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Food Security: A Dream for the Poor and a Reality for the Wealthy in the Medieval Islamic West

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Abstract:

Food security is essential to the stability of the state. Achieving it requires a careful assessment and full use of economic resources while taking the political and natural conditions of the region into account. This was also the case in the Islamic West. During the medieval period, food security in this region depended on diverse resources such as cereals, dates, and fish. Agriculture also developed through new techniques and innovations. However, the conditions and efforts involved in securing food differed between ordinary people and the wealthy. The types of food consumed also varied between times of prosperity and periods of hardship in the society of the Islamic West.

Keywords: Food Security; Islamic West; Medieval Period; Poor; Wealthy.

Introduction:

Securing food has been one of the main human concerns since the earliest times. Storing part of that food also became a constant concern. People therefore sought ways to preserve enough food for seasons of drought and scarcity, as well as for periods when some agricultural products were unavailable. Over time, they developed several methods for preserving and storing food. Meat, fish, vegetables, and fruit were dried and preserved with salt, sugar, vinegar, or oil because they spoiled more quickly. Cereals and pulses, by contrast, often required only drying before storage. As societies and techniques developed, people continued to search for better ways to secure food and preserve it for longer periods. Supplying the population with food and essential consumer goods eventually became one of the main foundations of state strength and stability.

Food security has been one of the major challenges facing states and societies in both the past and the present. Applying this modern concept to the medieval period is difficult. Contemporary studies of food security can rely on disciplines such as statistics, whereas the study of Islamic periods is limited by the scarcity, and sometimes the absence, of quantitative information. This is particularly true of agricultural and demographic statistics. Fortunately, other types of sources can help, including works on hisba, legal responsa (nawazil), biographical dictionaries, lexicons, and related materials.

To what extent did the Islamic West achieve food security during the medieval period?

How was this reflected in differences between the diets of the poor and the wealthy?

1- Concept of Food Security:

Food security means providing all inhabitants of a state with the food commodities they need, in sufficient quantities and in different forms. It includes access to the required foods and drinks at the appropriate time, when they are needed, without an expected future shortage. Accordingly, food security requires that food be available to all members of society, regardless of social group or purchasing power. In a Muslim society, even a poor person should be able to obtain essential food at a price suited to his or her income. The food available in the market should also come from domestic production so that the state can attain self-sufficiency. Domestic production depends on agricultural, industrial, and related products. In this way, food security can be achieved.¹

¹ Rachida Sebti, "Food Security in Islamic Religious Discourse (the Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah)," *Maalim Journal for Media and Communication Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, University of Algiers 3, December 2022, p. 81.

The Food and Agriculture Organization defined the food-security problem as the need to ensure that all people, at all times, have the economic and physical ability to obtain their basic food requirements. From this perspective, food security rests on three main elements. First, sufficient quantities of food must be produced. Second, the volume of food supply and its flow to markets must remain stable. Third, everyone who needs food must have the means to obtain the required quantities.¹

A World Bank report also stated that food security requires all people, at all times, to have access to enough food to lead healthy and active lives. Food security therefore depends on both the availability of food and the ability to obtain it.²

2- Food Security in Islam and the Encouragement of Food Production:

Surat Yusuf provides one of the clearest Qur'anic presentations of food security. It refers to methods for preserving and storing food in ways that prevent spoilage. It also highlights the importance of agricultural production and the need to regulate food consumption according to a planned use of reserves during years of drought and scarcity. The Qur'an states: "You will sow diligently for seven years. Whatever you harvest, leave it in its ears, except a little from which you eat. Then seven hard years will follow, consuming what you stored for them, except a little that you preserve. After that will come a year in which people will receive relief and in which they will press their produce."³

Islam encouraged the cultivation and development of the land through agriculture and productive work. The Qur'an states: "He brought you forth from the earth and settled you in it."⁴ It also calls on human beings to secure food, drink, shelter, and clothing: "Indeed, you will neither go hungry there nor be unclothed, and you will neither thirst there nor suffer from the sun's heat."⁵ Islam also encouraged the use of land for agriculture. The Qur'an states: "It is He who sends down water from the sky. From it you drink, and from it grow the plants on which you pasture. With it He causes crops, olives, date palms, grapes, and every kind of fruit to grow for you. In that is a sign for people who reflect."⁶ It also encouraged the reclamation of barren land in the verse: "So that We may revive with it a dead land."⁷

3- Conditions for Achieving Food Security:

Achieving food security requires several conditions, including the following:

- Producing the greatest possible quantity and variety of essential foods required by the population, either from domestic resources or from the resources of another country or group of countries.
- Producing a wide range of food products according to the principles of comparative advantage and economic feasibility in order to meet domestic and external demand.⁸
- Enabling people from all social and economic groups to obtain food in suitable quantities and types at all times. Such food should support an active, healthy, and productive life in accordance with accepted international standards.
- Achieving the highest possible level of balance in food trade on stable and fair commercial terms that protect the interests of all parties concerned.
- Achieving the highest possible level of balance in overall trade on stable terms and under conditions of fair competition.
- Maintaining a reserve stock of essential foodstuffs that can meet the population's needs for the longest possible period, and for no less than six months.
- Maintaining independent bargaining power, or gaining such power through membership in a regional or non-regional alliance that can secure food supplies and exchange them on economically and politically fair and suitable terms.⁹

4- Methods of Obtaining Food:

Human beings naturally need what sustains and provisions them throughout the different stages of life, from birth to old age.

