wheat from Ukraine—found themselves in a highly precarious situation.[12] Lebanon's problems are further exacerbated by the fact that the 2020 explosion in the port of Beirut destroyed the country's grain storage facilities and depleted this small, crisis-ridden country's meagre reserves.[13]

Lebanon's Minister of Economy and Trade claimed that the Russian invasion of Ukraine led to one of the worst crises in global food trade since World War I. He added that it was the deficit of not only the Ukrainian wheat—but also Russian fertilizers—that was threatening deep food insecurity.[14] For instance, Russia diverted all its export-bound fertilizer to domestic production.[15] Therefore, the current crisis risks not only food shortages but also unaffordable food prices to vast swathes of the population.

The reason why wheat, in particular, is so important in MENA countries is that it is the fundamental ingredient to produce bread, one of the region's staple food items. Wheat accounts for 37% of daily caloric consumption in the Middle East.[16]

6 Maksym Bezpartochnyi, Igor Britchenko, and Olesia Bezpartochna, "Financial Losses of Ukraine's Agricultural Exports and Ensuring Food Security During Martial Law," *VUZF Review* 7, no. 2 (2022): 193-204.
7 Reuters, "Ukrainian Embassy says."
8 Bezpartochnyi et al., "Financial losses."
9 Sławomir Matuszak, "Production and export of food from Ukraine during the war with Russia," *Centre for Eastern Studies*, 10 May 2022.
10 Matuszak, "Production and export."
11 Meszár Tárik, "The Russo-Ukrainian War Is A Threat To Food Security In The Arab World," *ATLAS Journal* 8, no. 48 (August 2022): 2748-2755.
12 Tárik, "The Russo-Ukrainian War."
13 Ellen Francis and Maha El Dahan, "After blast, Lebanon has less than a month's grain reserves," *Reuters*, 5 August 2020.
14 Amin Salam, Jasmine Zaki, Mark N. Katz, Sean McFate, and Jim Moran, "The Impact of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on the Middle East," *Middle East Policy* 29, no. 2 (June 2022): 3-22.
15 Janetta Azarieva, Yitzhak M. Brudny, and Eugene Finkel, "Bread and Autocracy in Putin's Russia," *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 3 (July 2022): 100-114, doi:10.1353/jod.2022.0043.
16 Ghada Ahmed, Danny Hamrick, Andrew Guinn, Ajmal Abdulsamad, and Gary Gereffi, "Wheat Value Chains and Food Security in the Middle East and North Africa Region," *Center on Globalization, Governance & Competitiveness, Duke University* (August 2013).

Political stability in the region has long been linked to affordable bread supplies, whereas shortages and disruptions occasionally resulted in outbursts of violence or aggravated other crises. For example, riots that broke out in Cairo in 1977 required a military intervention and resulted in 43 killed and over 600 injured.[17] The role of food inflation in triggering the 'Arab Spring', however, should be treated with caution. The root causes were much more complex: in addition to the exorbitant food prices, the affected nations had been suffering from deepening social inequality and years of political disenfranchisement. All three elements acted as a catalyst and fomented eventual revolutions in the region.[18] A lesson to draw from those developments is that a government's potential to provide welfare is a crucial factor affecting its image, ability to project power, maintain legitimacy and capacity to function.[19]

The World Food Program calculates that 13.4 million Syrians are suffering from food scarcity.[20] And nowhere are the bread prices so heavily and meticulously regulated as they are in Syria. While waging a brutal Civil War against its own people, Assad's brutal regime has relied on—and received ample support from—Russia to close the wheat shortage. In December 2021, the Syrian government reached a loan agreement with Moscow to import 1 million tonnes of wheat from Russia and pay later in 2022.[21]

2. From Crop to Bread

To understand the scale of government involvement that goes into the production of a loaf of bread, one must know that the supply chain process of wheat is highly regulated and offers many entry points for state intervention, especially in Syria.

