

The New Geopolitics of Hunger: When Food Becomes the Ultimate Weapon

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Abstract

This study investigates the strategic weaponization of food in modern geopolitical conflicts, contextualized within historical precedents from ancient sieges to contemporary economic sanctions. Through case studies of Russia's disruption of Ukrainian grain exports (2022–2024), the Saudi-led blockade in Yemen (2015–present), and China's food trade leverage via export bans and the Belt and Road Initiative, the paper reveals how states manipulate food systems to destabilize adversaries and consolidate power. Employing Realist, Constructivist, and Human Security frameworks, the analysis demonstrates that such tactics exacerbate humanitarian crises, causing mass starvation, displacement, and intergenerational poverty, disproportionately impacting marginalized groups. Despite prohibitions under international law (e.g., Geneva Conventions), enforcement remains inconsistent, enabling cycles of impunity. The study critiques the limitations of UN agencies and sanctions regimes in mitigating food coercion and advocates for robust legal accountability, climate-resilient agriculture, and technological innovations (e.g., AI, blockchain) to enhance supply chain transparency. It calls for interdisciplinary research to address gaps in understanding non-state actor involvement and long-term socio-economic impacts. By redefining food security as a fundamental human right rather than a geopolitical tool, the paper urges global governance reforms to decouple food access from conflict dynamics.

Keywords: Food Weaponization, Geopolitical Conflicts, Humanitarian Crisis, International Law, Climate Resilience, Agricultural Security

Introduction and Background

Climate change together with armed conflicts and economic disparities increase threats to worldwide food security at an increasing rate. The number of people suffering from acute food insecurity in 2024 ranges between 691 million and 783 million while 85% of these individuals live in areas affected by conflict like Yemen, Gaza, and Tigray (Del Duca, 2024). Military tactics that weaponize food distribution systems serve to worsen already existing crises. Food deprivation maintains its status as an instrument of power because rulership has utilized it throughout

generations beginning with Rome's salting of fertile agricultural lands in its destruction of Carthage during 146 BCE until the present through economic sanctioning and medieval blockades (Messer & Cohen, 2024). The combination of climate change consequences with economic policies that use export bans and biofuel subsidies creates market distortions that drive food price increases (Schmitt, 2022). Hunger predates every other humanitarian challenge because combatants intentionally target food-making systems and push away farmers from their land while blocking aid which sustains suffering throughout extensive periods of post-war recovery (Halakhe, 2022).

Statement of the Problem

The practice of food weaponization has become an ongoing military strategy used by states together with non-state actors throughout current violent conflicts which causes severe damage to humanitarian needs. Saudi Arabia imposed a blockade on Yemen in 2015 that cut off both food and fuel access causing food insecurity to afflict 17.6 million Yemenis by 2024 (Bowman & El-Tayyab, 2021). The government in Ethiopia fought its civil war by withdrawing essential supplies from Tigray which led to starvation as a method to restrain resistance (Muhumuza, 2021). International humanitarian laws together with the Geneva Conventions specifically ban using starvation as a war tactic because such methods constitute a violation of the agreements. Food insecurity creates multiple consequences that affect the population most when targeting children and women from marginalized groups because they endure systematic starvation and displacement into poverty over generations (Celis, 2022). Food used as a weapon represents a deep ethical problem because it compromises basic human rights of sufficient food while compromising systematic security structures meant for vulnerable populations.

Objectives of the Study

The research explores food weaponization strategies in current geopolitical situations while providing practical solutions for resolution. The research evaluates food weaponization practices by examining cases like Russian interference with Ukrainian grain shipments along with Chinese food export controls and the Saudi blockade of Yemen to understand coercive food control methods. A thorough evaluation will assess how well the World Food Programme (WFP) together with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) handle food-based coercion while also investigating their limitations in carrying out their responsibilities. The authors use these outcomes to call for new policies that should enforce stronger prohibitions against starvation methods and develop climate-compatible agricultural systems and regional food production to minimize exposure to unpredictable worldwide markets. Through establishing a connection between past situations and current challenges this investigation establishes foundations for international governance to protect universal food rights and make them independent from conflict dynamics (Messer & Cohen, 2024).

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Three major theoretical perspectives namely Realism, Constructivism, and Human Security evaluate the way conflicts utilize food resources as geopolitical weapons. Each analytical framework delivers separate viewpoints regarding power through food exploitation alongside food narrative development and the human rights and development effects of food militarization.

Realism: Food as a Tool of State Power and National Security

According to Realist theory states function like survival-focused entities that use power means to prosper in a disorderly world system. States use food as a strategic tool that serves dual purposes to build their national security and undercut their rivals. Food becomes an essential weapon of

state power that threatens enemy economies and populations through historical examples including the Roman siege of Carthage in 146 BCE and British naval blockades during World War I (Messer & Cohen, 2024). The Russian control of Ukrainian grain exports from 2022 to 2024 exemplifies realist strategic food manipulation because it creates food shortages that disrupt rival states and expand global Russian influence according to Schmitt (2022). As per the realist thinkers' food serves as an effective non-kinetic weapon during hybrid warfare because it adheres to logical state objectives. The concentration on state power as viewed by realists leads to neglect of the human cost that these strategies create (McAuley 2015).

