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Feeding Dichotomies: Hunger \textit{and} Politics in the Middle East and Africa

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\textbf{Abstract}: The concept of “food security” has a complex and sometimes contradictory relationship with issues of hunger and politics. Some believe the concept helps draw attention to the connection between hunger and politics, creating focused discussion around the idea of “hunger politics.” Other voices worry that “food security” results in food becoming yet another topic in the long list of critical issues to be securitised, depoliticising issues of food and hunger by relegating them to military interests. This paper sits in the centre of this debate, engaging with the relationships between hunger, politics, and hunger politics seen on the international scene. It will engage primarily with these issues in the Middle East and Africa by exploring a false dichotomy that has emerged in global discourses. In media, global aid funding, and academia, the same separation is seen: Politics happens in the Middle East; hunger happens in Africa. This false dichotomy was clearly seen during the 2011 string of protests and revolutions in both regions. When events began, major news outlets mentioned unrest in Tunisia over food prices, highlighting one street vendor who committed self-immolation over economic woes. Within a week, those headlines were gone. And suddenly a “democratic movement” was sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa. When the same political movement entered sub-Saharan Africa, though, and unions went on strike, oppositional presidential candidates were arrested, and people formed their own “Tahrir Protests”, headlines read along the lines of “Food riots in Uganda”.

Using discourse theory and theories of confirmation bias, this paper will present trends in media, funding, and research on hunger, conflict, environmental resources, and politics in the Middle Eastern and African regions. Attention will be drawn to the prominent disconnect between issues of hunger in Africa and military concerns in the Middle East. How this dichotomy plays in to the food security and/or insecurity of individuals in both regions will be explored. Work beginning to break down this separation will be highlighted and opportunities to further dissect the false dichotomy discussed. Finally, the ability of the concept of “food security” to help or hinder in breaking down this dichotomy will be considered.
Introduction

The concept of “food security” has a complex and sometimes contradictory relationship with issues of hunger and politics. Some believe the concept helps draw attention to the connection between hunger and politics, creating focused discussion around the idea of “hunger politics.” Other voices worry that “food security” results in food becoming yet another topic in the long list of critical issues to be securitised, depoliticising issues of food and hunger by relegating them to military interests. This paper sits in the centre of this debate, engaging with the relationships between hunger, politics, and hunger politics seen on the international scene. It will engage primarily with these issues in the Middle East and Africa by exploring a false dichotomy that has emerged in global discourses. In media, global aid funding, and academia, the same simplistic separation is seen: Politics happens in the Middle East; hunger happens in Africa. This false dichotomy was clearly seen during the 2011 string of protests and revolutions in both regions. When events began, major news outlets mentioned unrest in Tunisia over food prices, highlighting one street vendor who committed self-immolation over economic woes. Within a week, those headlines were gone. And suddenly a “democratic movement” was sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa. When the same political movement entered sub-Saharan Africa, though, and unions went on strike, oppositional presidential candidates were arrested, and people formed their own “Tahrir Protests”, headlines read along the lines of “Food riots in Uganda”. This dichotomy serves to depoliticise hunger in sub-Saharan Africa while oversecuritising food concerns in the Middle East and North Africa. It bolsters deeply problematic Western characterisations of the “violent Arab” and “powerless African”, which are deeply rooted in racism and conceptions of the “Other” (Said, 1994). As such, the dichotomy should be questioned and its utility in helping improve food security concerns in both regions considered.

This paper aims to begin that examination. Using discourse theory and theories of confirmation bias, the paper will explore this dichotomy and the impact it has on people in both regions as well as the rest of the world. Discourses and Framing will provide a brief introduction to discourse theory and the power of frames in influencing actors’ perceptions and actions. The Methods section will explain the rationale for focusing this paper on hunger [and] politics in the Middle East and North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa along with case study selection and data analysis. The paper will then turn to presenting trends in media, funding, and research on hunger, conflict, environmental resources, and politics in these regions. Attention will be drawn to the prominent disconnect between hunger and politics,
and how this dichotomy plays in to the food security and/or insecurity of individuals in both regions will be explored. Existing projects beginning to break down this separation will be highlighted and opportunities to further dissect the false dichotomy discussed. Finally, the ability of the concept of “food security” to help or hinder in breaking down this dichotomy will be considered.