Growing such a sought-after crop as wheat is expensive. It requires seeds, plant protection chemicals, equipment, fertilizers, fertile land, and labour. Most of these inputs are supplied by large global companies and heavily subsidised in MENA countries. Wheat is a water-intensive crop that is grown both on rain-fed and irrigated land. The machinery used to sow, harvest, and maintain these crops demands large volumes of fuel, which places an additional burden on farmers and invites more state intervention. Following a successful harvest, elevator infrastructure is necessary to store, clean, weigh, examine, and grade wheat. Moreover, proximity to ports and production facilities is mandatory for logistical reasons. To process wheat into flour and produce bread, it needs to be milled. This final processing stage usually happens in the country of the product's destination, for milled flour is hard to transport.

Since the Syrian government views bread as a strategic resource, the state used to control most of the production facilities and strictly regulate the industry; Syria even reached wheat self-sufficiency in 1994. The General Establishment for Cereal Processing and Trade (HOBOOB being the Arabic acronym) is the government agency in charge of the entire value chain from wheat to bread. Through HOBOOB, the government subsidised wheat production by paying premiums to farmers and fixing retail prices below production costs. It subsidised all and monopolised most inputs, including seeds and fertilizers. Finally, it acted as the sole purchaser on the market and controlled all marketing channels. Thus, at one point, HOBOOB exerted influence over multiple companies involved in the value chain, incorporating 26 government-owned mills and 35 government-contracted private mills, as well as companies that operated silos and feed mills and supplied seed plants. HOBOOB was an exclusive supplier of flour to bakeries that produce standard bread to be sold at a fixed price. Additionally, the Syrian state used to own 122 bakeries and co-own 90 more together with private sector businesses.[22]

That was the case before the outbreak of the Civil War in Syria. The conflict itself has been at least partially perpetuated through a food crisis that forced rural populations to abandon their drought-ridden lands and move into urban centres—such as Aleppo, where political tensions had already been brewing. The Civil War and the war against the Islamic State (IS) disproportionally affected farming businesses, whose assets and property (especially the irrigation systems) were destroyed, while their crop fields constantly caught fire.[23] The agriculture industry was further stymied by social damage: the violence against and displacement of agrarian communities, as well

17 "Cairo calm after rioting," *Star-News, 21 January 1977.*
18 Tárik, "The Russo-Ukrainian War."
19 José Ciro Martínez and Brent Eng, "Struggling to Perform the State: The Politics of Bread in the Syrian Civil War," *International Political Sociology* 11, no. 2 (June 2017): 130-147.
20 Tárik, "The Russo-Ukrainian War."
21 "Syria to Import a Million Tons of Wheat from Russia," *The Syrian Observer*, 7 December 2021.
22 Ahmed et al., "Wheat Value Chains."
23 Fadi Adleh and Diane DuclosKey, "Considerations: Supporting 'Wheat-to-Bread' Systems in Fragmented Syria," *Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform* (2022).

as pressure on young men—the backbone of the rural workforce—to either flee their homes or join the militias.[24]

3. A Bad Harvest

As of January 2022 (i.e., before Russia invaded Ukraine), an estimated 12.4 million Syrians—or 60% of its entire population—were food insecure, with nine out of ten people living below the poverty line of USD 1.09 per day.[25] And their number could only be expected to grow as a result of the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

As accurate data from the Syrian government (or other actors controlling territories in the war-torn country) is hard to obtain, this paper relies on the United Nation's most recent findings.[26] In 2021, the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) dispatched a mission to assess Syria's agricultural production capacities and estimate wheat and bread availability to the Syrian population. It identified multiple crisis factors and shortcomings in wheat production and the value chain addressed in the following paragraphs.

