

THE STRUGGLE FOR LAND IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

BY BRENT HIERMANN

“Busy as we are from childhood tilling Mother Earth, we peasants have no time to let any nonsense settle in our heads. Our only trouble is that we haven't land enough. If I had plenty of land, I shouldn't fear the Devil himself!”

More than a hundred years after the publication of Leo Tolstoy's [*How Much Land Does a Man Need?*](#) these words still capture the desire for land ownership felt by many low-income farmers in the Middle East and Central Asia. In both regions, many of these individuals still hope to own more land, or in some cases, [any land at all](#).

Over the past several decades, market-oriented reforms in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Middle East have redefined the relationship between low-income farmers and the government. In some cases, these reforms have led to the formal acquisition of property rights, and the opportunity for small farmers to acquire productive lands. In other cases, however, reforms have done the opposite and cost individuals' their property. In many cases, these measures have strengthened economic elites, at the expense of low-income farm workers, who are all too aware of this destructive dynamic.

The Struggle for Land

The market-oriented reforms of recent decades are not the first time state agricultural policies have reshaped rural societies in Central Asia and the Middle East, or raised concerns amongst poor farmers.

This is no more apparent than in the [Soviet Union's collectivization campaign in Central Asia from 1929-1933, which sought to modernize rural life](#) by eradicating private farming and establishing collective, state-controlled farms. [Through the course of this campaign](#), at least a million Kazakhs, out of a population of around 4 million, perished as a result of famine. Between the 1960s and the fall of communism, these collective farms were transformed into an arm of the Soviet welfare state.

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Private farmers in Tajikistan

Credit: author

As [Sheila Fitzpatrick describes in her book, *Stalin's Peasants*](#), during this period, the inherent risk of financial ruin due to crop failure was eliminated for collective farmers. While there was no hope of getting rich, collective farmers had a guaranteed income regardless of their agricultural output.

Although transformative, agricultural reforms in the Middle East were never as sweeping or violent as the Soviet Union's collectivization campaigns. Two of the most extensive regional initiatives occurred in Egypt and Syria. In both cases, ruling regimes claimed their reforms responded to demands from the rural poor for a more equitable distribution of farmland.

“AGRICULTURAL REFORMS IN THE MIDDLE EAST WERE NEVER AS SWEEPING OR VIOLENT AS THE SOVIET UNION'S COLLECTIVIZATION CAMPAIGNS”

In 1952, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser launched a [land reform campaign](#) aimed at alleviating tremendous inequality in land ownership by establishing a land ceiling of 200 *feddans* (84 hectares) per person; all land above the ceiling was redistributed to landless households. Even more importantly, as Roy Prosterman has pointed out, registered tenancy laws were introduced, [which supported the landless through rent price fixing and protection from eviction](#).

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In Syria, the Baathist regime began a land reform process in 1958, which combined aspects of the Soviet and Egyptian models. As in Egypt, land ceilings reduced the influence of massive estates and provided the state with excess land to redistribute to the landless poor. In exchange for complying with the state’s agricultural plan, these newly landed farmers were able to access subsidized inputs, such as fertilizer, seeds, and fuel, as well as credit through state-organized cooperatives.

In addition to these quasi-private farms, Syria created a number of state farms with Soviet support that were intended to show off modern, socialist farming techniques.

State Withdrawal in the Middle East

Egypt and Syria’s commitment to explicitly pro-poor agricultural policies began to weaken in the latter half of the 20th century. In response to a fiscal crisis in the 1970s, Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat began pursuing a policy of *infitah* (openness), which reduced the role of the public sector in the economy and relied on domestic and international investment. As [Raymond Hinnebusch has noted](#), the push for privatization, which spread from Egypt throughout the Arab world, was accelerated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resulting loss of Soviet aid.