**Discourses and Framing**

This research bases both its methodology and its purpose in discourse theory. “Discourses” refer to the systems through which people give meaning to and make sense of the world (Runhaar et al., 2010: 340). Discourse theory posits that language does not merely reflect but also reproduces and shapes the ways in which topics and events are understood and acted upon by various actors. Through “framing”, certain discourses become dominant in sectors or groups of actors; these frames strongly influence not only the ways in which we talk about issues, but also the way we classify and understand “facts”, how events can best be influenced, and which actions we should take; these frames are also referred to in literature as “lenses”, “schemes”, and “models”, among others (Downey and Brief, 1986: Kolkman et al., 2007: Schön and Rein, 1994: Rein and Schön, 1996: Shmueli et al., 2006: and Kaufman and Smith, 1999).

“Framing” has much in common with “confirmation bias”, a theory arising from social psychology. Confirmation bias was first considered by P.C. Wason in a 1960 paper. Wason demonstrated how individuals frequently fail to attempt to disprove hypotheses and assumptions, instead only seeking evidence that confirms them. In doing so, people come to firmly believe “facts” that are “half-truths” at best and sometimes blatantly false. Since Wason’s experiments in the lab, confirmation bias has been explored in a multitude of sectors. In multiple contexts, people are shown to latch onto evidence that confirms what they already think they know while dismissing material that challenges their beliefs. While confirmation bias is difficult to prove and has been used in so many disciplines and sectors that it is not always well defined (e.g., perhaps “confirmation biases” is a more appropriate term) (Koslowski and Maqueda, 1993), it can be a powerful tool for questioning the extent to which people’s minds and assumptions are easily changed. Confirmation bias and discourse theory have strong overlaps. People impose their assumptions on new information, amplifying components that “fit” their “frame” and downplaying or disregarding elements that do not. This happens in daily life, media, and policy, as well as all stages of the academic
process – funding, interest creation, evidence seeking, and publication (Torgerson, 2006; McMillan and White, 1993).

Issues of hunger, politics, and food security are not free from these issues of framing and confirmation bias. The degree to which hunger is given attention in various regions, the ways food security is understood and explained, and the manner in which causes of malnutrition and obesity are investigated are all shaped by dominant discourses of hunger politics. Which discourses are dominant varies across regions, sectors, and stakeholders; however, there are often “macro discourses” that frame topics in general ways on large levels.

One such macro-level framing has emerged around the relationship between hunger and politics in the Africa and Middle East. In Western media, aid funding, and academia, a false dichotomy has emerged that frames hunger politics in the regions such that a lay observer may come to the conclusion that politics happens in the Middle East and North Africa while hunger happens in sub-Saharan Africa. This is clearly not the reality on the ground, but this is precisely the point: Dominant discourses influence the way realities are perceived and, when these frames are embraced by powerful action, the way realities are responded to.

The dichotomy of politics in MENA and hunger in SSA, while simplified, nonetheless provides an interesting case study for how dominant discourses influence frame reproduction and power. The power of frames lay in their ability to influence perception of what is happening and how best to respond. To illustrate with a hypothetical example, let’s say there are two primary factors influencing Mahmoud’s food security: climate change and unemployment. Mahmoud believes that job loss is the most important factor, as he was able to afford basic nutrition, even with price shocks, before becoming unemployed. This is Mahmoud’s micro-level framing of his family’s food insecurity. If a policymaker, Jasmine, has been allotted funding for a food security programme in the area, Mahmoud would think that a programme focused on job creation, poverty alleviation, and employment skills would be most useful. But if Jasmine has been told over and over that climate change is the main driver of price shocks and thus food insecurity in Mahmoud’s state, she is likely to invest the food security programme funding in climate change resilience. And while it would not seem a bad thing to invest in climate change projects focused on food security, the macro frame embraced by Jasmine diverges from Mahmoud’s local frame, and results in very different policy decisions.