Constructivism: Politicizing Narratives of Scarcity and Dependency

International relations exist through the construction of socially formed concepts along with cultural principles according to constructivist principles. Food scarcity stories along with dependency narratives and "us against them" rhetoric serve political purposes to support forceful governmental policies. The Tigrayan rebels received their enemy status through the Ethiopian government's political move which enabled them to prevent food distribution during their civil war (Halakhe, 2022). Saudi Arabia has maintained a blockade of Yemen since 2015 by using terrorist labelling of Houthi rebels to conceal deliberate starvation attacks on civilians (Del Duca, 2024). The interpretation methods explained by constructivists demonstrate how these labels maintain ongoing disputes because they intensify separation among groups while sanctioning forceful tactics. The Ukraine-Russia grain crisis transformed into a worldwide "food emergency" after Western media covered it this way thus directing global assistance (Cohen, 2024).

The Human Security model demonstrates its effects on human rights together with development outcomes. The Human Security paradigm transforms the national security perspective by recognizing individual welfare which includes food accessibility as an essential human right. Food weaponization represents a major violation of basic human rights according to Human Security because Israel restricting Gaza access in 2025 resulted in starvation conditions that affected 2.3 million Palestinians (Shurafa et al., 2025). Human Security specialists criticize Realism because it fails to care about civilian casualties by showing how starvation warfare breaks down communities and compromises development while breaking international laws (Celis 2022). Intentional agricultural facility destruction in South Sudan expanded displacement episodes and poverty which undermined years of developmental advancement according to Dannenbaum et al. (2022). The proposed framework advances policies that protect vulnerable groups by reinforcing starved-crime accountability systems at the United Nations and supporting agricultural methods that adapt to climate change to reduce dependency (Halakhe, 2022).

These theories create a comprehensive approach to understand food weaponization by considering both state objectives alongside political narratives while safeguarding human beings' dignity.

Historical Context

The government uses food as an instrument to regulate geopolitics and calls food one of the deadliest weapons behind bombs and missiles (McAuley 2015). Written historical documents validate food utilization as a weapon since records began. History has documented military blockades together with sieges and hunger as battle tactics and political organizations employ food as a strategic tool to gain supporters while driving away opposition. Throughout the twentieth century and our present twenty-first century governments sought various ways to restrict food deprivation from becoming a military weapon. Historical records show that one of the most familiar uses of food for political dominance took place when Romans destroyed Carthage in 146 B.C (Dannenbaum et al., 2022).

The war between Athens and Sparta which started in 431 B.C and ended in 405 B.C made these two powerful city-states in ancient Greece fight using methods that included food supply blockade and starvation execution (History.com Editors, 2009).

During this time Athenian ships had to beach and the sailors engaged in food harvesting activities. The Athenian population surrendered entirely in March 404 BCE following their inability to feed themselves because of their destroyed fleet and Spartan control of Deceleia. Following their loss Athens had to establish an oligarchy backed by Spartan forces (WarMaps, n.d.). Military forces from ancient times rendered agricultural land unusable for cultivation through both earths salting methodology and irrigation destruction. At the end of the Punic Wars during the second and third centuries B.C, Eastern Roman Emperor Leo III defeated the Arab navy through sea power while securing food imports which resulted in ending the siege of Constantinople in 717 ("Food as a Weapon of War", 2025).

During the First Jewish Revolt the Romans encircled Jerusalem with siege walls during their siege of the city (70 CE) while blocking access to outsiders who could have transported food into the city thus creating starvation. The Romans cordoned the city with walls to eliminate all food supply routes and ensure demoralizing starvation among the Jewish population. (Lohnes, 2018)

One of the most illustrative events that shows how hunger functioned in warfare occurred when the Assyrians laid siege to Lachish during 701 BCE. King Sennacherib led his Assyrian army to besiege Lachish which functioned as a fortified city belonging to Judah. The Assyrians starved Lachish by blocking food and water routes which represented a ruthless siege tactic as shown through Nineveh relief carvings. Research indicates that the Trojan War happened between the 13th and 12th century BCE. Two ancient civilizations the Mycenaean Greeks and Trojans conducted this conflict according to Woerner et al. (2023). Throughout the Trojan Siege, Greek soldiers started attacking the surrounding communities to disconnect Troy from its food supply routes (Lantern Theater Company, 2016).

The Mongols employed this same technique to attack the northern Chinese Jin Dynasty between 1211 and 1214 by devastating the land although they numbered fewer soldiers than their adversaries. This forced people to seek shelter inside cities that suffered from food shortages. Food scarcity became severe as a result which led the Jin army to execute tens of thousands of its peasantry population. Under Mongol siege in 1214 the ruling Jin accepted to deliver vast amounts of silk along with silver, gold, and horses to the Mongols (Hill, n.d.). When the Hundred Years' War (1337-1340) began Edward III of England filed a formal declaration of war against Philippe VI of France thus initiating this war. Edward III established a maritime blockade against France to stop all Baltic grain imports from reaching the country (Study Rocket, n.d.).

