Seeds of discontent

Iraqi farmers say the planting season was a mess. A wheat shortage could undermine Islamic State’s attempt at governing.

BY MAGGIE FICK
As the season for wheat planting in Iraq wound down early last month, farmers in areas under the control of Sunni militant group Islamic State grew worried.

More than two dozen farmers told Reuters they had not planted the normal amount of seed, because they could not access their land, did not have the proper fertilisers or adequate fuel, or because they had no guarantees that Islamic State would buy their crop as Baghdad normally does.

Farmers, and Iraqi and United Nations’ officials, now fear a drastically reduced crop this spring. That could leave hundreds of thousands of Iraqis hungry. But another big loser would be Islamic State, which controls territory that normally produces as much as 40 percent of Iraq’s wheat crop.

The breakaway al Qaeda group, which declared an Islamic caliphate across parts of Syria and Iraq last summer, has killed thousands and forced hundreds of thousands from their homes. Islamic State militants had hoped to use wheat to show it can govern better than the Arab governments it condemns as infidels. They have published pamphlets with photos of golden fields and fighters distributing food.

A bad crop might not cost the group control of territory, but it would seriously dent its campaign to be seen as an alternative government, and hurt its credibility among some fellow Sunnis.

Iraqi farmers have long complained of Baghdad’s neglect and mismanagement of agriculture. International sanctions and the U.S. invasion further hurt the sector. But many farmers say this planting season marks an all-time low.

Across the border in Syria, where Islamic State has controlled the city of Raqqa since May 2013, wheat production last year was down almost 70 percent from the level before the civil war, according to the U.N.’s Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

Syrian farmers in Islamic State-held territory say production was hit by the conflict, poor rainfall and fuel shortages. Several told Reuters that Islamic State did not help farmers plant, and did not purchase their harvest as the Syrian government used to. Instead, farmers say they were forced to look for new buyers and often fell prey to avaricious middlemen.

U.N. and Iraqi government officials don’t have access to much of Iraq, so cannot provide an accurate forecast of the country’s 2015 wheat crop. Farmers will begin harvesting in April and production will also be determined by the weather – so far very favourable according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) – and farmers’ access to their fields.

Farming in huge swathes of the rural belt around Baghdad has also shut down because of violence, or because farmers fear the Shi’ite militias which now control the area and are fighting Islamic State.

But the greatest concern is in northern Iraq. Interviews with farmers who remain on their land or have left for Kurdistan, suggest that few in Islamic State-controlled parts of the country’s breadbasket region were able to plant as normal.

 Recent satellite imagery from NASA and USDA reinforces that. The imagery, publicly available through the Global Agriculture Monitoring Project at the University of Maryland, shows that crops in Islamic State-controlled parts of Nineveh and Salahadeen provinces appear far less healthy than in Kurdish-held territory.

Sunni farmer Abu Amr laments how tough it has become. Abu Amr once hated Iraq’s Shi’ite Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who lost power following elections last April. But his view began to change when he was not paid for last season’s harvest. Instead, Islamic State militants stole it from a government silo they had seized.
“When we saw the chaos of IS we wanted Maliki back. Everything is gone, my livestock, my harvest, everything,” he said.

Abu Amr has moved to peshmerga-held Kirkuk. Old neighbours have told him by phone that they have planted about a third of his 25 hectares (61 acres) using seeds stored in his house. He sent some cash to buy fertiliser, but not enough.

“We used to blame Maliki for everything. Now we cry and hope for the return of those days,” he said. “Before, there was some kind of security, some kind of state. It is incomparable to the current situation.”

**AIRSTRIKES AND LANDMINES**

During its military campaign against Baghdad, Islamic State used wheat as a symbol of its new power. It seized government silos and hundreds of thousands of tonnes of wheat from opponents, especially members of the Christian and Yazidi minorities.

Much as it did in Syria, Islamic State has kept Iraqi government employees and silo operators in place to help run its “caliphate”. That decision provided an early propaganda victory, when fighters handed out milled flour in sacks stamped with the Islamic State logo in Mosul, the north’s largest city.

But U.S.-led airstrikes and pressure from Iraqi forces, allied militias and Iraqi Kurdish fighters known as the Peshmerga have made it hard to defend ground, let alone govern.

Islamic State has not only lost some territory but, preoccupied by its military effort, it has been unable to provide farmers with seeds, fertiliser and fuel at subsidised rates, as the Baghdad government does.

“There was no support,” said a Sunni Arab farmer in Sharqat, a town on the Tigris, just east of the road linking the militant-held cities of Tikrit and Mosul.

“Normally we get supplies (for planting) from the government but this year, we got nothing.”

