

XVI Convegno SeSaMO

Università degli Studi di Cagliari  
Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali

3-5 ottobre 2024



SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

**TITOLO/TITLE: FOOD POLITICS IN POST-2003 IRAQ: LOOKING AT THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN THE NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND GLOBAL LEVELS**

**PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/s:** GENNARO GERVASIO (UNIVERSITY OF ROMA TRE); MARIA CRISTINA PACIELLO (UNIVERSITY OF VENICE CA' FOSCARI); DANIELA PIOPPI (UNIVERSITY OF NAPLES L'ORIENTALE)

**ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):**

Food is essential for life. Therefore, it is central to many different political and social dynamics and a powerful lens through which to explore broader issues of power and identity both locally and transnationally.

Food politics is of crucial importance to the Arab region, one of the most food insecure regions of the world (Harrigan, 2014). This is even more true for Iraq, home of the flood plains of the Tigris and Euphrates, a country self-sufficient in food mere decades ago and today heavily dependent on food imports and highly food insecure. How did a state so abundantly rich in agriculture become such a net food importer? What policies of food production, consumption and distribution have domestic political leaders and external actors adopted in search for food security and political stability? How have these policies impacted the lives of the Iraqi population? What do Iraqi civil society and social movements have to say about it?

By concentrating on the largely unexplored Iraqi politics of food since 2003 with a historical, interdisciplinary and bottom-up approach linking political economy and subaltern/social movements, the panel aims at contributing both to the emerging historiography debate on Iraq (for an overview Tejek et al. 2012) and to the growing critical literature on food insecurity in the Arab region (Ayeb and Bush 2019).

**Chair:** Daniela Pioppi (University of Naples 'L'Orientale')

**Agricultural and food policies in the post-2003 Iraq: the case of the date palm sector,** Maria Cristina Paciello (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia) and Daniela Pioppi (Università degli Studi di Napoli l'Orientale)

The date palm sector in Iraq can be seen as a useful case study through which to analyze how food and agricultural policies have evolved and transformed the organization of food production, consumption and distribution in the post-2003 period. Until the 1980s, Iraq was the world's leading producer of dates in terms of cultivated area, number of trees and exports. The 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war and the UN-imposed embargo in the 1990s, combined with poor agricultural policies under Saddam Hussein's regime, severely damaged the date sector. Since the US-led invasion in 2003, as part of the measures aimed at accelerating the liberalization of agriculture, the Iraqi government, USAID and other international actors have increasingly

focused on reviving the date sector for export through several measures and projects. These policies have been effective in increasing the production of Iraqi dates for export, which now account for over 80% of total agricultural exports. However, based on initial research, the impacts on Iraqi population and food import dependency appear to be less positive and require further investigation.

The paper will provide an early reconstruction of the policies and initiatives in the date palm sector implemented by international actors and the Iraqi government from 2003 to the present, and their impact on smallholder farmers, local agriculture, employment, food security and biodiversity.

**Re-reading Iraq's agricultural history through the lens of Food Sovereignty,** Ansar Jasim (Free University of Berlin).

Main topics of concern studying agriculture and food politics in post-2003 Iraq are the legislation of the neoliberal patent law of seeds and the big question of how the country turned into a major food importer. Both aspects are marked in the literature as main points of rupture in the Iraqi food system. However, looking at those questions through the lens of food sovereignty, meaning asking the question of who controls and owns the means of production, gives space for a reassessment of the reading of the post-2003 system as a major rupture (Harling 2012). Rather, through the framework of food sovereignty, light is shed on the oral histories of farmers and how they experienced the pre-2003 centralized agriculture system and the state's approach in using agriculture and food policies as a means for population control. In this paper, those policies and practices are read against the framework of food sovereignty and critically explored and complemented through the oral histories of farmers' and food producers' about self-organization from below in pre- and post-2003 Iraq. It is argued that through analyzing the agriculture and food system, new ways of understanding state-society relations in Iraq can be explored.

**Food and contentious politics: the case of the *Tishreen* movement,** Gennaro Gervasio and G. Fabio Merone (Università Roma Tre)

Contentious politics and collective action have been a key factor of the Iraqi politics, since at least 2011. New social movements grew in cycles of protest in 2011, 2015, 2018 and 2019. Those mobilizations stemmed from the collapse of the centralized state and the exacerbated militarization of the post-2003 Iraq, which eventually lead to social, economic, and sanitary crisis. Structural dysfunctions of the post-2003 Iraqi political system made difficult for state institutions to provide citizens with food security, water, healthy environment, and energetic self-sufficiency; ultimately leading to the increase of poverty. This presentation deals with the food question through the lenses of the social mobilizations and focuses in particular on the 'Tishreen movement' (2019/20), that it takes as a case-study. The movement has been examined under the angle of urban politics (Alkhudary, 2022), social analysis of space production (Ali, 2023), and the discursive symbols of contestation (Mustafa, 2023). In this study, we propose to deal instead with issues such as political organization, ideology, and strategy, as taken from a Leninist Gramscian model of political movement. We will rely on ongoing fieldwork in Iraq, including interviews with a sample of activist-leaders, especially on the matter of organization and political strategy. Finally, we will consider the primary sources produced by *the Tishreeniyyin*.

**Representation and Management of Tunisia's Food Crisis: The Interplay between Domestic and International factors,** Gianni Del Panta and Martino Tognocchi (Università di Pavia)

The debate on the politics of food and regime stability is essentially split into two antagonistic perspectives. Those who claim that food is a regime stabilizer, as many autocrats have relied on food to secure their internal consensus; and those who explain that the need for food tends to produce instable social conditions, eventually leading to political unrest and regime transition. By focusing on the recent 2022 Tunisian food crisis, this article departs from unilateral understandings of the interaction between the politics of food and regime stability. It does so by combining insights from comparative politics and international relations, and drawing on various waves of interviews with experts, journalists, academics, NGOs actors, and international organizations officials that have been conducted both in Tunisia and online over the last year. This leads to two main contributions. First is a representation of the various and multiple accounts that domestic and international actors have given of the Tunisian food crisis. By exploring a few key dimensions, such as the deep roots of the crisis and the role of international powers, the article maps the intellectual debate. Second is an account of how Kais Saied's authoritarian rule has used the food crisis to delay key financial decisions and to depoliticize the mounting of food prices, consolidating a new power bloc based on the state apparatuses, such as the bureaucracy, the Ministry of Interior and the army, and capable of passively co-opting the organized labour movement, anti-Political Islam leftists, and the poor. Saied has indeed adopted a wait-and-see strategy, aimed at accommodating internal demand by constructing a *sovereigntist*, anti-Western rhetoric, and at the same time aimed at yielding room to international institutions' (as the FAO and IMF) pressure on financial matters. Although the article focuses on Tunisia, it aims at developing insights that could travel to many other countries of the Middle Eastern region, which remains deeply affected by cyclical food crises.

**The panel is part of the activities of a research project PRIN 2022 funded by Next Generation EU and the Italian Ministry of University and Research.**

**PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS**

Gennaro Gervasio, associate professor, University of Roma Tre

Maria Cristina Paciello, tenure-track assistant professor, University of Venice Ca' Foscari

Daniela Pioppi, associate professor, University of Naples 'L'Orientale'

**INDIRIZZO/I EMAIL/EMAIL ADDRESSES:**

Gennaro Gervasio [gennaro.gervasio@uniroma3.it](mailto:gennaro.gervasio@uniroma3.it), Maria Cristina Paciello [mpaciello@unive.it](mailto:mpaciello@unive.it), Daniela Pioppi [dpioppi@unior.it](mailto:dpioppi@unior.it)