In 1590 the siege at Paris aimed to gain authority over the city from Catholic rule. The French Royal Army established a blockade of Paris on 7 May 1590 before they set fire to windmills to prevent food from reaching the city. The siege leaders believed that food shortages equivalent to starvation would be the only method to make Paris surrender. Between 40,000 and 50,000 people of the total population died from starvation during the siege. Starvation acted as a military strategy during the Thirty Years War evidenced through the Siege of La Rochelle. The attack on La Rochelle fortified both land and sea positions with defensive walls that completely prevented all incoming food deliveries from reaching its inhabitants. During the siege three-quarters of the citizens became victims of starvation based on research by Global Rights Compliance (2022).

During the decisive Spanish Tenochtitlán Siege of 1521, Hernán Cortés led the conquistadors in their conflict against the Aztec Empire (Fiveable, 2024). The siege tactics Cortés executed resulted in a lack of supplies to Tenochtitlán thus causing its defenders to starve while the decomposing human bodies produced unbearable odors across the city (Springer, 2018).

The colonial forces experienced shortages of essential supplies throughout the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783) because Britain controlled their trade routes and ports. The wartime environment disrupted how people pursued and processed their food consumption so soldiers alongside civilians saw significant changes in their eating habits. The effect of hunger differed between individuals (Eats History, 2025). The monster of hunger moved continuously through all parts of the continent. Hunger was power. Hunger was a war (Herrmann, 2017). In the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Though Morocco's forces waged against Spanish Ceuta lasted thirty years (the Thirty-Year Siege) under the leadership of Sultan Ismail Ibn Sharif (Bagwell, 2025), the siege occurred on North African coastal territory which is now part of Spanish North Africa. Ceuta endured the lengthy siege because the Spanish naval forces ensured sea-based resupply operations thus making surrender unnecessary (Mary, 2023).

The Irish Famine of the 1840s also known as “The Great Hunger” served as the focus for historian Cecil Woodham-Smith in her 1962 history book which bore the same title. During this period British and local authorities observed the Irish starvation while doing little to assist (McAuley, 2015). Napoleon’s Grande Army found Moscow empty after winning the Battle of Borodino because local Russians burned the city in September 1812 (HISTORY Editors, 2010). After their retreat, the Russian forces deliberately destroyed any available supplies throughout the land to prevent the French forces from obtaining resources (Josephson, 2023). After midnight when Napoleon's army entered the city of Moscow, Russian patriots ignited fires all over the city (HISTORY Editors, 2010) while Russian peasants faced starvation and their land was cleared of animals (Josephson, 2023). This left Napoleon's massive army without survival means for the upcoming Russian winter (HISTORY Editors, 2010).

Strategic objectives related to economic warfare became explicit due to the Bolsheviks' strategic manipulation of Russian wheat from the Russian Civil War through WWI and WWII which involved starving enemy forces (Al-Ghwell, 2024). During the First World War, no one could determine how many soldiers would lose access to food in the war. Only neutral nations administering trade throughout WWI included Switzerland together with the Netherlands Sweden and the United States before 1917 (Cronier, 2021). Tom entered the United States into the Great War in April 1917 so President Woodrow Wilson appointed Herbert Hoover to become the country's food administrator. The United States and its Allies needed a large increase in food supply so he received the mission to carry out this task. The objective required America to expand agricultural production and encourage population-wide food preservation practices. Herbert Hoover proclaimed “Food Will Win the War” as his wartime slogan according to Patenaude (2007).

A deliberate plan emerged from the Allies which aimed to restrict access to food supplies for the Central Powers. According to Cox (2019), The Central Powers experienced a dual impact from their isolation because it accelerated mass reorganization while leading to full food crisis development during the winter of 1916-1917. Large militarized front states without adapted war-support transportation networks including Russia and the Ottoman Empire experienced tremendous food shortages during wartime. (Geyer, 1989). During summer 1914 British naval power supported the Allied food blockade after the German blockade proved ineffective for long-term naval operations. The German naval efforts resulted in the sinking of hundreds of thousands

of tons of supplies with 500,000 tons per month being destroyed throughout unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917 (Cronier, 2021).

According to Backer (2020) World War food served as an effective weapon of war. Food and production means were the primary driving factors behind the war since the 1920s when Weimar Republic Germany pursued additional lands to thrive while avoiding World War I starvation deaths which had killed nearly a million Germans. The people carried the physical reminders of these events because they remained psychologically wounded from that period (Cribb, 2019). A million Russians lost their lives through starvation throughout the 500-day blockade of Leningrad in World War II surpassing the total civilian casualty counts from all bombings of Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki combined ("Food as a Weapon of War", 2025). A Soviet commissar launched the concept of using food as a weapon when the Soviets began using starvation as a tactic against "class enemies" while forcibly stealing Ukrainian grain to support their Russian population. The famine killed approximately two million citizens in Ukraine. During the Soviet-orchestrated famine in Ukraine Stalin delivered his cynical observation which stated, "A single death from hunger represents a tragic loss but such statistics show only millions dying." According to Hagney (2022), the death of millions equals nothing more than numbers in statistics. From 1943 to 1944 the British colonial administration conducted the Bengal Famine which claimed 3 million victims (Soma, 2024).