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By the mid-1980s, agricultural privatization represented [a counterrevolution in the Egyptian countryside](#), as private sector investment was sought to offset the state’s withdrawal from key components of the agricultural sector. Among the most significant aspects of Egypt’s land counter-revolution was a law passed in 1992, which [reversed tenancy protections](#) that had been in place since the 1952 land reform. The new law gave landlords the power to raise rents and evict tenants, and, as a result, led to sharp increases in rental prices and a [rise in landlessness](#). Unsurprisingly, the law was linked to [numerous disputes](#) between farmers and landlords.

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Economic liberalization represented a substantial shift in the social contract between the state and the Egyptian people. While the Nasser regime had established patronage networks with the rural poor, [under Hosni Mubarak, it was the landowners who were clients of the regime](#). With a large proportion of the rural population feeling increasingly alienated, the Mubarak regime’s [legitimacy](#) was [undermined](#) and [the groundwork for the 2011 revolution](#) was laid.

Although agricultural reforms in Syria were more modest than those in Egypt, they had significant effects on rural society. In 2000, the regime of Bashar al-Assad [privatized all state](#)

[lands](#). This led to the dissolution of state farms and the distribution of land to eligible parties, including to former owners and farm workers. This development underscored the failure of state farms [to efficiently produce crops](#) and indoctrinate the rural population.

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The Syrian regime also significantly cut subsidies and credits that had been provided to independent farmers involved in cooperative farming. Reductions in credit from the state-run Agricultural and Cooperative Bank [were not, however adequately offset](#) by private sector lending options. In line with the government’s [tenth five-year plan](#), launched in 2005, cuts were made to [subsidies](#) on fertilizer and fuel, which were critical to operating irrigation pumps.

These changes occurred during a period of [acute agricultural crisis brought on by a severe drought](#) across much of the country. The Syrian government’s inept response to the drought would become [one of the main triggers of the current civil war](#), a conflict that is, at least partially, motivated by socio-economic inequality and discontent with the country’s powerful economic elite.



Sharecroppers in Tajikistan

Credit: author

The Central Asian Experience

While the Soviet Union's collapse accelerated the pace of land reforms in the Middle East, it did not trigger it. In Central Asia, however, agricultural reforms resulted directly from the dissolution of the Soviet state, and the loss of subsidies from Moscow.

The speed at [which collective farms were dissolved and land made available to farmers has varied across the region](#). While Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan had privatized their old state-owned lands by 2003, in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan the government continues to own all land, which is leased to private individuals for long-term use. As is often the case, Turkmenistan is an outlier in the region, and has its own peculiar kind of [private ownership of land](#) — land owners are not permitted to sell or give their property away, which severely limits its economic utility.

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Similarly to the Middle East, many rural farmers in Central Asia believe the process of decollectivization has disproportionately benefitted the wealthy.

In the summer of 2014, I conducted a small survey of eighty-one people in Tajikistan from ten randomly selected villages. The results revealed some dissatisfaction with the land reform process. One question in particular helped explain these sentiments. I asked respondents who would receive the bigger land share, if both applied at the same time, a wealthy businessman or a common farmer. An overwhelming majority of respondents (73.17%) indicated that a wealthy businessman would likely receive the larger share, while only 6.1% of respondents believed it would go to the common farmer.