The process of engaging with others’ frames and rethinking your own is referred to by Runhaal et al. and others as “frame reflection” and may involve “reframing” (2010). It is possible – and increasingly popular – to facilitate the process of reframing between
stakeholder groups in various projects, from corporate investment to development projects. But reframing is not an easy or quick task. It often involves dismantling fundamental assumptions about the way the world works. In spite of the difficulties, sessions in which various stakeholders dialogue around their frames and hear about others’ can be useful in creating empathy and understanding and, perhaps, even reformulating policies and actions. Beyond facilitated meetings, major events can also create “windows of opportunities” for reframing dominant discourses. Rein and Schön refer to these moments as “exogenous events” (1996: 100; see also Runhaar et al., 2010: 340). When an event occurs that garners a great deal of attention, it can serve to question a dominant discourse. Or it can serve to reinforce it. Let’s return to Mahmoud and Jasmine. If a hurricane damages local infrastructure, causing a factory to shut down and hunger in the community to soar, Mahmoud and his friends may be able to use the event to show Jasmine how devastating unemployment is to food security and persuade her to rework the programme. On the other hand, Jasmine may view the hurricane as yet another example of climate change’s effects, reinforcing her frame and reassuring her that the project funding is properly allocated. How events are perceived, discussed, and responded to is impacted by which frames are held by which actors and how much power they have. Again, investing in climate change resilience would not seem to be a bad thing. But if Jasmine repeatedly has her climate change frame of food insecurity reinforced, and receives more and more power to invest and speak authoritatively on the subject, the time may come when she is given power over a project and automatically makes it a climate change project, even if AIDS, unemployment, gender issues, or basic sanitation is much more of a problem and would better engage and aid the local community. Her dominant frame may cause her to misinterpret an event, and thus respond to it poorly. Frames and discourses are not inherently bad. They allow us to make sense of our world. But uncritically embracing dominant frames, and failing to question those frames by seeking new evidence and more information, can result in serious errors that have very direct and serious impacts on others and on us.

**Methods**

This paper does not seek to unequivocally prove the existence of a dichotomy between food in sub-Saharan Africa and politics in the Middle East and North Africa. As demonstrated in the previous section; multiple frames often coexist around the same issues. Nor does it mean to argue that hunger is as widespread a problem in the Middle East and North Africa as
malnutrition is in sub-Saharan Africa. What it does aim to do is draw attention to the fact that dominant framings emerge in media, policy, and academic work that impact how events, trends, and realities are understood, discussed, and responded to. To illustrate this concern, this paper will explore a perceived dichotomy in how the West frames and filters information around issues of hunger and politics in the Middle East and Africa in its media, aid funding, and research. Case studies will be used to demonstrate that, while this dichotomy is by no means absolute, there exists a tendency in the West to oversecuritise food concerns in the Middle East and North Africa and depoliticise hunger in sub-Saharan Africa.

Case Study Selection and Analysis
Two case studies will be presented to demonstrate the existence of this dichotomy in media: Google Image Search and news coverage of the 2011 Middle Eastern and African uprisings. Google Image Search was selected for its ability to provide a quick but incredibly accurate picture of how issues are visualised around the world. As one of the most sophisticated pieces of software, Google Search incorporates data from million of websites and shows the most common and popular content. And as one of the most widespread search engines in the world, looking at Google Image Search gives researchers a strong indication of what others see when they engage with issues. The 2011 Middle Eastern and African uprisings were selected as the second media case study in part because they demonstrate the perceived dichotomy so clearly, but primarily because they created one of those pivotal moments in history when dominant framings can either be questioned or reinforce. Discourse analysis was used to compare and contrast the language used in news articles and headlines on the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa with those on the uprisings in sub-Saharan Africa. The principles of discourse analysis were applied similarly to the visual images gathered.

To examine the hunger and politics dichotomy in international aid funding and policy, the budgetary reports and/or requests of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID), and EuropeAid were considered. The United States and the United Kingdom were chosen as primary case studies for their significance in the funding scene and the comparative possibilities between them. The US and the UK are two of the top donors in the international scene. Even with their “special relationship”, the two countries have very different histories with both regions and maintain different interests and intentions. Examining whether the dichotomy is equally pronounced in both countries can suggest the degree to which the
dichotomy is or is not pervasive. Examining EuropeAid’s programming provides a further test of pervasiveness. A primary budgeting document from each body was analysed for the connections drawn between food, conflict, the environment, and the two regions. The relative weight of each issue in either region was considered, as was the specific language used. Finally, the role of this dichotomy in academia and research will be explored. Several academic databases were searched for combinations of “food”, “hunger”, “Middle East” and “Africa”. JSTOR (searched for all content, regardless of access privileges), EBSCO (searched with access granted by the University of East Anglia), and Academic OneFile and ProQuest (searched with access granted by Michigan State University) were selected for their prominence and interdisciplinarity. The top search results, as sorted by relevance, were examined for trends and foci. While this in no way constitutes a systematic review, it does provide a glimpse into the general trends of academic research, publication, and discourse.