Under Nazi Germany, the "Hunger Plan" consisted of wartime starvation plans that could have led to the demise of 20 million or more Soviet citizens in Nazi-occupied Soviet lands. Many thousands of people died because of starvation that occurred when Germany implemented its siege against Leningrad (St. Petersburg) (National Geographic Society, n.d.). The American military operation to surround the Japanese homeland in 1945 had received its codename Operation Starvation. In 1950 Britain employed the exact terminology to describe its population resettlement initiative which sought to defeat the rebels in Malaya (Dannenbaum et al., 2022). Consequently, Pol Pot employed mass starvation as a weapon to reconstruct society in Cambodia during his Year Zero dictatorship in 1977. A civil war erupted in 1983 between Sudan People's Liberation Army members and government military forces. Food was politically important. The government immediately chose to ship its agricultural products overseas for foreign currency which was then used to fund military expenses (Socialist Writer, 2022).

Subsequently, Nigeria achieved independence from Britain as an autonomous nation in 1960. Biafra in eastern Nigeria proclaimed independence from the rest of the nation. Nigerian authorities opposed the secession. Nigerian military forces implemented roadblocks while declaring starvation to function as an official war tactic during June. Military troops isolated the 13 million Biafran citizens from getting access to food. Approximately 6,000 children together with 10,000 total people lost their lives daily due to starvation. An estimated 2 million civilians perished during the Biafran conflict because it claimed 15% of Biafra's entire population according to Marlowe (2021).

North Korea suffered from a devastating famine during the mid and late 1990s according to Seth (2011) which devastated its 25 million people while self-sufficiency policies and isolation contributed to the crisis. When food supplies grew scarce the government ended its food distribution while maintaining focus on military supplies rather than supplying civilians with ration assistance. When food supplies decreased the authorities decided to end ration distributions while devoting surplus food to military troops rather than civilians according to Blakemore (2017). Research indicates that about 1 million citizens or 5 percent of the population succumbed to death

(Relief Web, 2006). Historical events verify how cunning hunger became when used as a warfare strategy. Through all periods of history including the present day measuring and blocking food access has proved deadly as a military tactic. Starvation functions as a terrifying military tactic because victory is frequently achieved through the death of innocent people by hunger (Pareles, 2023).

Current Studies and Findings

Sun Tzu recorded food use as a warfare technique during the 5th century BC in his book *The Art of War*. The strategic limitation of food continues to be employed as a strategic tool to destroy or create harm to populated groups in modern times. In modern times the global food systems of today make food weaponization during wars more hazardous than previously imagined. Armed conflict zones in Gaza and Ukraine as well as Yemen and the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and Tigray, Ethiopia host 85% of those who experience food insecurity. This results in 691 to 783 million victims. Mass starvation and food insecurity exist in all humanitarian crises as the United Nations Security Council acknowledges that using food as a war tactic (Del Duca, 2024). Research reveals food has become a weapon in current international conflicts where Saudi Arabia waged (2014 -2024) a maritime blockade of Yemen thus blocking essential commercial and humanitarian supplies (Bowman & El-Tayyab, 2021). Supplies and protective human services are required by 18.2 million population while 17.6 million citizens face food along with nutrition challenges (Arms Trade Litigation Monitor, n.d.). Israel faces increasing criticism from various parties because of its blockade that surrounds the war-torn Gaza Strip. In April 2025 Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz declared that blocking aid serves as a core method for Israel to pressure Gaza (Shurafa, Khaled, & Keath, 2025). The Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant implemented mass punishment targeting every Gazan person through his announcement that "There will be no electricity, no food, no fuel, everything is closed" (Soma, 2024).

Economic sanctions have forced 2.3 million Palestinians into a famine that was specifically created through supply and aid blockade. Starvation functions today as an intentional military weapon used against the population of Gaza. The world observes the situation (The New Arab Staff & Agencies, 2025). The military junta of Myanmar has been accused of employing hunger as a 'weapon' by obstructing vital food aid throughout Rakhine State according to Mitsanas et al., 2024. The WFP senior spokesperson declared "medieval tactics of besiegement" during this Russia-Ukraine conflict (Schmitt, 2022). At present Ukraine and Russia collectively provide about 30% of wheat to the world markets (Schmitt, 2022). The Ukraine war has triggered a worldwide food scarcity that threatens 333 million people with starvation according to an article from the Foreign Affairs site (n.d.) located at the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs. World Food Programme's report identifies Ethiopia and Yemen as nations where starvation functions as a military tactic in repeated warfare (Celis, 2022). The Ethiopian population has lived with food manipulation for many decades because past Ethiopian authorities have purposefully used food resources as weapons against their people. During the periods from 1954-58 and 1965-67 Emperor Haile Selassie made a conscious decision to overlook the development of hunger in Tigray. The 1983-1995 famine period witnessed military offensives that ruined crop production in surplus regions according to Halakhe (2022). The United Nations together with other humanitarian organizations confirm Tigray faces famine impacts more than 350,000 of its people. Multiple farming region sources in Tigray affirmed to the Associated Press that Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers are using food as a weapon through food-blocking and stealing practices (Muhumuza, 2021).