The geography of distribution is what makes wheat a strategic resource for the Syrian regime

Albeit the government declared 2021 to be the "Wheat Year" and celebrated it with a massive sowing campaign, the harvest fell far below expectations. The rainfall during the cropping season was meagre, and a heatwave in mid-April was responsible for 30% of all crops failing (meaning that almost all rainfed crops failed that year). Furthermore, Syria has had a substantial water deficit since Türkiye controls the water flow from the Euphrates River into the neighbouring country and has restricted this vital lifeline for the badly needed resource. Destroyed infrastructure, combined with a massive spike in fuel prices and constant electricity outages meant that irrigation systems were rarely used. Farming inputs were largely unavailable; seeds sown were often of the 5th or 6th generation, while fertilizers remained scarce, which eventually led to lower yields. The country´s only fertilizer production facility in the city of Homs had been destroyed in 2016, although Russians were trying to rebuild it. Not only did the fertilizer prices rise dramatically, but also nitrogenous fertilizers disappeared from the market—since considered a dual-use product, their exports to Syria were curbed under sanctions.[27] The Assad regime was previously accused of adding nitrate, originally used in fertilizers, to construct improvised barrel bombs that wreaked havoc upon the civilian population.[28] The FAO further maintains that the import of fertilizers via the Beirut-Damascus Road axis is also constrained, as the Lebanese economy suffers under severe crises and due to the lasting effects of the Beirut port explosion of tonnes of ammonium nitrate.

The skyrocketing fuel prices were a heavy burden on the farmers' shoulders. Government subsidies on diesel only covered a third of the total cost, causing businesses to sell their produce more locally. The geography of distribution is what makes wheat a strategic resource for the Syrian regime. Only two out of five agricultural zones in Syria are suitable to grow wheat, with the eastern governorates accounting for 80% of total wheat production. The main agricultural areas in the North-east (NES)—Al-Hasakeh, Ar-Raqqah, and Aleppo governorates—are under Kurdish control.[29] Whereas North-west Syria (NWS) is divided between the Türkiye-affiliated National Army and Interim Government in northern Aleppo governorate and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly al-Nusra Front) and its affiliated Salvation Government in the north of Idlib Governorate.[30] In March 2021, the government paid SYP 900/kg of wheat, while Kurdish authorities paid SYP 1150/kg, effectively beckoning all producers in the Kurdish-controlled territory to the Kurdish authorities and thus halting the transfer of wheat from the eastern provinces to the rest of the country.[31]

The Syrian state used to control 144 grain collection centres before the outbreak of the Civil War; there are currently only 49 operational ones left under the government's control. Therefore, HOBOOB can only store somewhere between 590 000 and 770 000 tonnes of wheat annually—instead of 3.8

24 Adleh et al., "Considerations."
25 Adleh et al., "Considerations."
26 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Special report: 2021 FAO Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic – December* (Rome: FAO, 2021).
27 FAO, "Special report."
28 "Syria: Barrage of Barrel Bombs: Attacks on Civilians Defy UN Resolution," *Human Rights Watch*, 30 July 2014.
29 FAO, "Special report."
30 Adleh et al., "Considerations."
31 FAO, "Special report."

million tonnes. Simultaneously, milling capacity also dropped to 2.8 million tonnes annually.[32] As of 2021, the Syrian government was projected to have a wheat deficit of 1.89 million tonnes.[33]

Adding to the existing deficit, the ramifications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine pose further challenges to bread production in some parts of Syria. For instance, *Watad*, an HTS-owned company, has a monopoly on fuel trade in NWS. Up until February 2022, fuel used to be imported from Ukraine through Turkish companies.[34] It is expected that the impact of the war on fuel supply and prices will further increase bread prices in NWS. In the Damascus-controlled regions, the invasion of Ukraine is likely to further restrict access to flour and fuel. The Assad government can still purchase supplies at a higher cost from NES, yet the amounts available may be insufficient to meet the population's needs. In August 2022, the Syrian regime increased the subsidised petrol prices—for the third time this year—by 127%, from SYP 1100 to SYP 2500.[35]

Imports via the government-held seaport of Tartus—leased to the Russian Federation for 49 years—remain the only lifeline. Subsidised bread is the primary marker of the welfare state's functioning