A Word on Regionalisation
This paper grapples with framing and dichotomies between two regions that both lack a universal definition. International organisations, governmental ministries, disciplines, researchers, and media outlets all categorise countries in Africa and the “greater” Middle East slightly differently. Sometimes, the entirety of the Middle East and Africa are grouped as one region; at other times, sub-Saharan Africa and the five northernmost African countries are separated, with the five North African countries grouped with the Middle East. But the Middle East and North Africa is just as likely to be termed “West Asia and North Africa” or “the Near East”. One of the challenges of this research lay in ensuring data collected was relevant to the region it was intended to represent. This proved particularly difficult in examining statistics about just how extant malnutrition, obesity, and other forms of food insecurity are throughout this part of the world. Multiple organisations present conflicting numbers for hunger’s pervasiveness, as well as for population and poverty. Divergent classifications make comparisons of facts and figures gathered from the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), World Bank, and other institutions difficult and inaccurate. While statistical analysis need not be employed to illustrate the existence of framing dichotomies, it would be useful in examining just how damaging this dichotomy might be. More universal regional classification would also aid in comparing policies, other trends, and research.

For the purposes of this paper, the “Middle East and North Africa” or “MENA” includes the five northernmost countries of Africa (Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, and Egypt), along
with “Middle Eastern” countries; “sub-Saharan Africa” or “SSA” includes all other African countries. The “Middle East” need not be explicitly defined, since the comparison lay between MENA and SSA, not MENA and other Asian or European regions. While this fluid definition is far from perfect, it allows for the incorporation of “Near East” and “West Asia” regionalisations from media, policy, and research documents as appropriate, regardless of precisely where the eastern border is drawn. As will be shown, the dichotomy is most pronounced between “Arab” states and “African” states. While Sudan and South Sudan are classified as sub-Saharan Africa here, many of the strongest counterexamples to the dichotomy or mixed messages come from these border states that can be seriously considered both “African” and “Arab”; it will be interesting to revisit these trends in several years’ time when South Sudan has become more established to see if Sudan’s representation then looks more like Egypt and Tunisia while South Sudan’s depiction more closely mirrors Uganda’s and Kenya’s.

**Media**

*A Picture is Worth A Thousand Words*…

Perhaps the clearest way to demonstrate the dichotomy that oversecuritises food in the Middle East and North Africa and depoliticises hunger in sub-Saharan Africa is through Google Image searches of “hunger middle east” and “hunger africa”.

**Figure 1** shows the first fifty or so images that the Google search tool returns when “hunger middle east” is input. Nearly all of the images show people taking action, the majority images from protests.
Figure 1. Google Image Search Results for “hunger middle east”

![Image search performed 13 March 2013 on images.google.com.]

Figure 2 shows the same search results but for “africa” rather than “middle east”. Comparing Figure 1 with Figure 2 is startling. The results for “africa” are almost entirely of starving women and children. Very little action occurs in these images; instead, they are primarily images of desperation and helplessness.

Figure 2. Google Image Search Results for “hunger africa”

![Image search performed 13 March 2013 on images.google.com.]

These images reflect extant stereotypes of the “violent Arab” and “helpless African” all too present in Western mindsets. When students, policymakers, and the public are regularly
shown these types of dichotomised imagery, it is little wonder than the stereotypes are not broken down but rather reinforced.

*The 2011 Uprisings*

The much-lauded revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt dominated Western media for several months in 2011. It was not until a massive earthquake hit Japan that Tunisia was kicked off the front page. International news sources highlighted the peaceful nature of these movements, protestors’ anger over governmental corruption, and the people’s push for democracy. But when the protests first began, before they became grandiose movements, before Ben Ali and Mubarak were overthrown, before the events were labeled as “revolutions”, food prices were named as the primary cause of the unrest.

This section will explore the ways in which events on the ground in MENA and SSA were reported. A brief overview of the uprisings will be given for readers not overly familiar with events.

Organisers of civil movements in North Africa reported that discussions and planning had been occurring for months, and no one will dispute that there have been quiet grumblings in select circles against corrupt leaders and strict regimes for years. But the start date generally given to the recent series of events is 18 December 2010, the day Mohamed Bouazizi, a street produce vendor, set himself on fire (Noueihed, 2011). The self-immolation struck a chord for many Tunisians, and the action began. On 14 January 2011, protestors saw their first major victory as Zine El Abidine Ben Ali stepped down and fled the country (BBC, 2011, “Tunisia…”). Some time later, Egypt’s Muhammad Hosni Sayyid Mubarak was also ousted (BBC, 2011, “Egypt…”). Civil unrest and other uprisings occurred in the Middle East, North Africa, central Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, in countries as diverse as Iraq, Mauritania, Libya, Algeria, Djibouti, Morocco, Sudan, Egypt, Western Sahara, Benin, Burkina Faso, the Ivory Coast, Kenya, Senegal, Swaziland, and Uganda. The word “copycat” was seen frequently in international media as the unrest seemed to “spread” from Tunisia across the region (Huffington Post, “Tunisia Revolution…”). And though certain techniques were borrowed or imitated (most noticeably the self-immolation, which proved successful in gaining great international attention), the uprisings were in no way homogenous. The media’s treatment of some protests as “mere” copycat movements served to downplay the seriousness of people’s needs and agency in many other locales.