Gaps in the Literature

Research efforts on food weaponization have shown several knowledge deficits in fully comprehending its complete nature and effects. Research about non-state actors using food as a weapon remains inadequately investigated because terrorist groups as well as insurgent organizations and multinational corporations are underrepresented. Non-state entities use food systems to coerce people while Russia and Saudi Arabia continue to draw most of the scholarly attention (Bowman & El-Tayyab, 2021). Corporations active in Sudan's civil war spent their financial resources on military needs while exporting food supplies instead of safeguarding food security according to Socialist Writer (2022) although systematic research at this point is limited. Research regarding how Boko Haram and ISIS use food as a weapon in Nigeria and Syria remains scarce according to Marlowe (2021).

Current knowledge lacks quantitative evidence documenting the permanent social effects which result from these situations. Researchers have primarily studied sudden humanitarian events resulting in deaths from starvation such as Yemen and Tigray but have failed to examine persistent impacts which include systemic poverty and mental health destruction as well as social disintegration. The North Korean famine that ravaged the country in the 1990s led to permanent growth impairment in children and weakened community confidence (Blakemore, 2017) yet researchers have limited evidence about these lasting outcomes. Disrupted food systems caused by climate change make existing vulnerabilities much worse over a timeframe spanning multiple decades (Del Duca, 2024). Successful policy development depends on closing these information gaps because such knowledge enables hunger reduction strategies that protect both immediate hunger outcomes as well as long-term intergenerational impact.

Findings

Case Study 1: Russia's Grain Politics

Weaponization of Ukrainian grain exports during the 2022–2024 war

The 2022 escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict has heavily affected global food security because Russia weaponized Ukrainian grain shipments. European nations perceive the "breadbasket of Europe" as an apt description for Ukraine because it stands as a major global grain-producing nation that provides significant amounts of wheat and corn to worldwide markets. The Russian military used strategic measures to intervene with Ukrainian food shipments because Russia understood that food availability controls could create pressure on allies and Ukraine.

At the start of hostilities Russia targeted Ukrainian agricultural sites like port facilities and grain storage units and this resulted in diminished wheat and corn export capabilities for Ukraine. The blockade of the Black Sea by Russian forces created additional problems for Ukraine because the route serves as a main path for its grain exports. Russia blocked maritime access to Ukrainian routes for two strategic purposes: to damage its economic stability while using food shortages for geopolitical gains according to Schmitt (2022).

On July 2022 Turkey together with the United Nations successfully negotiated to enable Ukrainian grain exports out of its ports. The agreement persisted against numerous challenges because Russia constantly used bogus violations as a reason to abandon it. Russia showed its readiness to weaponize food by using grain exports as a political tool in this manner which Bowman and El-Tayyab (2021) identified as food weaponization.

Global Ripple Effects

Russian military interference in Ukraine caused disruptions that produced worldwide food emergencies and international diplomatic disputes affecting distant regions. The crisis caused a significant increase in food costs together with shortages in nations that depend on Ukrainian grain imports primarily in African and Middle Eastern regions. The Egyptian economy suffers significant financial loss through wheat imports since the nation relies on foreign wheat supplies for 80% of its consumption needs. Food shortages from the crisis have triggered widespread protests together with political instability in various nations because high bread prices cut into the incomes of millions of people (Celis, 2022).

The worldwide food emergency has triggered disagreements between member states of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Different countries experiencing grain shortages have initiated diplomatic communication to ask for actions that would stabilize both food supply and pricing structures. Experts now debate about developing stronger food systems and finding measures to reduce the effects of international geopolitical conflicts on worldwide agricultural markets (Messer & Cohen, 2024). The geopolitical landscape changed when nations started looking for new grain suppliers from atypical sources as they rushed to find new sources. The scarcity of available resources between competing nations has made prices continue to rise while making food insecurity worse for vulnerable nations. The spreading effects of this conflict demonstrated how food supply networks operate globally while establishing the necessity of joint approaches to handle food insecurity (Schmitt, 2022).

The weaponization of Ukrainian grain exports throughout the 2022–2024 war illustrates to the world the strategic value that food maintains as a geopolitical weapon. Both global food security and international trade practice disputes emerge from this situation that began on the battlefield. The vital requirement for powerful policies that defend food systems and guard vulnerable groups has grown more pressing while nations adjust to this intricate environment.