In this dire situation, imports through the government-held seaports in Latakia and Tartus are the only remaining lifeline. It is worth remembering that the Assad regime leased the port of Tartus to the Russian Federation for 49 years (beginning in 2019). In December 2021, it also struck a deal with the Kremlin to deliver 1 million tonnes of wheat to Syria.[36]

4. Bread and Peace

The value of bread for political stability during the Civil War in Syria must not be underestimated in order to understand Russia's interventions to help its allies in Damascus. Adleh et al. elaborate extensively on the welfare provisions in Syria. In particular, they speculate that subsidised bread is the primary marker of the welfare state's functioning. The term 'state bread' is frequently used to refer to the bundle of a dozen salted flat loaves, baked by public bakeries and sold by public vendors at a low price. As of February 2022, a package of such state bread cost USD 0.10 in the regime-controlled areas.[37]

Despite state institutions, alongside many aspects of daily life, disrupted, people still expect their daily bread—regardless of who is in charge. Adleh et al. maintain that the (in-)ability to provide subsidised bread to the local population was a crucial factor for the breakaway and the government-held territories alike. The warring factions in Syria engaged in what was described as a 'wheat war', denying each other access to wheat production. Their tactics ranged from torching each other's fields to cornering wheat, engrossing the local markets; from appropriating fertile lands to establishing smuggling networks.[38] For instance, the Assad regime—with direct support from the Russian Airforce—killed at least 801 civilians in 174 recorded attacks that specifically targeted bakeries and bread queues.[39]

The warring sides were constantly under extreme pressure from frustrated civilians, who significantly hindered their operations.[40] Public discontent manifested itself through protests, acts of sabotage, or non-compliance, as well as by forming militias and collaborating with the adversary. However, by providing basic and welfare services—electricity, shelter, water, and bread—the new authorities were able to consolidate control over the captured territory with support from the local population. According to Martínez et al., multiple factions in Syria's complex Civil War successfully employed this concept and thus won the

32 FAO, "Special report."
33 FAO, "Special report."
34 Adleh et al., "Considerations."
35 "Syria regime raises price of subsidised petrol by 127%," *Middle East Monitor*, 8 August 2022.
36 "Syria parliament okays Russian lease of Tartus port: state media," *France24*, 12 June 2019.
37 Adleh et al., "Considerations."
38 Adleh et al., "Considerations."
39 Adleh et al., "Considerations."
40 Martínez et al., "Struggling to Perform the State."

governing mandate from the public in the capture of territory.

For example, once the anti-Assad Free Syrian Army´s (FSA) inability to provide welfare services had become obvious in 2012-13, the Islamist factions quickly started gaining a foothold, especially in Northern Syria. As soon as Idlib had been captured in 2015, the FSA and multiple Islamist factions sought to restore access to bread products. Where the FSA had initially failed to do so, al-Nusra and the IS swiftly filled the power vacuum. The IS re-opened the only functioning bakery in the city of Palmyra immediately after its capture in 2015 and distributed bread free of charge.

(In-)ability to provide subsidised bread to the local population was a crucial factor for the breakaway and the government-held territories alike

At the same time, the IS is notorious for burning wheat fields in territories under their enemies' control. Bread distributions might have initially helped it to secure a foothold in the areas, previously dominated by other rebel groups. However, the IS' subsequent inability—or unwillingness—to continue performing the state functions loosened its hold over several Syrian communities. In Ar-Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor, failure to provide basic goods fostered resistance in the cities increasingly reluctant to tolerate its erratic rule.

With extreme poverty on the rise, bread and other welfare services tend to shift the loyalties in local populations—a fact the Assad regime is well aware of. Employing similar tactics, it conducted targeted attacks against wheat production facilities and bakeries in Idlib, Homs, and Deir ez-Zor after the FSA or other rebel groups had entered those cities. Since 2012, the regime has tried to interfere with the opposition-administered effort to provide vital public services and subsistence goods, thereby presenting itself as the only viable source.[41]

