

The Weekend Essay Life & Arts

The coming global food crisis

Hunger and even famine are foreseeable consequences of the war on Iran. Now the world must act to shield the poorest from effects that will continue long after the fighting stops

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Published APR 18 2026

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Few 20th-century transformations did more to remake the world than the “Green Revolution”. From the 1950s onwards, new high-yielding crop varieties, synthetic fertilisers, chemical pesticides and large-scale irrigation drove a sharp increase in the output of staple crops such as wheat and rice. In its more celebratory accounts, this transformation pushed back famine and helped support rapid population growth across much of Asia and Latin America. India, one of the key centres of the Green Revolution, more than doubled wheat production between the mid-1960s and early 1970s.

As numerous critics have noted, the Green Revolution also came with enormous ecological and social costs. But one of its less discussed consequences was the link it established between food production and the fossil fuel industry across every stage of farming. Higher yields depended on a vast expansion of mechanisation, pumped irrigation and, above all, synthetic fertiliser use.

Before the mid-20th century, farmers across the global south relied on organic inputs such as manure and compost to maintain soil nutrients. The new high-yielding varieties of the Green Revolution, by contrast, could only deliver their promised output through large and repeated applications of industrial fertilisers, especially nitrogen-based products such as urea and ammonium nitrate. Since many of these fertilisers are derived from natural gas, the Green Revolution meant that the world’s food production became ever more closely tied to a constantly increasing supply of hydrocarbon inputs.



Ships sailing towards the Strait of Hormuz on March 23 © AP

Doubts have long been expressed about the sustainability of this fossil fuel-based food system. But as oil and gas prices have risen steeply amid the US-Israeli war on Iran and a significant part of the global fertiliser trade has been brought to a standstill, its potential vulnerabilities have been made clear. After only seven weeks, food shortages and even famine are now looking more likely for millions of people across vulnerable countries in Africa and Asia.

Recent data from the World Bank captures these links between energy and food sharply. In March, the organisation's energy price index rose 41.6 per cent, led by a 59.4 per cent increase in European natural gas and a 45.8 per cent rise in Brent crude oil. In the same month, food prices rose 2.7 per cent and fertiliser prices 26.2 per cent. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has warned that, if the crisis persists, global fertiliser prices could average 15 to 20 per cent higher in the first half of 2026.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE have come to occupy a far more central place in the global food economy than is often recognised

Comparisons are frequently drawn with the food price shocks of 2007-08 and 2022, when surging energy costs helped drive fertiliser and freight prices higher, amplifying wider disruptions to trade and pushing up the cost of basic staples. Yet the current moment differs from those earlier crises in one crucial respect. During the past two decades, Gulf

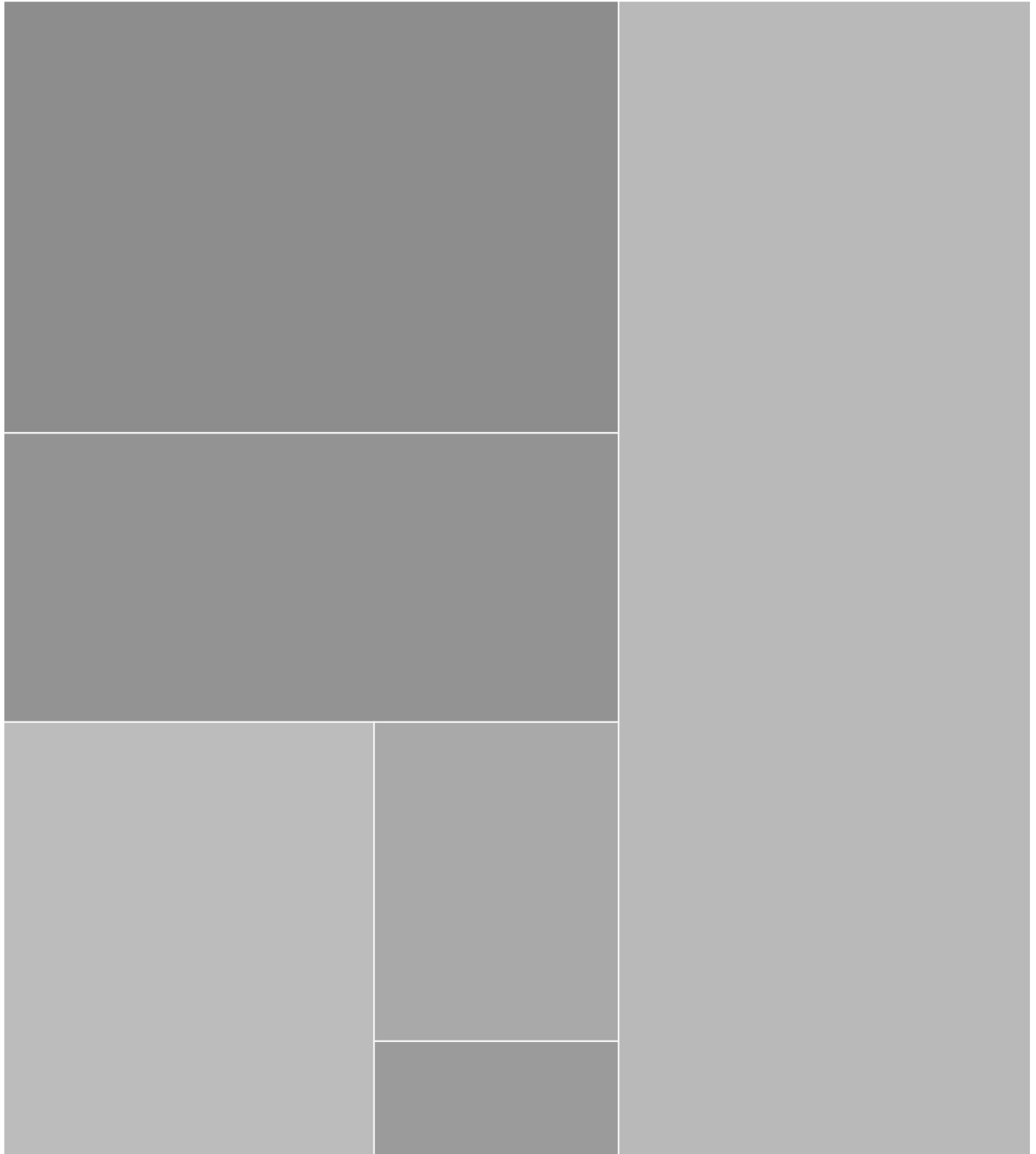
monarchies such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have come to occupy a far more central place in the global food economy than is often recognised.