Case Study 2: Yemen and the Saudi-Led Blockade

Restrictions on food imports as a tactic in the Yemeni civil war

Since its escalation in 2015, the Yemeni civil war has triggered a world-class humanitarian crisis because food imports are being employed strategically as military weapons. During its intervention to support the Yemeni government, the Saudi-led coalition established an absolute blockade that cut off vital supplies including foodstuff as well as fuel and medical products to the country. The Saudi-led coalition has implemented the food blockade to restrict desired goods into the areas controlled by the Houthi movement with Sana'a as its capital. Yemen depends heavily on external imports to feed its population so the blockaded conditions have banned essential food commodities from reaching the country. According to World Food Programme statistics from early 2024 Yemen faced acute food insecurity threatening millions of people with famine (Bowman & El-Tayyab, 2021). Due to coalition-imposed restrictions basic food items have become scarce and prices exponentially high which makes the war consequences worse for the war-affected millions.

The blockade produces dual problems because it interferes both with importing foodstuff and obstructs international relief support operations. The delivery of goods through ports remains highly limited because inspectors and prolonging procedures lead to worsening standards of living in the country. Numerous humanitarian organizations insist that ending the blockade would be necessary because international humanitarian law shows the situation violates civilian rights by cutting off essential items like food (Celis, 2022).

Famine as a byproduct of geopolitical manoeuvring

The blockade-caused famine exists as an intentional weaponization method that Saudi-led coalition members purposefully use against the Houthi rebels and their backers. Through food weaponization, the coalition has established a plan to force the Houthis into surrender or result in their weak negotiation position. The international community and human rights organizations have strongly denounced the warfare tactic because they see starvation as a punishable war crime against humanity. The situation in Yemen has developed into a full-fledged famine crisis. Acute malnutrition affected more than 2 million children according to UN estimates during the first months of 2024 as the condition threatened their lives. The blockade together with the current situation has escalated mortality rates among women children and other vulnerable populations (Schmitt, 2022). The Houthi force weakness and civilian population mistreatment combine into an intentional food blockade strategy that produces large-scale suffering and population displacement.

The regional geopolitical activities between different powers in the Middle East actively influenced the creation of Yemen's humanitarian disaster. The Middle East conflict operates as a substitute war because Iran supports the Houthis alongside Saudi Arabia and its accompanying allies who try to limit Houthi expansion. Through the weaponization of food, the military and strategic purposes connect since policymakers use famine as a strategic instrument to reach their navigated political objectives while causing widespread human misery. The global response to the Yemen crisis consists of requesting blockade termination alongside strengthening humanitarian aid measures. The active resolution of the situation faces difficulties due to political complexities that continue with the ongoing hostilities in the area. Food weaponization in Yemen reveals the tragic nature of contemporary warfare because it results in civilian suffering during geopolitical conflicts.

The Saudi-led blockade of Yemen showcases a perfect application of using food imports to realize warfare objectives within an ongoing civil war. Millions now face famine conditions because the imposed limitations on food distribution have caused massive humanitarian tragedies. The international community faces dual challenges regarding responsible decision-making and civilian protection in this current crisis.

Case Study 3: China's Food Trade Leverage

Export bans on fertilizers or staples during crises

The Chinese government has transformed into a major presence in world food markets through agricultural exports to strengthen its global position. When faced with crises China employs one significant tactic which is banning exports of essential products such as fertilizers together with staple foods including rice and pork. Export restrictions implemented by China are commonly used to protect domestic food security yet they lead to important changes in worldwide agricultural markets. During the COVID-19 pandemic of 2021, China imposed export limits on vital fertilizers despite global food production dependence on them. The immediate impacts of this decision triggered increased fertilizer costs and created worries about food production levels among nations dependent on Chinese exports. The global food systems took on additional risks for Southeast Asian and African nations when China implemented export limitations (Schmitt, 2022).

At the beginning of 2023, China started implementing limits on the export of important agricultural products including rice and pork to external markets. Domestic price stability and sufficient supply for Chinese residents were used to legitimize these restrictions. These international export restrictions drew criticism as food trade weaponization from the community members because

they created dependencies and forced pressure on importing nations (Bowman & El-Tayyab, 2021). Supply changes in Chinese agricultural imports make countries dependent on Chinese food products increasingly vulnerable to market disruptions in the international food marketplace.

The Belt and Road Initiative's role in creating food dependencies

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an extensive infrastructure and economic development project created by China enhances the country's capacity to use food trade for political goals. Which was initiated in 2013 the BRI has established its mission to develop trade links between Asia Europe and Africa by building roads railways and ports. The Chinese initiative promotes agricultural alliances and food supply pathway development between member states to expand food-related interdependencies. The BRI instrument allows China to invest significantly in agricultural infrastructure development in its partner nations with provisions of funding and technology support for better domestic food output capabilities. Short-term benefits of food security through these initiatives lead to long-lasting dependencies by partner countries on Chinese agricultural resources and technological solutions. The BRI engagement between Southeast Asia and African countries produces dependency on Chinese agricultural products including fertilizers seeds along machinery systems which creates trade weaknesses when China implements new regulations or price changes (Celis, 2022).

