Was climate change one of the causes of the wave of popular protests and uprisings that has swept the Arab countries of North Africa and the Middle East since January? The wave of protests, feeding on one another, might have broken at any time over the last few decades. Why did it happen now? A proximate factor behind the unrest was a spike in global food crises, which in turn was due in part to the extreme weather throughout the globe over the past year. This was not enough to trigger regime change – we have seen food price spikes and food riots before – but it was a necessary part of this particular mix.

The cost of wheat has been climbing since summer 2010, when drought and bushfires laid waste to crops in Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan, all leading exporters; the prices of sugar, maize, soybeans and vegetable oils have also been rising. Russia, the world’s fourth-largest wheat exporter accounting for roughly 14% of the global wheat trade, responded by imposing an export ban on wheat, barley and rye from August.

In Egypt, families spend an average 40% of their income on food, overall food-price inflation has been at 20%, and the price of some individual commodities, such as tomatoes, has shot up tenfold. About 40m (of 83m) Egyptians rely on ration cards and that the bread-subsidy system is riddled with corruption.

The main focus of the protests, to be sure, was the departure of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. But there are many reasons to link the Arab uprisings to food-price inflation. With little arable land and scarce water supplies, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region imports more food per capita than any other, accounting for 25–50% of national consumption. By tonnage it is the world’s largest cereal-importing area, and it is a major customer for Russian grain. Huge population growth and changing diets have contributed to the region’s growing food insecurity.

With the usual caveat that individual events can never be definitively attributed to climate change, the severe weather over the past year is exactly what we should expect to happen with increasing frequency as the world warms. It (climate change) has been a threat multiplier, in the sense that it was a necessary component of any number of possible scenarios, each of them sufficient to have led to the sort of unrest we are witnessing.

The potential of climate change to foster unrest need not always be a bad thing. But fledgling democracies with weak institutions might find it even harder to deal with the root problems than the regimes they replace, and be more vulnerable to further unrest in turn. And climate change may increase the probability that events such as those we are seeing in the Middle East and North Africa will happen elsewhere in the world. Global warming may not have caused the Arab Spring, but it may have made it come earlier.

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