The Egyptian movement garnered an incredible amount of attention in Western media. The action began publically with the 25 January Revolution. Protestors, through a series of
marches and mainly nonviolent civil resistance techniques (including demonstrations and labor strikes), demanded the resignation of Hosni Mubarak. They won it 11 February (Al-Jazeera, 2011, “Triumph…”). The events of Tahrir Square captured the hearts and imaginations of people and international media. Yet nearly all Western media outlets failed to adequately cover events in a nuanced way. The nickname “Twitter Revolution”, while cute and catchy, serves to give credit for Egyptian labour to digital technologies. It also downplays the poverty and hunger element of the movement. Egyptian protestors suffered from of food price inflation, unemployment, and low wages alongside human rights abuses. Their slogan (“Bread, freedom, and social justice”) reflects this multiplicity of concern; however, the protests were portrayed as mainly political (MacQueen, 2011). Egypt’s protests became almost purely about democracy and political freedom for most academics and news sources. There are some counterexamples, of course; in particular, US’ National Public Radio reporting the ideas of New York University economics professor Nouriel Roubini acknowledged the role of food prices (Geewax, 2011).

Egypt and Tunisia, however, were far from the only countries with similar protest movements in early 2011. Protests in Kenya focused on commodity prices, particularly maize (Al-Jazeera, 2011, “Kenyans…”). The Kenyan government reduced the tax on fuel, but citizens protested the cuts were not large enough. Protestor Yash Pal Ghai, an expert in constitutional law, cited both prices and corruption as causal factors for the protests. Pal Ghai says that the irony and inappropriateness of luxury cars driven by politicians traveling to debate rising food prices is not lost on the starving Kenyan public. “It is amazing there has not been a rebellion by now” (Associated Press, 2011). Like Kenya, Uganda saw protests over food and commodity prices. The media did not generally present the Ugandan protests as democratic, even though two opposing presidential candidates were arrested. Instead, a news article details the increase in commodity prices, citing the fact that “staples such as soap, rice, and cooking oil have gone up by more than 40 percent since the beginning of the year” (Kron, 2011). Rather than highlighting the political nature of the protests, articles discussed “walk to work” protests pushing back against rising fuel prices (Associated Press, 2011). As discussed above, many of the protest triggers and strategies in the Middle East and North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa were similar. Yet Western news sources – and even Al Jazeera – reported on events in the two regions very differently. Table 1 presents a sample of the headlines seen in major media outlets January-May 2011 around the protest action in the Middle East and North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. News articles were found and saved in
spring 2011 as well as archive searched in spring 2013. While there are some counter and less extreme examples, the language used is primarily dichotomised.

### Table 1. Sample News Headlines of the 2011 MENA and SSA Uprisings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Headline</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SSA</td>
<td>“Kenyan protest against rising prices”</td>
<td>20 April 2011</td>
<td><em>Al Jazeera</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MENA</td>
<td>“Triumph as Mubarak quits”</td>
<td>11 February 2011</td>
<td><em>Al Jazeera</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSA</td>
<td>“Africa bears brunt of global rise in food costs”</td>
<td>15 March 2011</td>
<td><em>The Star</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MENA</td>
<td>“Egypt crisis: President Hosni Mubarak resigns as leader”</td>
<td>12 February 2011</td>
<td><em>BBC</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MENA</td>
<td>“Tunisia Riots Continue As President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali Dismisses Government”</td>
<td>14 January 2011</td>
<td><em>Huffington Post</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MENA</td>
<td>“Peddler’s martyrdom launched Tunisia’s revolution”</td>
<td>19 January 2011</td>
<td><em>Reuters</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSA</td>
<td>“Protests in Uganda Over Rising Prices Grow Violent”</td>
<td>21 April 2011</td>
<td><em>New York Times</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSA</td>
<td>“Uganda riots over soaring food prices”</td>
<td>30 April 2011</td>
<td><em>Al Jazeera</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSA</td>
<td>“A recipe for riots”</td>
<td>26 May 2011</td>
<td><em>The Economist</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSA</td>
<td>“Uganda riots reach capital as anger against President Museveni grows”</td>
<td>29 April 2011</td>
<td><em>The Guardian</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MENA</td>
<td>“No Longer About Bread – Egyptians Want Mubarak’s Head”</td>
<td>January 2011</td>
<td><em>New America Media</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The presence of this dichotomy in the media both reflects and propagates popular understandings of the MENA and SSA regions in the West. It also influences policymakers and government funding, as discussed in the next section.