The BRI enables Chinese agriculture to set up new trading paths which especially promote the advancement of Chinese agricultural products. Through its strategic geographic placement, China gains control over food markets in target participating countries by wielding food as a means of executing diplomatic economic policies. The increase in agricultural dependency on China forces participating nations to prioritize Chinese interests when shaping their political and economic decisions which improves Beijing's geopolitical dominance (Messer & Cohen, 2024). The BRI framework illustrates how geopolitical planning and commercial food exchange develop complex relationships between agricultural nations. International relations show an increasing trend where food has the potential to serve as a strategic tool for countries working between their geopolitical interests. The agricultural export manipulations and dependency control by China create numerous difficulties for maintaining worldwide food security together with sustaining stability in international trade. China proves that fertilizer export restrictions together with careful Belt and Road Initiative implementation illustrate the developing relationship between food trade and political power. These food trade developments in China extend their impact across worldwide borders to affect both global food safety and foreign trading structures.

International Involvement and Mediation

Effectiveness of UN agencies (WFP, FAO) and sanctions regimes

The United Nations through its agencies including the World Food Programme and Food and Agriculture Organization leads essential efforts to address food scarcity problems caused by conflicts. Emergency food assistance was delivered to millions of people affected by conflicts in Yemen Ukraine and other crisis areas thanks to the operations of the WFP. WFP and FAO agencies face problematic obstacles because access limitations together with insufficient funding reduce their operational effectiveness (Bowman & El-Tayyab, 2021). International sanctions designed to maintain civilian safety seek compliance from states regarding humanitarian rules along with civilian protection measures. These sanctions demonstrate inconsistent results in their performance. The effectiveness of sanctions on governments is unclear because although they may force governments to act their restrictions on essential food imports can create more widespread food scarcity (Schmitt, 2022).

Challenges in enforcing humanitarian corridors

Implementation of humanitarian corridors presents a major difficulty during armed conflicts. The international bodies support these corridors to enable food and aid deliveries yet the involved parties in conflicts regularly fail to uphold agreements thus civilian communities continue to suffer. In Yemen the ongoing warfare keeps humanitarian corridors from working despite international demands for truces and corridors (Celis 2022). The processes of obtaining safe passage agreements become complicated because conflict politics and the negotiations' intricate nature make implementing such corridors difficult. International mediation practices commonly lack enough effectiveness since they do not stop vulnerable groups from starving while creating new humanitarian disasters (Messer & Cohen, 2024).

Comparative Analysis

Commonalities in tactics and outcomes.

When studying food weaponization in geopolitical conflicts through Ukraine and Yemen and China's food trade practices several fundamental methods emerge. Blocking entry routes to essential supplies represents a strategic move that nations use to withhold vital resources. Food importation restrictions under the Saudi-led blockade caused Yemen to face extensive famine throughout the country. Russia demonstrated how disrupting Ukrainian port access through blockade measures severely limited grain export capabilities thus revealing that controlling food delivery channels generates destabilization effects and political leverage (Schmitt, 2022). Economic coercion represents a common method of strategic control employed in these specific cases. Russia along with China utilize essential commodity export restrictions that focus on grain from Russia and fertilizers and staples from China to reshape world food markets as well as reinforce their respective political advantages. The economic methods generate broad effects on dependent food security because they drive price increases and commodities shortages in numerous importing countries (Bowman & El-Tayyab, 2021).

These operative methods create humanitarian emergencies that cause severe food scarcity together with nutritional issues which lead to higher death rates for susceptible communities. The use of food as a weapon highlights the relationship between food security and international relations because geopolitical manoeuvres create severe human consequences (Celis, 2022).

Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings

Geo-political conflicts retain food as a strategic weapon because they draw from ancient approaches including Roman sieges of Carthage and medieval blockades (Messer & Cohen, 2024). Today states and non-state actors choose destructive tactics of naval blockades combined with export restrictions followed by infrastructure destruction to destabilize rival forces in current conflicts. Russia used its control over Ukrainian grain exports between 2022 and 2024 to disrupt global wheat supplies thus triggering intensified food insecurity throughout Africa and the Middle East region (Schmitt, 2022). The Saudi Arabian blockade affecting Yemen between 2015 and the present moment cut off food together with fuel imports resulting in 17.6 million people suffering from acute hunger (Bowman & El-Tayyab, 2021). Food functions simultaneously as a fundamental requirement needed for survival and as an instrument designed to create harm. The human costs are catastrophic. The 2025 Israeli blockade against Gaza resulted in starvation that put 2.3 million Palestinians at risk of famine while becoming a tool for political influence (Shurafa et al., 2025). The government forces in Ethiopia's civil war cut off aid to Tigray which triggered widespread

malnutrition and mass population displacement according to Muhumuza (2021). Vulnerable demographic groups which include children, and women alongside marginalized populations suffer most from these actions which leave them in protracted poverty and facial and psychological damages (Blakemore, 2017). Realism theory explains food coercion through national policy tactics (McAuley, 2015) yet Human Security identifies it as a core violation preventing social cohesion and development (Halakhe, 2022).