In areas recently retaken by Peshmerga forces, there are constant reminders of the dangers that have kept many farmers from planting.

In the Makhmur district southeast of Mosul, a group of Kurdish farmers gathered one mid-December afternoon after heavy rains. In a normal planting season, rain would be a blessing. But most of the men were from areas too close to the front-line to risk returning to their fields.

As they talked, a loud explosion sounded in the distance. The farmers looked up, assuming the noise had been an airstrike. Then one received a phone call saying a landmine had exploded.

Kurdish farmer Mushir Othman Hassan explained how two tractor drivers in the area had driven over landmines. One died. The other lost both his legs and an eye.

In his Islamic State-held village of Surnaj el Kobra, about 15 km (9 miles) away, Hassan said he knew some of his Arab neighbours were planting, but said they too were hurt by the fighting.
“They are just planting a subsistence amount for themselves. Daish has not intervened with them,” he said, using the derogatory Arabic term for Islamic State. He said his neighbours had told him by phone that fighters “visited them” while they were planting but that Islamic State “doesn’t have a big presence because of airstrikes.”

Islamic State, he said “are people who take things, they don’t give.”

His and other accounts of planting in Islamic State-held areas could not be independently verified.

In Gwer district just across the Greater Zab river from Islamic State-held land, local Agriculture Ministry official Moustafa Mohammed said less than half the area normally planted with wheat and barley has been sowed this season. Much of the territory – about 50,000 hectares – was still not secure, he said.

SUNNI DISILLUSIONMENT

Islamic State’s attempts to help farmers seem to have backfired.

Several farmers reached by phone in areas controlled by the group said they had rejected subsidised seeds offered to them by the militants.

“We don’t want any help from them,” said Saidullah Fathi, a farmer from Surnaj al-Kobra, southeast of Mosul.

Others said the seeds came from wheat stolen by the militants and called it “haram”, or forbidden.

While Iraqi farmers have long complained of Baghdad’s neglect and mismanagement, one Sunni wheat farmer, speaking through a crackling phone line from Sharqat, said life under the militants and government rule was like “the difference between night and day.” He receives only a few hours of electricity a day, and needs to buy fertiliser on the black market at exorbitant prices.

Many farmers feel caught in a conflict that could last for years.

“We can’t go back home and feel secure on the land. I can’t convince my relatives to come back,” said farmer Sherzaid Sadradein, a Kurd now living in a house in Arbil. “In our village, only one person (of 19 farmers) is planting, just as a shot in the dark. In the past, during the worst days under Saddam, we were only able to plant 10 percent. Now that 10 percent has been reduced to one percent.”

Farmers who have managed to plant worry that Islamic State will not offer them the government price come harvest time. Depending on the quality of the wheat, Baghdad normally pays farmers up to 750,000 Iraqi dinars ($650) per tonne, more than double the price it pays for imported wheat.

Baraa Mohamed Salih, agriculture adviser to the governor of Salahadeen, the country’s top wheat-producing province in recent years, said Baghdad had decided not to deliver subsidised seeds, fertiliser, or fuel to government-held parts of Nineveh and Salahadeen this year because it fears it would end up helping the militants.

The FAO has distributed seeds and fertiliser to needy farmers in the north but is also concerned such moves will play into Islamic State’s hands.

“We have avoided areas that will not be secure during growing season,” said Alfredo Impiglia, senior emergency coordinator for FAO’s Iraq operation.

“We try not to serve Islamic State.” He says it is impossible to measure planting in Islamic State-held areas. “There will be decreased planting for sure,” said Impiglia. “How much we cannot say.”

An estimated 2.8 million people in
Iraq currently need food assistance, said Jane Pearce, head of the World Food Programme’s Iraq office.

In a rented house in Arbil packed with members of his extended family, Ali Ibrahim Awadh, a tribesman from the Sunni Jabour group, pondered the fate of his farmland, livestock, fruit and date groves.

His town of Hajaj was the site of early fighting, in part because it is home to many members of the army and police. Hundreds of members of his tribe have fled.

“In the beginning, people liked Islamic State because they had been suffering,” said Awadh. “We too wanted change, but not in this destructive way. We see now that they are criminals, gangsters, destroyers.”

$1 = 1,153.0000 Iraqi dinars

Additional reporting by Suleiman Al-Khalidi in Amman and Ahmed Rasheed in Baghdad
Editing by Michael Georgy and Simon Robinson

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Maggie Fick, Correspondent
maggie.fick@thomsonreuters.com
Simon Robinson, Enterprise Editor, Europe, Middle East and Africa
simon.robinson@thomsonreuters.com
Michael Williams, Global Enterprise Editor
michael.j.williams@thomsonreuters.com