The Assad regime tends to exploit its monopoly over wheat and bread supplies to increase surveillance of its population and brutally crack down on whoever it deems an 'enemy of the state'. Recent measures limit subsidised bread to those carrying digital consumer identification, which replaced the old paper 'household' ID.[42] And those who are allowed to buy bread from non-subsidised sources must register their names, nationalities, and phone numbers with local authorities.[43]

With outperforming one's adversary in the realm of welfare recognised as an effective counter-insurgency strategy, the Assad regime has devoted a tremendous effort to keeping the subsidy system solvent, thus offering affordable bread to the populations under its territorial control. In 2022, the budget allocated 18% (SYP 13.3 trillion) to subsidise consumer bread. The Damascus-held areas need 1.2 million tonnes of wheat, whereas their production capacity is estimated at 200 000 tonnes. Despite supplies from foreign allies such as Iran and Russia, the government can hardly compete with the Kurdish authorities. In NES, the estimated needs are 300 000 tonnes, while production is at 600 000 tonnes.[44] These opposition-held regions, however, struggle with fuel supplies and limited international support, as well as suffer from continued infighting and tensions with their adversarial neighbours of Türkiye, Iraq, and Iran.

Similarly, once the Assad regime had withdrawn its troops and administration from parts of northern Syria in July 2012, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing—the People's Protection Units (YPG and YPJ)—were able to take advantage of the situation, asserting control over three Kurdish-majority enclaves in the region of Al-Jazira and cities of Kobanî and Afrin. Benefiting from the weakened central government and divided opposition, the PYD managed to establish itself as a de-facto governing authority. It maintained law and order, administered justice, and kept the local institutions up and running. The PYD sought to introduce a bottom-up self-government model by establishing councils akin to ministries, building schools and prisons, and forming civil defence forces.[45] The YPG's main rivals were the jihadi groups—Jabhat al-Nusra (now HTS) and the IS—with whom the Kurdish militia repeatedly clashed for resources and key border crossings areas.[46]

While building up functional institutions and a competitive state, the Kurdish authorities

41 Martínez et al., "Struggling to Perform the State."

42 The Syrian government recognises a household as the family of a father, mother, and unmarried children.

43 Adleh et al., "Considerations."

44 Adleh et al., "Considerations."

45 Vittoria Federici, "The Rise of Rojava: Kurdish Autonomy in the Syrian Conflict," *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* 35, no. 2 (2015): 81-90.

46 Afrin is currently under the control of the Türkiye-backed FSA.

must not forget about subsidised bread. At this point, their geographical location may position them for success. Recapture by the unpopular Assad regime forces—and subsequent loss of independence—seems less and less likely by the day. The Assad regime itself may be positioned to lose its capability to govern these territories directly from Damascus, with the autonomous Kurdish entities unwilling to compromise.

5. Russia's Global Ambitions

With the Russian supplies of wheat stolen from Ukraine, Bashar al-Assad could consolidate power and portray himself as the sole source of stability, peace, and prosperity in the war-torn country. This strategy would fully agree with Russia's own proclaimed goals for its intervention in Syria's Civil War.

Ever since taking the president's office, Vladimir Putin sought to restore Russia's influence in MENA, thus presenting it as a significant player in a multipolar world order. In contrast to the USA, Russia seeks to establish itself as the status quo guarantor in the region exhausted by multiple foreign interventions. Promoting Bashar al-Assad—its staunchest ally in the Middle East—as the only alternative to chaos in Syria, Moscow thereby projects and enhances its own image.[47] If Syria and Russia are successful in their joint endeavour—quelling the rebellion and preventing the Kurds from forming autonomous territorial entities—Russia will significantly advance and strengthen its position in the wider region.