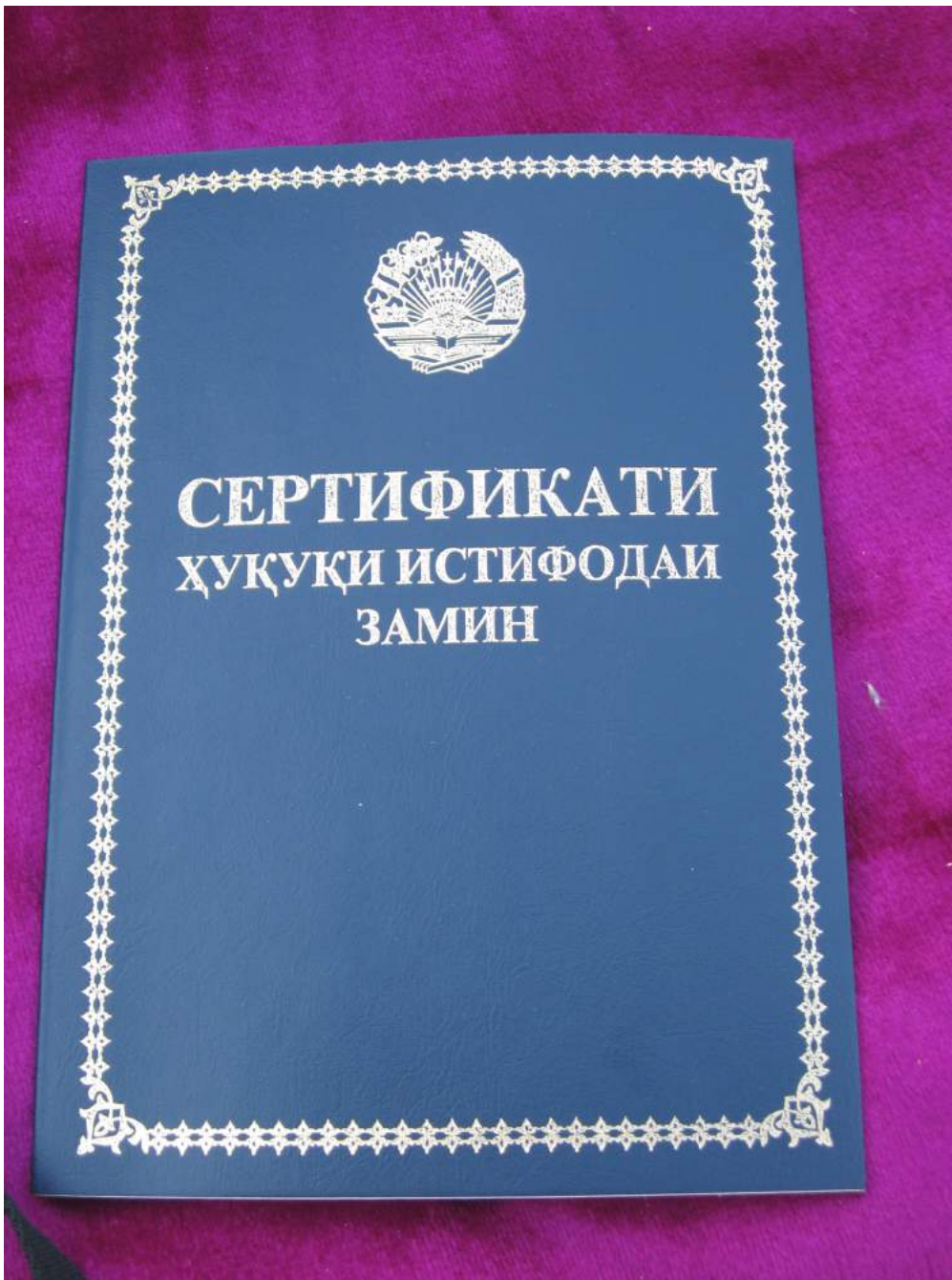
The intuition reflected in these responses is that wealthy, well-connected elites are manipulating the rules to dispossess average farmers of their land. This fear has been openly articulated in debates in [Tajikistan](#) over legislation to permit the sale of land use rights, and, in [Kazakhstan](#), over land privatization. In the Kazakhstani debate, critics argued the land code should be renamed the “Code on *Latifundia*,” the Roman and South American term for large estates dominated by a single landlord.

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The Continued Politicization of Land

This is all to say that the state's withdrawal from parts of the agricultural sector in both the Middle East and Central Asia has changed the locus of political power, but [has not](#)

[depoliticized economic relations](#). While some small farmers have certainly benefitted from these reforms, others have struggled. For many in both regions, well-connected economic elites have replaced state bureaucracies as the dominant political actors.



Land certificate for private farmer, Tajikistan

Credit: author

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