**Money Speaks**

The ways in which aid money is allocated speaks volumes to donors’ priorities and framings. Here, recent budget narratives from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID), and EuropeAid will be explored for their allocations and justifications around aid to MENA and SSA.

*United States Agency for International Development*

Of the three evaluated donors, the United States is perhaps the “worst offender” for focusing aid along dichotomous lines. Egypt and Israel are major recipients of US aid, both
programmes strongly focused on military funding. This is a major source of the perceived dichotomy. Table 2 shows the stark difference between MENA- and SSA-focused funds along economic and military lines.

Table 2. USAID Funding Allocations to Selected MENA and SSA Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme</th>
<th>USD Allocated to MENA</th>
<th>USD Allocated to SSA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic Support Fund</td>
<td>1394.4 million</td>
<td>562.2 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Military Education and Training</td>
<td>18.9 million</td>
<td>13.3 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Military Financing</td>
<td>4836.2 million</td>
<td>51.5 million*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This $51.5 million also includes all military financing for East Asia and the Pacific.

Data Source: US Secretary of State. FY 2013 Congressional Budget Justification Volume 2 – Foreign Operations.

The food-politics dichotomy is equally present in the Budget Justification’s qualitative narrative. The Bureau for Food Security mentions a regional focus only once, and three of the four places mentioned are in sub-Saharan Africa, with the fourth in Asia: “The FY 2013 budget will focus on activities intended to transform the major crop production systems located in the Indo-gangetic plains, eastern and southern Africa, the Ethiopian highlands, and the West Africa Sudano-Sahelian region” (CBJ, 250). The “Feed the Future” programme has only one regional mention, again on SSA: “FTF programs will include a focus on reducing long-term vulnerability to food insecurity, specifically in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, and on harnessing science and technology to help populations adapt to increasingly erratic production seasons” (CBJ, 41). Even on climate change concerns, MENA is almost entirely absent: “USAID prioritizes work with vulnerable countries, both in terms of exposure to physical impacts of climate change and socio-economic sensitivity to those impacts. Thus USAID will focus on least developed countries (LDCs), African countries, small-island developing states, and glacier-dependent countries” (CBJ, 21). USAID’s 2012 request reflects the dichotomised reaction to the 2011 uprisings as well. “For the first time, our FY 2013 request also includes $770 million for a Middle East and North Africa Incentive Fund to help America support citizens who have demanded change and governments that are working to deliver it” (CBJ, 4). This funding is focused on the political rather than the food and hunger elements of the uprisings; it also ignores the simultaneous sub-Saharan African uprisings. Nor does the Congressional Budget Justification try to hide its motivation for involvement in MENA politics: “The FY 2013 request includes funding to support democratic reform and political institution building in the Middle East and to help
create economic opportunities for youth in the region. *Funding will continue for programs that advance U.S. national security interests*” (CBJ pp. 98-99, emphasis added).

**United Kingdom Department for International Development**

Aid allocation in the United Kingdom is strongly influenced by the fact that government programmes focus on the Commonwealth. Very little attention is given to the Middle East and North Africa in comparison to sub-Saharan Africa. In MENA, only Yemen and the Occupied Palestinian Territories are considered DFID priority countries. This affects the amount of attention given to the region as a whole, not only to food concerns. Nonetheless, narratives around the country-specific programmes can be compared across regions. The smallest of the country and regional programmes for DFID is its “Security & Humanitarian – Middle East Division”. The three highlighted Yemeni focus areas are on voting, economic programmes, and health; focus areas for the Occupied Palestinian Territories are on state institutions, security, and economic growth. Food insecurity is mentioned in the narrative on Palestine but not emphasised.

