

Syrian agriculture: A long story of marginalization and a last chance for rescue



The agricultural sector in Syria is not only the main lifeline for rural communities, but also retains its position as one of the most important productive sectors feeding the national economy and directly affecting its stability and growth.

Yet this sector suffered from marginalization and mismanagement throughout the decades of Assad rule, before the long years of war compounded the damage inflicted on it, directly affecting the livelihoods of nearly half of Syrians for whom agriculture had been the main source of income.

With the fall of the Assad regime and the reshaping of the Syrian landscape, the opportunity appeared ripe to restore the agricultural sector's standing and give it the priority it deserves, given its pivotal role in driving economic recovery and reviving rural areas.

But a year and a half into the new phase, the government's steps have not risen to the level of real and comprehensive change in dealing with this sector, which is still being managed as a secondary file amid slow procedures and the absence of a clear vision for its role in reconstruction and economic recovery.

This report discusses the reality of the marginalization that has afflicted the agricultural sector over past decades, the ways to revive it and activate its role at the present stage, and the challenges standing in the way.

Decades of marginalization and more than a decade of war

At the beginning of Hafez Assad's rule in Syria, the rural population made up more than half of the country's population, meaning Syrian society was to a large extent an agricultural one that needed supportive development policies to ensure the sustainability of this sector.

However, the agricultural policies pursued by Hafez Assad from the outset were aimed at consolidating the regime's foundations. He sought to win the support of medium landowners and agricultural organizers to ensure the stability of his rule, at the expense of a broad segment of poor farmers. The General Union of Peasants was also transformed from an organization supposedly meant to defend their rights into a tool of control and political mobilization, after the loyalty of its leadership had been secured.

Although the agricultural sector witnessed what is known as the "golden period" during the first decade of his rule, policies focused on increasing production without regard for sustainability. They were geared more toward achieving social stability and self-sufficiency in strategic crops than toward raising efficiency and productivity.

This led to poor management of environmental resources, soil degradation, and the depletion of groundwater as a result of the expansion of unlicensed wells.

Poverty also remained a reality in the Syrian countryside, as the benefits of support programs and loans did not reach poor groups to the same extent that large farmers benefited. By the 1980s, growth rates had begun to decline, giving way to problems of inflation, soil salinity, and a widening class gap in rural areas.

With the transfer of power to Bashar Assad, the deterioration in the agricultural sector deepened, especially with the adoption of the "social market economy" approach, which involved reducing the state's role in supporting the public sector and the countryside in favor of private-sector expansion. This led to the enactment of tax, property, and agricultural laws that favored capital over labor and reduced protections for the most vulnerable groups.

With government support reduced, especially for fuel, alongside the years of drought between 2007 and 2010, the cost of farming rose and its economic viability declined, leading to the forced migration of about 60,000 families from northeastern Syria to the cities. Agriculture's share of rural employment also fell from 37 percent in 2006 to 21 percent in 2010.

After the outbreak of the Syrian revolution and the conflict's transformation into a full-scale war, the agricultural sector went from a promising sector to an exhausted one in need of comprehensive rehabilitation. According to estimates

by the Food and Agriculture Organization in a 2016 report, losses reached about \$16 billion, covering agricultural assets, crops, means of production, animal shelters, greenhouses, and irrigation systems, in addition to major losses in livestock and fish farming. These losses, notably, doubled in subsequent years. The former regime used the destruction of agriculture as a tool to displace Syrians, with damage concentrated heavily in Hasakah, Raqqa, the Damascus countryside, Deir Ezzor, Daraa, and Idlib, leading to the displacement of tens of thousands of farmers and rural residents.



Why is agriculture a pillar of economic recovery in Syria?

Beyond the fact that the agricultural reality, with all its marginalization and deterioration, cannot be restored to its proper standing or role without understanding its central place in reconstruction, viewing agriculture as a tool for economic revival appears to be a necessity, not a secondary option to be postponed. Several indicators underscore this point:

Land used for agriculture and livestock accounts for more than 75 percent of the country's area, including rangelands, of which about 32 percent is arable land, aside from land that could be converted to agricultural use if developed.

The agricultural sector contributes about a quarter of Syria's GDP, though this may rise or fall depending on drought and war years, and reduces reliance on food imports from abroad, easing pressure on foreign currency reserves and the state's public finances.

Before the war, it absorbed about 20 percent of Syria's labor force, making the revival of the sector an effective means of raising living standards for a broad segment of the population.

It helps achieve food security and social stability by stabilizing the prices of basic goods, such as bread through wheat production, reducing the financial burden on households and easing social tensions caused by hunger or high prices.

The sector once accounted for roughly one-third of Syrian exports, ranking second after oil in export revenues, thereby contributing to overall economic stability and providing much-needed foreign currency.

It is a gateway for agricultural investment and a promising opportunity to attract Syrian expatriate capital, as thousands of Syrian companies in neighboring countries aspire to expand and return to invest in Syria if the right environment is available, accelerating economic growth.

In this context, economic adviser Osama Qadi told NoonPost that the agricultural sector could help transform the Syrian economy from a traditional model into a "smart economy," restoring Syria's role as a regional breadbasket and a food gateway between East and West, provided there is a clear vision and effective management that thinks beyond conventional frameworks.

