Revolutions that swept the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) since 2010 were in response to many factors, including higher food prices. The dependence of the region on imports for staple grains, highly subsidized systems and ill-advised policies coalesce, increasing the probability for food shortages and, therefore, social unrest. The 2007 and 2010 grains’ price hikes highlight the limited capacity of MENA nations to effectively manage wheat supplies, due both to the globalized nature of the industry and the food security policies adopted across the region. This paper explores the various strategies utilized in the region and the limitations of these strategies, arguing that a stable food system, one that lowers the likelihood of internal conflict, is linked closely to nation’s participation in the global economy. Specifically, we identify three approaches to food security: import dependence, self-sufficiency and off shore productions. The specific strategy undertaken and the relative success with the approach varies across nations but is ultimately determined by a nation’s ability to consistently access foreign currency and type of assimilation into the global economy.

To explore the interdependencies between global economic participation, food security policies and outcomes we utilize the global value chain approach. The GVC approach offers a systemic method that can better incorporate the often-overlooked actors and institutions that contribute to food (in)security and social stability outcomes. GVCs refer to the sequence of value-added activities that comprise the creation, delivery, and end-use of a given product or service. The framework considers both the macro and micro levels of analysis by examining policies that constrain or promote food security, linkages between actors and economic integration at the global, national, subnational and firm levels. To conduct our GVC analysis we draw on a comprehensive literature review of
food systems, food security, social stability and unrest, and the wheat industry from multiple data sources including academic publications, multilateral and bilateral organizations, news articles, and industry, regional, and country reports. We supplemented our desktop research with 45 semi-structured interviews conducted during 2013 and 2014 with actors in leading international organizations, industry associations, and firms, as well as policy makers focused on food security strategies within MENA and the resulting opportunities and bottlenecks of various approaches. By using the GVC framework to understand the structure of the wheat industry in MENA, our analysis reveals the strong role that governments continue to play across the chain. This can be attributed to the critical role that wheat plays in food security and the stability of the region. Moving forward these governments must reevaluate their role and the ways that they can continue to provide a stable and affordable supply of wheat.