Sub-Saharan Africa, on the other hand, gets a great deal of DFID funding and food concerns feature prominently. The department’s biggest single country operation is Ethiopia. The narrative around SSA concerns includes statements such as “In the Horn of Africa, Britain led the world in tackling food insecurity in the last year” (2011-12 Report, 72) and “East Africa is experiencing a major humanitarian crisis due to drought. More than 13 million people have been affected. Britain is providing lifesaving aid for over three million people across Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia” (ibid, 63). However, a great deal of attention is also given to electoral assistance to African countries, showing that the political in Africa is being considered somewhat by the UK (though food assistance still seems to be depoliticised).

**EuropeAid**

EuropeAid allocates donor funding from the European Union as a whole, and thus reflects EU foreign policy goals and assumptions. In its 2012 Annual Report, EuropeAid describes its programmes in various regions, including the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. In both the way monies are spent and the narrative used to describe progress and programme implementation, the MENA-SSA dichotomy is clearly seen.

Narrative surrounding the Middle East refers to the “Arab Spring” (26). Its foci in the region are “to support ‘deep democracy’ and form partnerships with societies: intensifying political and security cooperation, supporting their sustainable economic and social development,
creating growth and jobs; strengthening trade ties, enhancing sector cooperation, promoting further mobility and enhancing regional partnerships” (51). Strategies include using sanctions when necessary (51), considering political prisoners (51), and focusing on girls’ education and women’s empowerment (54). Central concerns in Iraq are around health, education, and water and sanitation. All of these have strong ties with food and hunger, yet these aren’t mentioned (66). Yemeni concerns do include a focus on food security, along with “social welfare, health and good governance” (68). Throughout its narrative on the Middle East, a great deal of attention is given to poverty and water, yet these are consistently not connected to food.

The narrative for sub-Saharan Africa, on the other hand, includes a great deal of attention to “frequent food crises”, natural resources governance, desertification, land degradation, and environmental management (70). The Millennium Development Goal on eradicating hunger and attaining sufficient child nutrition is prominent. Multiple programme highlight boxes explore issues such as “Seeds improve food security in Somalia”, “Food-security – Support to Livestock in Somalia” (74), “Kenya – food security for households (77), and “Sweet success of Malawian farmers” (78). The focus for SSA thus looks completely different than the focus for the Middle East. There are not only multiple references to food in SSA’s narrative, but also multiple headlines. Food security, farmers, and fisheries are featured prominently throughout.

**Academia: Just another Mirror?**

A first glimpse into prominent academic search engines would seem to indicate that the false dichotomy of politics in the Middle East and North Africa and hunger in sub-Saharan Africa is just as present in academic work as it is in media and aid funding. The first hit of “food middle east” on Google Scholar is a handbook of birds; for “food africa”, it’s a piece on indigenous agricultural food production. **Figures 3** and **4** illustrate the top few results found on Google Scholar.
Figure 3. Google Scholar Search Results for “food middle east”

Search performed 25 March 2013 on scholar.google.com.
Broad academic trends on research in sub-Saharan Africa is on agricultural production (strongly tied to the Green Revolution), poverty, climate change (especially drought), “land grabs”, and health. In the Middle East and North Africa, academia is more likely to focus on politics, terrorism, economics, religion, and military security. This is not to say that this dichotomy is absolute. An incredible number of academics look at local politics, democracy, voting, and the rule of law in sub-Saharan Africa. A significant amount of environmental and ecological research exists on the Middle East and North Africa. But considerably more research exists along the lines of the dichotomy, and even research that crosses those lines tends to focus on the security elements of MENA ecology and food while depoliticising African poverty and agriculture.

To present a sample of these trends, **Table 3** lists the top twenty-five title results of journal articles returned for searches on “hunger ‘middle east’”, “food ‘middle east’”, “hunger africa”, and “food africa” using the JSTOR database, listed in the order they appear to users.
Table 4 provides a quick snapshot of common words appearing in these results and compares their prevalence in the search results across both regions. Of course, not all academic work happens within the realm of the journal article. Blog articles such as Martin Keulertz’s on de-naturing politics in the Middle East (2013) are more accessible to lay audiences than journal articles and can influence popular perceptions in the same way news media does. Projects around virtual water such as Angela Moreli’s graphic representation and Raureif/Timm Kekeritz’s iPhone app help highlight the strong links between water and food and have strong connections to hunger politics in the Middle East and North Africa. These types of platforms can be utilised to help break down this dichotomy, but they can just as easily be yet more reproductions and reproducers of the dominant framing.