How can the agricultural sector be revived?

Qadi believes that reviving Syria's agricultural sector requires a "smart agro-industrial revolution" that would form a modern economic model linking agriculture with food industries, technology, artificial intelligence, energy, and supply and export chains.

In one of his articles he calls for drawing on the Brazilian experience, which succeeded in becoming one of the world's largest agricultural and food powers after once suffering from weak agricultural output.

For his part, agricultural engineer Abdul Aziz al-Mustafa told NoonPost that among the most important agricultural policies requiring urgent treatment in a way that serves farmers is the need for the government to provide customs facilitation for importing modern agricultural machinery, certified high-yield seeds, and reliable pesticides.

He also stressed the importance of government bodies playing an effective oversight role to ensure the quality of imported materials and their proper use, in a way that curbs manipulation, protects the agricultural sector, and enhances its productive efficiency.

Al-Mustafa also pointed to the importance of reactivating the role of technical and extension cadres because of their role in advising farmers, since without

these experts, modern knowledge cannot be transferred and resources cannot be managed efficiently.

In this framework, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization included in its Emergency and Resilience Plan for Syria for 2026-2028 a comprehensive vision for reviving the agricultural sector, adopting the principle of “people at the center” as a cornerstone of agricultural development. The plan revolves around four interlinked outcomes aimed at restoring food production and building a sustainable agricultural system:

Evidence and coordination: Providing high-quality, timely evidence and analysis to guide agricultural policies and programs and ensure they are based on accurate data, through conducting an agricultural census and developing geographic information systems and periodic surveys.

Emergency agricultural support: Seeking rapid and tangible improvements in food security and nutrition through direct emergency agricultural interventions, including immediate grants for wheat farmers, vaccination campaigns against epidemic diseases such as foot-and-mouth disease and lumpy skin disease, and the distribution of feed and cash assistance to empower farmers.

Livelihood resilience: Strengthening the income and coping capacity of small farmers, including internally displaced people, returnees, and host communities, with a special focus on women, youth, and people with disabilities.

Recovery of agrifood systems: Laying the foundations for building inclusive, sustainable, and climate-adaptive agricultural systems by training farmers in climate-smart agriculture, rehabilitating rangelands and forests to protect soil from erosion, combating desertification, and improving the capacity to withstand natural disasters.



The difference between subsidized seed fields and commercial seed fields.

The plan also outlined the challenges it faces on this difficult path, which are the same challenges standing in the way of reviving the agricultural sector, most notably economic and market challenges stemming from a lack of financing for agricultural projects, inflation, rising prices of agricultural inputs and fuel, as well as the collapse of supply chains.

Environmental and climate factors also make the task more difficult. Vast areas of Syria suffer from desertification and salinization as a result of previous years of drought, as well as water scarcity and deteriorating infrastructure, in addition to an increase in natural disasters such as fires and floods that harm agricultural production.

Security challenges cannot be ignored either, particularly the contamination of large areas of land with war remnants, which poses a major obstacle to safe access to land and limits the livelihoods of tens of thousands, in addition to legal challenges related to ongoing land ownership disputes caused by unjust expropriation laws or the loss of property documents.

What about the ministry's plan?

On the official level, the Syrian government has not been without plans to revive the agricultural sector, especially as the urgent need to strengthen food security has become clear. For its part, the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture, under former minister Amjad Badr, worked on preparing a strategy that included a comprehensive development plan for the agricultural sector for 2026-2030, with the possibility of amendment according to internal and external changes.

The official plan is based primarily on rural development that limits migration to cities and creates job opportunities for rural communities. It also places importance on developing plant and animal production through the adoption of applied research programs, and seeks the sustainable use of natural resources and support for vital projects such as the agricultural cooperatives program, which helps improve farmers' incomes by providing production inputs at suitable prices and offering technical support.

The strategy adopts the "theory of change," linking the required interventions with overarching strategic goals to develop sustainable value chains, adopt innovative technologies, and improve agricultural services.



It mainly encourages the private sector to invest in agricultural projects and works to provide a supportive legal and regulatory environment, expand the use of modern irrigation techniques and agricultural mechanization, and strengthen the role of agricultural extension, in addition to addressing climate challenges, according to the Ministry of Agriculture.

But economic researcher Hassan Ghazza argues in his assessment of this strategy that despite its strengths, such as realistic planning, institutional flexibility, the adoption of the theory of change as a roadmap, and the comprehensiveness of its goals, it suffers from gaps and weaknesses.

He argues that for the strategy to move from the level of a planning document to a tool for actual economic transformation, it requires fundamental changes in

financing mechanisms, the legislative framework, and integration with national water policy, as well as a shift from the superficial borrowing of successful international models such as the Dutch model to an understanding of their core philosophy, based on the idea that agriculture is first and foremost a knowledge industry.

Ghazza offers several practical recommendations that could improve the performance of the agricultural sector, including establishing a national fund for agricultural rehabilitation, accelerating reform of the agricultural investment law to settle land disputes, creating a national agricultural insurance network against climate risks and natural disasters, and launching a national digital platform for agricultural extension.

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