The Gulf states now shape the production and circulation of food directly, supplying key chemical inputs, exporting large volumes of finished fertilisers and controlling the logistical corridors through which food and agricultural commodities move across much of the Middle East, central and east Asia and Africa.

Gulf states play a central role in global fertiliser and commodity markets

Exports (\$bn)

Urea	Sulphur	Ammonia
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That deeper integration with the global food system is what makes the ongoing conflict both different from, and potentially far more serious than, earlier price shocks. A shock in the Gulf can now cascade rapidly through the supply chains that carry food from the farm to the shelf. Any prolonged disruption in the region can therefore spread far more widely, whether this is because of the closure of key maritime corridors, higher freight and insurance costs, interruptions at ports and re-export hubs or damage to energy and industrial infrastructure.

Beyond oil and gas

One of the clearest signs of the Gulf's changing role in the world food economy is its growing weight in chemicals and fertiliser production. The old image of the Gulf monarchies as little more than oil and gas exporters no longer holds. Today, the region sits at the centre of modern agriculture, not only as a major producer of fertilisers in its own right but also as a force shaping fertiliser industries across neighbouring countries.

A fertiliser blending plant in Gombe, Nigeria © Finbarr O'Reilly/New York Times/Redux/eyevine

This shift reflects a broader transformation in the Gulf's oil and gas industry. In recent years, the region's large state-owned energy companies have moved down the hydrocarbon value chain, using cheap gas, large-scale industrial infrastructure and state-backed investment to become major producers of the chemical feedstocks on which modern agriculture depends. This vertical integration has been enabled in part by the enormous financial surpluses generated in the Gulf through expanding hydrocarbon exports to China and wider east Asia. Companies such as Saudi Aramco and the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (Adnoc) have used these windfall revenues to fund industrial diversification into chemical production.

A key example here is ammonia, which the International Energy Agency describes as making "an indispensable contribution to global agricultural systems" and is the starting point for all mineral nitrogen fertilisers. About 70 per cent of the world's ammonia is used in fertiliser production, and just under 30 per cent of global ammonia exports originate in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia is the world's second-largest exporter of ammonia, while Oman ranked sixth in 2024.

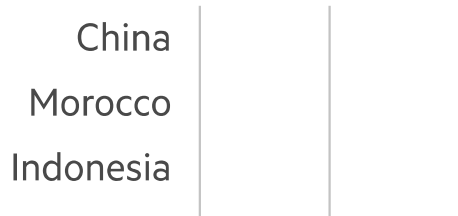
The Gulf's ammonia exports are especially important for markets outside North America and western Europe. In 2024, for instance, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Qatar together supplied more than three-quarters of India's ammonia imports and 30 per cent of Morocco's. As a result, food production in south Asia and north Africa has become deeply dependent on Gulf nitrogen flows.