It is bolstering the Assad regime—and not Russia's humanitarian concerns—that explains the Russian food supplies to Syria

Syria remains one of the pivotal geostrategic countries in the Middle East, bordered by Türkiye in the North, Lebanon and Israel in the West, Iraq in the East, and Jordan in the South. The Kremlin has always viewed Assad as the only legitimate authority in Syria—its legal and diplomatic justification for the military intervention in 2015.[48] The same logic applies to food supplies. It is bolstering the Assad regime—and not Russia's humanitarian concerns—that explains it. For instance, Russia has recently vetoed a measure that would have allowed the last U.N. aid route into Syria to remain open for another year. That vote, critics said, endangered the lives of millions already suffering for over a decade.[49] Moscow, however, insisted that the route violated the country's sovereignty and that President Bashar al-Assad of Syria should decide how the foreign aid would be distributed.[50]

The alleged war against terrorism is not a novelty for Russia. Vladimir Putin has been fighting insurgencies in the Caucasus regions of Chechnya, Dagestan, Circassia, Abkhazia, and Abazinia for decades.[51] To foster its geopolitical ambition and cement Assad's regime, Russia again used the pretext of combating Islamic terrorism together with the global anti-IS coalition. It carpet-bombed rebel-held cities such as Aleppo, indiscriminately killing civilians. Being on the receiving end of the Russian military aggression, HTS publicly declared its support for Ukraine and called upon its fighters to set out against Russian forces.[52]

While claiming that terrorist groups in Syria may pose a security threat to the Russian Federation, the Kremlin's definition of 'terrorism' remains rather vague. Any armed opposition to the Assad regime essentially constitutes terrorism. The paranoid Putin regime itself perceives any anti-government protest—from the 'Colour-Revolutions' to the 'Arab Spring'—as a West-orchestrated plot and thus a threat to itself. Therefore, it is quick to designate any opposition as 'terrorist' and target it when it fits the narrative.[53]

The type of arms Russia has deployed indicates that its true goal is to project military power rather than defeat the IS. For instance, neither the IS nor any other Islamist group in Syria has ever had an air force of any kind. Yet Russia—

47 Salam et al., "The Impact of the Russian Invasion."

48 Shafiqur Rahaman, "Syrian Civil War: A Historical Study from the Russian Perspectives," *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education* 3, no. 10 (October 2016): 7-13.

49 Lara Jakes, "Russia Votes to Shut Down Last U.N. Aid Route Into Syria," *The New York Times*, 8 July 2022.

50 Jakes, "Russia Votes."

51 Rahaman, "Syrian Civil War."

52 Khaled al-Khateb, "Syrian opposition backs Ukraine in stand against Russian army," *Al-Monitor*, 2 March 2022.

53 Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Russian Way of War: Threat Perception and Approaches to Counterterrorism," in *Russia's War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned*, ed. Thomas J. Shattuck (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020), 15-34.

from early on in its intervention—fielded S-400 surface-to-air-missile (SAM) systems, effectively denying airspace to militaries active in the region (i.e., the US and Israel).[54] At times, this Russian air cover even allowed the IS to advance into the territories held by the anti-Assad militia. Most of Moscow's air strikes also targeted areas outside of the IS' control and thus effectively assisted the terrorist group.

Throughout the years, Russia has consistently engaged, and even partnered, with other terrorist groups in the region, such as Hezbollah and Hamas.[55] It might be the reason why Israel, a strategic ally of the United States, has been notably tacit in its support for Ukraine. Jerusalem fears that Russia's growing influence in Syria would enable the militant groups that operate from Syria and Lebanon under Iran's supervision to escalate their fight against Israel.

Russia needs to find other wheat providers to main exports to Syria, unless it wishes to jeopardise its domestic food security policy and undermine its own ban

Russia is examining the Syrian Civil War from three major perspectives: the pretextual war against proclaimed terrorists; protecting Assad's government; and holding geostrategic positions in Syria to exert influence over the Middle East.[56] Terrorism—as much as the fight against it—is a tool in the Russian arsenal in its desperate struggle for the multipolar world and the very survival of the Putin regime.

6. Many Mouths to Feed

The full-scale invasion challenged the Russian state much more than it had originally anticipated. Whereas Ukraine's fierce resistance, coupled with economic sanctions, put the Russian government itself in peril.