Food relief programs of the World Food Programme (WFP) encounter obstacles in reaching affected populations and running out of funding resources (Bowman & El-Tayyab, 2021). The problems in Yemen and Ukraine showcase how weak enforcement of humanitarian standards requires immediate legislative changes and policy updates. Food weaponization creates a horrifying contradiction because the fundamental life-sustaining resource gets weaponized to harm people whereas it should exist for human survival hence necessitating global responsibility to break the link between food and warfare.

Implications for Future Policy

International legal frameworks need to be strengthened to stop food weaponization. Enforcement of starvation regulation in wartime faces inconsistent outcomes despite the Geneva Conventions and Rome Statute prohibiting this warfare tactic (The Institute of International and European Affairs, 2022). Two examples from the world show how states like Saudi Arabia in Yemen and Ethiopia in Tigray lack accountability for food-related crimes despite existing anti-starvation laws (Muhumuza, 2021). The UN Security Council should make starvation crime prosecution under the Rome Statute their priority by using mechanisms such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) to prevent violations according to Dannenbaum et al. (2022). The sanctioning process should undergo revisions that exclude essential food products and medical aid from restrictions because this change might reduce unintended consequences (Schmitt, 2022). The World Food Programme (WFP) requires enhanced real-time monitoring power to detect violations because its protocol works similarly to Ukraine and Gaza (Celis, 2022).

It is equally important to support food systems and local agriculture as a means to minimize dependence on unstable worldwide supply networks. Recent events in Ukraine revealed how confounding grain export operations create worldwide price volatility while causing food supply problems, especially for countries that heavily depend on imports such as parts of Africa (Schmitt, 2022). Introducing climate-smart agricultural measures with drought-resistant crops and sustainable irrigation systems would help communities resist both climate-related disasters and political conflicts (Halakhe, 2022). The repeated famines in Ethiopia show how vital it is for the country to develop diverse local food production systems to prevent political interference according to Muhumuza (2021). Smallholder farming incentives should include technology access with subsidies therefore international bodies like the FAO need to establish agricultural rebuilding priorities in post-conflict areas (Messer & Cohen, 2024). The Belt and Road Initiative developed by China reveals the problems of depending too much on imported food while building local trading relationships and seed storage facilities strengthens self-sufficiency (Del Duca, 2024). Separation of food security from geopolitical weapons potential would shift food from being used as a national advantage to becoming a basic human right that is accessible to all.

Recommendations for Future Research

Consolidated research programs need to create pioneering methods to fill the present understanding voids while combating food weaponization threats. Artificial intelligence (AI) and blockchain technology serve as digital instruments to both track and reduce food coercion through

revolutionary capabilities. Through analysis of satellite images together with social media posts and trade business information AI systems can detect and forecast food supply chain interruptions caused by blockades or hoarding in real time (Schmitt, 2022). Machine learning can identify crop destruction patterns in conflict areas such as Tigray or Yemen thus enabling rapid humanitarian help (Muhumuza, 2021). Blockchain technology presents a solution because its tamper-proof decentralized ledger functions to improve transparency during food aid deliveries by stopping resource diversion through armed organizations or corrupt institutions (Celis, 2022). Tests of blockchain technology verification and accountability systems for aid delivery should be conducted through pilot projects operating in Gaza and Sudan.

Interdisciplinary research requires the examination of quantitative methods and mapping techniques to assess the lasting impacts of food coercion on society such as nutritional deficits and economic collapse that may extend across multiple generations. Technology specialists need to join forces with government agencies and non-governmental organizations to create solutions that follow international legal mandates (The Institute of International and European Affairs, 2022). Research between technology and humanitarian practice would create tools for the WFP to take preventive action rather than react to emergencies.

Final Thoughts

The action of weaponizing food reflects a calamitous moral degradation that affects the worldwide human consciousness. Populations face starvation violations of the right to life when states block essential sustenance supplies as Saudi Arabia does in Yemen (Bowman & El-Tayyab, 2021), Russia interferes with food exports (Schmitt, 2022) and Ethiopia limits aid in Tigray (Muhumuza, 2021). Under both Geneva Convention and Rome Statute laws starvation qualifies as an illegal war practice but states fail to enforce these rules consistently which leads to extended cycles of human suffering (The Institute of International and European Affairs, 2022).

Rearranging food production from warfare should be considered both a goal of policy and a moral necessity. The use of starvation tactics creates the most harm to innocent civilians destroys trust between societal groups and enables long-lasting trauma to pass between generations (Blakemore, 2017). Countries across the world should focus on both prosecutor accountability through institutions including the ICC as well as protective measures for food supply chains from geopolitically motivated exploitation. The development of post-conflict societies relies on both agricultural resilience and equitable trading systems (Halakhe, 2022). The right to food should exceed strategic considerations so that every person gets equal access to food as a fundamental human right rather than using it as an instrument of war. Hunger used as a weapon of war stunts the principle of shared humanity because we exist in a modern interconnected world. Being ethical in governance leadership is the only way to avoid becoming a society that condones violence against civilians.

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