Some of the world’s top importers of fertiliser depend significantly on the Gulf

Top 10 sulphur, urea and ammonia importers in 2025 by source of supply, mn tonnes

Middle East supply Other supply

Sulphur



Sulphur is another crucial basic input into modern agriculture. While less visible than ammonia, it is used to make the sulphuric acid needed to turn phosphate rock into phosphoric acid and, from there, phosphate fertilisers. Roughly half of the world’s global seaborne sulphur passes through the Strait of Hormuz, with most of this produced by the Gulf’s state-owned energy companies — above all Adnoc, QatarEnergy, the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation and Saudi Aramco. Morocco, home to the world’s largest phosphate industry, is the biggest sulphur importer globally, with about three-quarters of its 2024 imports coming from the Gulf.

All this is unfolding at a moment when the global south is already weighed down by debt distress

Chemicals such as ammonia and sulphur are significant to agriculture because they are converted into finished fertilisers on a vast scale. Much of the Gulf's ammonia is processed into urea, the world's most widely used nitrogen fertiliser. Gulf countries account for 35 per cent of global urea trade; Saudi Arabia was the world's largest urea exporter in 2024, while Oman ranked third. Monoammonium phosphate (MAP) and diammonium phosphate (DAP), two of the principal fertilisers used to supply crops with phosphorus, are also closely tied to Gulf production and export routes. In 2024, countries upstream of Hormuz accounted for 18 per cent of global MAP and DAP trade.

As Leiden University's Christian Henderson has recently shown, Gulf countries have also become deeply enmeshed in cross-border control of large agribusiness companies throughout the Middle East as a whole. Egypt, the world's second-largest urea exporter, offers a clear example of what this means for the production of fertiliser.

A substantial share of Egypt's export-oriented nitrogen capacity is controlled by Fertiglobe, a company in which the UAE's Adnoc now holds a controlling stake and that claims to be the world's largest seaborne exporter of urea and ammonia, according to its 2024 financial results. Fertiglobe's Egyptian assets include the Egyptian Fertilizers Company, with an annual capacity of 1.7mn tonnes of urea and 0.9mn tonnes of ammonia, alongside Egypt Basic Industries Corporation, which adds another 0.7mn tonnes of ammonia. For comparison, Misr Fertilizers Production Company (MOPCO), which operates Egypt's largest nitrogen fertiliser plant, reported 1.7mn tonnes of urea and 1.1mn tonnes of ammonia in 2024. About 44 per cent of MOPCO is owned by Saudi and UAE investment funds.

Logistical nodes

The cost and availability of global food supplies depend as much on circulation as on production. Grain and other staples have to be stored, shipped, processed and redistributed across long distances, often through a small number of highly concentrated trade corridors. This is another sphere in which the Gulf, particularly the UAE, has become increasingly influential.

The US Department of Agriculture noted in 2024 that the “UAE’s centrality to global food trade flows, especially to the Middle East and North Africa, [has] enabled the country’s emergence as a re-export hub”. The country now ranks as among the top five re-export hubs globally, with large UAE exports of wheat and rice going to countries such as Somalia, Ghana, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

Smoke rises from Dubai’s Jebel Ali Port after an Iranian attack on March 1 © Reuters

In testimony before the US Congress in 2024, Jon Alterman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies made the wider point even more starkly, noting that 60 per cent of China’s trade with Europe and Africa passes through the UAE, along with a large share of its trade with the Middle East.

This logistical power of the Gulf rests on the control of vast vertically integrated networks linking ports, warehousing, inland transport, free zones and food processing. Dubai's Jebel Ali Port offers the clearest example. Operated by the state-owned logistics company DP World, it is the world's largest human-made harbour and is connected by more than 80 weekly services to more than 150 ports globally.

Lloyd's List's 2025 ranking placed Dubai ninth globally in container throughput, illustrating its key role as a pivotal trade hub. Jebel Ali functions as part of a wider logistical ecosystem, integrated with sea, air and land transport and tied to the warehousing and re-export of goods across the Gulf and beyond. In practice, that makes it a major redistribution point for food moving into surrounding countries in the Middle East, east Africa and parts of south Asia.

Increased aid, unconditional debt relief and emergency financing are immediate priorities to secure food and humanitarian supplies

Jebel Ali has also become an important transit point for humanitarian supply chains, including the shipment of 45,000 metric tonnes of bagged wheat flour as aid to conflict-affected regions in the Middle East and Africa in 2024. Concurrently, Jebel Ali remains a crucial node in the US military architecture over the region, and has been described as the US Navy's busiest port of call outside of the

US. This overlap of military logistics, humanitarian transit and commodity circulation is part of a wider strategy to strengthen the UAE's cross-border projection of power, giving commercial networks a wider geopolitical reach.