Table 3. JSTOR Search Results

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This overview methodology is admittedly limited. A systematic review of trends in academic work around this perceived dichotomy would be beneficial, but is beyond the scope of this paper. Nor is it immediately necessary for this discussion. The results presented here, while superficial, do provide an indication of basic research trends and of the academic work most easily accessible to the lay public, students, and professional researchers. And while academia provides a great deal more counter-examples to this dichotomy than either media or aid funding seem to do, its general picture still reflects the macro framing of MENA securitization and SSA depoliticisation. Academia does not exist in a vacuum, much as some methodologies seem to wish it did. The reality is that academia is influenced by funding and researcher interests. When funding is made available for projects based on a dichotomy and academics themselves grow up with dichotomised images and stories, it is unsurprising that the majority of academia reflects this dichotomy. This does not, however, mean that academics should be let off the hook. Indeed, academia that is not purposefully critical of dichotomies exactly such as this one fails to live up to its promise and potential.

**Conclusions**

*On Dropping the Ball*

In the section of this paper introducing discourse theory and confirmation bias, the ability of major events to spark changes in the way dominant frames are shaped was considered. The series of 2011 uprisings was one such major event. But, as demonstrated in the section on Media, this “window of opportunity” was not well utilised. Instead of questioning the dominant framing of hunger in sub-Saharan Africa and political conflict in the Middle East and North Africa, media and aid attention – and, to a lesser extent, even academic research
and dialogue – reinforced this dichotomy in the way events were discussed and responded to. The most widespread term for the uprisings is “Arab Spring”. Neither of the two words in this label is accurate. Political activism happened in far more places than the Arab states. Nor were the uprisings a brief-lived season; indeed, turmoil is still active. Terms like the “Arab Spring”, beyond being factually wrong, thus help to reproduce this false dichotomy. The media is perhaps the worst offender, but academics are complicit too. Instead of capitalising on the fact that action was occurring across both regions, academic attention has continued to focus on the political and conflictual aspects of the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. Academics of the MENA region had a brilliant opportunity while spotlighted in popular discourse. Yet too few of them challenged the dominant discourses around “Twitter Revolution” and “Arab Spring”, especially in arenas accessible to the lay public. Meanwhile, too few Africanists strongly engaged in popular discourse around the causes and effects of the movements, helping bolster lay opinion of the “uniquely Arabness” of the so-called “Arab Spring”.

Yes, there are a greater number of people hungry in sub-Saharan Africa than in the Middle East and North Africa. And yes, more obvious political changes were wrought in MENA than in SSA during the 2011 uprisings. There is some reason for the existence of this dichotomy. But it has become more pronounced that it should be, to such an extent that media, aid, and research have fallen into boxes too firmly, so that they ignore problems, programmes, and possible solutions because they have become blinded to them.

On Picking It Up

The international academic community missed a great opening when they allowed the 2011 (and beyond) uprisings to come and go without challenging the dichotomised reaction that quickly emerged in media and political discourse. Such “windows of opportunity” do not emerge every day. We must not allow another such event to pass us by – for the sake of more accurately representing and understanding the world, to say nothing of the importance of improving food security for all peoples and challenging racist depictions of the “Other” in any form. Depoliticising hunger in sub-Saharan Africa allows the systems that create and maintain poverty to go unquestioned and furthers Western misconceptions of Africans as helpless or overly vulnerable people without agency. Oversecuritising food issues in the Middle East and North Africa dehumanises hunger and reinforces Western views of Arabs as militantly violent.
In some regards, this depoliticisation and oversecuritisation are the two poles of hunger politics. The first ignores the politics, focusing almost exclusively on the hunger, while the second disregards hunger, honing in on the political. Neither serves to present an accurate portrayal of the complex relationship between hunger and politics in the world today. The false dichotomy explored in this paper is significant primarily because of the way in which it continues to support the even more macro framing of “hunger and politics”, in which the two are separated, rather than tackling “hunger politics”, through which we can examine the myriad ways in which hunger and politics intersect with and impact each other. The concept of “food security” can be employed in both hunger and politics and hunger politics. The use of the term “security” is a tricky one, as it can draw attention to the military and state-level interests of a topic, to the possible detriment of the local and individual levels. But it may also serve to garner more attention to an issue desperately needing greater resources. “Food security” can be a useful element in realising the human right to food and attaining a world free from hunger. But we must always ask “food security for whom? And at whose expense?” if we are to avoid the dangerous ground of hunger and politics and achieve a sustainable understanding and beneficial utilisation of hunger politics.
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