On 15 March, Moscow introduced a temporary ban on grain export, followed by an export ban on fertilizers in April.[57] These steps were part of the Russian doctrine on food security—one out of seven doctrines designed to guarantee the survival of the Russian State. Having been a grain importer as recently as in the early 2000s, Russia successfully spearheaded a campaign to rely entirely on domestic production, stimulated the agriculture industry, and placed itself among the world's leading exporters. Those measures were designed to protect Russia's food security in the event of a major geopolitical conflict and shielded it from the EU sanctions that followed its unlawful annexation of Crimea and aggression against Ukraine in 2014. A repeat of the 1979 Soviet Grain Embargo, for example, would be rendered useless, thus depriving the West of one more leverage to stop Russia's brutal onslaught against Ukraine.[58]

On the one hand, halting exports to the Global South serves as a tool of blackmail. Continued wheat supplies to Moscow's ally in Damascus, on the other hand, positions Russia as a guarantor of stability in a multipolar world—and in the Middle East in particular. However, Russia needs to find other wheat providers to maintain exports to Syria, unless it wishes to jeopardise its domestic food security policy and undermine its own ban. And this is why the grain theft from Ukraine is pivotal to achieving Russia's both strategic goals simultaneously. It is much easier to loot than to evade sanctions via money-laundering schemes and front companies, although the Russian governing circles are no strangers to such practices either.

It is important to remember that only five companies account for almost 90% of wheat traded internationally.[59] These firms exploit their market share to broker deals and maximise profits even during global food shortages such as the 2007-2008 world food price crisis.[60] Following 24 February 2022, four out of five agricultural giants—*Cargill, Archer Daniels Midland, Louis Dreyfus*, and *Bunge*—left the Russian market. Whereas the Russian wheat trading companies are connected to the EU through post-box companies. For instance, *Agromino* left the Russian market following the events of 2014, and a Cypriot shell firm—whom it was impossible to identify beyond the name of '*Ellania Business Inc.*'—purchased its large Rostov cluster.[61]

54 Borshchevskaya, "The Russian Way of War," 15-34.
55 Borshchevskaya, "The Russian Way of War," 15-34.
56 Rahaman, "Syrian Civil War."
57 Azarieva et al., "Bread and Autocracy."
58 Azarieva et al., "Bread and Autocracy."
59 Ahmed et al., "Wheat Value Chains."
60 Ahmed et al., "Wheat Value Chains."
61 Christopher Lander and Brian Kuns, "The Sinking of the Armada: Problems for the Three 'Flagship' Foreign Investment Agroholdings in Russia and Ukraine," *Europe-Asia Studies* 74, no. 3 (2022): 449-480.

Conclusions

The Russian Federation has been expropriating hundreds of tonnes of wheat from Ukrainian farmers and endangering their lives. Its aggression against Ukraine has millions of people globally at risk of starvation. In the meantime, it has bolstered the brutal Assad regime. Vladimir Putin's Russia has committed all these crimes in a delusional quest to fulfil its maniac imperial ambitions both in its direct neighbourhood and the Middle East. Today, the Russian State is the mortal enemy not only of the Ukrainian and Syrian people but the entire Global South, threatening to plunge its population into food insecurity and poverty.

Adequate sanctions, business due diligence, and rigorous scrutiny may counter Russia's corrupt practices rather effectively

Regulating whether grain cargo leaving the Russian ports has been stolen from Ukraine may be an incredibly complex venture. It requires intense monitoring through satellite imagery, as well as honest cooperation from port authorities and agricultural holdings. Fortunately, the global wheat market is extremely concentrated. Adequate sanctions, business due diligence, and rigorous scrutiny may counter Russia's corrupt practices rather effectively.

However, the fastest way to end both the theft of wheat from Ukraine and the brutal regime in Damascus is to boost military support to the Ukrainian Armed Forces, allowing them to win a swift and decisive victory over the Russian invaders and restore Ukraine's sovereignty in its internationally recognised borders. Until then, the EU, NATO, and their international partners must intensify joint efforts to prevent Russia from stealing the Ukrainian grain and shipping it to the Syrian regime.

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