Abu Dhabi's Khalifa Port is a major part of this same strategy. In 2025, the port's operator AD Ports signed a 50-year lease agreement with an Emirati milling company to develop a grain storage and processing facility at its South Quay, explicitly tying this infrastructure to the handling of strategic food commodities. The project will expand silo capacity and later support an integrated grain-processing complex. It is one more indication of how Gulf ports are being drawn more tightly into food production and provisioning, giving Gulf-based companies greater influence over the transit and shipment of food across multiple regions.

Global food shocks?

With the Gulf now embedded across several layers of the food system, the first signs of this shock are already appearing in food prices and farm input costs. In Britain, the Food & Drink Federation warned this month that food inflation could approach 10 per cent by the end of 2026 as a result of the war, up sharply from its earlier forecast of 3.2 per cent. Across Europe, the squeeze is also being felt through higher costs of agricultural inputs, with the price of nitrogen fertilisers rising by about 20 per cent in March.

But these shocks to the food system will hit hardest in countries beyond the west. The UN Trade and Development's March assessment of the Strait of Hormuz, for instance, found that Sudan imported 54 per cent of its fertilisers by sea from the Gulf region in 2024, the highest share in the world. It was followed by Sri Lanka at 36 per cent, with Tanzania at 31 per cent, Somalia at 30 per cent, and countries such as Kenya and Mozambique also heavily exposed. Unlike the US and EU, these states do not have the existing fiscal or borrowing capacities to extend subsidies to farmers and poorer populations in the event of any major food price shock.

That vulnerability takes different forms. In Tanzania, higher prices threaten farming systems already strained by climate variability and high import costs. In Somalia, the danger is compounded by an intensifying drought that the FAO warned back in January would likely be “as severe and widespread as previous major droughts of 2022, 2017 and 2011”. In Sri Lanka, still recovering from a balance-of-payments crisis and years of economic instability, a renewed increase in fertiliser costs risks feeding directly into food inflation and fiscal stress. More widely, the World Food Programme has estimated that an additional 45mn individuals will be pushed into acute hunger as a result of the war, with about two-thirds of these people located in Africa.

Displaced women in Kassala, Sudan, waiting at a UN World Food Programme distribution centre in January © Getty Images

Sudan is perhaps the starkest case. After three years of civil war, the country is currently enduring famine conditions across parts of its territory with 19mn people, just over 40 per cent of the population, facing acute food insecurity. Nearly one in three people in Sudan have been displaced, making the country the “world’s largest displacement and worst humanitarian crisis”, according to a February 2026 briefing from UNHCR, the refugee agency.

Aid operations for Sudan also depend on Dubai’s International Humanitarian City, the world’s premier disaster-relief logistics hub, located near Jebel Ali. Agencies such as the UN World Food Programme have rerouted aid shipments around the Cape of Good Hope as a result of the war, adding three weeks and significant costs to journey times. In this setting, reliance on Gulf-linked fertiliser supplies and trade corridors makes the potential food-security implications of the current war much more acute.

All this is unfolding at a moment when much of the global south is already weighed down by debt distress, with borrowing costs set to rise further in the months ahead. As war drives up energy and food prices, inflationary pressures push interest rates higher, while investors retreat towards the US dollar and other safe assets. The result is that finance becomes both scarcer and more expensive for poorer countries, as lenders demand a higher premium to hold their debt.

For governments carrying large stocks of dollar-denominated liabilities, this means weaker currencies, higher import bills and rising debt-service costs all at once. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, developing countries paid a record \$921bn in interest in 2024, while rising debt-service obligations are eating into budgets that might otherwise be used for subsidies or social protection. The number of developing countries that are now paying more to their external creditors in debt servicing than they receive in fresh loans has doubled during the past decade. A total of 3.4bn people in the global south live in countries that spend more on interest payments than health or education.

These realities highlight why we need to loosen the grip of hydrocarbons on our food system. Farmers, non-governmental organisations and scientists have long argued that more sustainable farming is both possible and necessary, including the use of crop rotations instead of the monocultures encouraged by the Green Revolution, wider application of natural fertilisers and agrofarming practices, and a renewed attention to soil health. Such approaches could reduce the fossil fuel emissions associated with agricultural production. They would also lessen the dependence on imported chemical inputs whose price and availability are so deeply shaped by war and energy volatility.

What is most urgent now is not only an end to the war, but active steps to shield the poorest from effects that will continue long after the fighting stops. Increased aid, unconditional debt relief and emergency financing are immediate priorities to secure food and humanitarian supplies and to contain the impacts of surging fertiliser and transport costs. Famine and widening food insecurity are the foreseeable consequences of military aggression in the Gulf. That reality ought to weigh heavily on a world that has largely understood this war through the narrow lens of oil-price instability.

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