One of the most important events over the past decade has been the Arab Spring of 2011 that brought down dictators in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Egypt, and continues to reverberate through the region.

Although the proximate cause of the unrest was the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a fruit vendor in Tunisia, empirical evidence indicates that a spike in local food prices across the Arab world was responsible for setting the stage.\(^1\)

Over the last two decades, there is a strong evidence that food price increases have led to increased political unrest.\(^2\)

By late 2010, global food prices had increased by 40% over the year, largely due to drought and wildfire in grain exporting regions of Russia and Eastern Europe, as well as by unprecedented floods in grain-importing Pakistan.

Although few of the protesters in Tahrir Square or fighting in Benghazi would have said that they were fighting because of food prices, the empirical evidence shows that high prices made riots much more likely.

Syria is the most extreme example of how drought and food prices combined to foment unrest.

The five years preceding the beginning of the unrest in the Spring of 2011 (2006-2010) saw a drought unparalleled in both length and severity in recent Syrian history.\(^3\)
Since at least 1900 (when modern recordkeeping began), droughts had only lasted one or two years at most. This drought caused an unprecedented mass migration of 1.5 million people from rural areas to urban centers. The severity of the drought was increased by the inability of the Assad regime to prepare for or adapt to the extreme conditions.

For decades, the Assad regime – both father and son – had ignored water conservation issues and agriculture in general. When the drought destroyed farming communities, it sent new migrants to the cities – most of which were not from the ruling Alawite minority. This placed great strain on urban populations, and exacerbated ethnic and religious strife. This strain is evident in the ongoing conflict within Syria.

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Read more on the national security implications of climate change in the Climate Security Report
Endnotes


Building a New American Arsenal

The American Security Project (ASP) is a nonpartisan initiative to educate the American public about the changing nature of national security in the 21st century.

Gone are the days when a nation's strength could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires a New American Arsenal harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead other nations in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with all the tools at our disposal. We must address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this, we must forge a new bipartisan consensus at home.

ASP brings together prominent American leaders, current and former members of Congress, retired military officers, and former government officials. Staff direct research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, climate change, failed and failing states, disease, and pandemics. The same-old solutions and partisan bickering won't do. America needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities the new century offers.