God Almighty created everything in the world for human beings.

This idea is supported by several Qur'anic verses,¹⁰ including the statement: "It is He who created for you all that is on the earth, then turned to the heaven and formed them into seven heavens. He has knowledge of all things."¹¹ Food could also be obtained from domesticated animals through products from which people benefited,¹² such as milk from livestock and honey from bees.

¹ Salih al-Amin al-Arbah, *Food Security: Its Dimensions and Determinants*, Dar al-Kutub al-Wataniyya, Libya, 1st ed., vol. 1, 1996, p. 23.

² Abd al-Hadi Kout, *The Food Problem and Its Dimensions in the Arab Countries*, Arab Development Institute, Lebanon, 1st ed., 1984, p. 33.

³ Qur'an, Surat Yusuf, 12:47-49.

⁴ Qur'an, Surat Hud, 11:61.

⁵ Qur'an, Surat Taha, 20:118-119.

⁶ Qur'an, Surat al-Nahl, 16:10-11.

⁷ Qur'an, Surat al-Furqan, 25:49.

⁸ Muhammad Yedou, "The Role of Agricultural Policy in Achieving Food Security," *Journal of the New Economy*, no. 6, May 2012, p. 104.

⁹ Yedou, previous reference, p. 105. See also al-Qasim Subhi, *Arab Food Security: Its Present and Future*, Abd al-Hamid Shuman Foundation, 1st ed., 1993.

¹⁰ Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun, *Al-Muqaddima [The Introduction]*, ed. Abd al-Salam al-Shaddadi, 1st ed., Casablanca: Bayt al-Funun wa-l-Ulum wa-l-Adab, 2005, vol. 2, p. 21.

¹¹ Qur'an, Surat al-Baqara, 2:29.

¹² Ibn Khaldun, previous source, p. 421.

Food could also be obtained through wages earned from work and through cooperation among people. Workers were paid what they were entitled to receive for their labor. Examples included the wages of a cleaner of latrines and of a guard responsible for bales of goods and the houses of warriors.¹

There were many ways of seeking food, whether through purchase, acquisition, wages, or payment. Hunting was one such means, since animals could be captured from land or sea.² Food could also be obtained through obligatory almsgiving (zakat). Abu Imran held that zakat was due on dates that did not ripen by turning red or yellow but remained green while becoming sweet and juicy.³ Delaying payment of zakat on dates until after they had dried was not considered sinful, although earlier payment was recommended.⁴ Such payment was connected with securing the means of life and subsistence.⁵

5- Methods of Food Preservation:

The main cause of food spoilage is microbial activity, which can make food toxic or unpalatable. Once plants are harvested or animals are slaughtered, food begins to deteriorate. Many microorganisms can be controlled or destroyed through cooling, drying, heating, or chemical preservatives.⁶ Food can also be preserved by reducing its moisture content. This increases the proportion of solids to a level at which the growth of many microorganisms is inhibited, while the color and nutritional qualities of the food are preserved as far as possible.⁷ Communities also relied on cooling, including chilling and freezing.⁸ Ice was used to preserve fresh food. It was brought from the mountains, protected from heat and sunlight in bags, and covered with wood shavings. During winter it was stored in underground cisterns for use in summer. Fresh vegetables were also kept in pottery vessels.⁹ These processes generally had only a limited effect on flavor. Grapes frozen in August and baked in pastries in January could still taste close to fresh produce, even if their texture had changed slightly.¹⁰ Preservation was not limited to cooling. Salting, pickling, drying, and smoking remained important, especially for building food reserves for winter and early spring.¹¹ Vegetables and fruits were dried until their moisture content was reduced. The source states that vegetables could reach about 1–2 percent moisture, while fruit could retain about 11–22 percent because of its higher proportion of solids. This helped inhibit enzymatic activity and microbial growth. Drying used either natural heat, such as sunlight, or artificial heat.¹² Salting, meaning coverage with a thick layer of dry salt, and brining, meaning immersion in a concentrated salt solution, inhibited bacterial growth by drawing water from food through osmosis.¹³

Merchants also preserved vegetables in their shops by sprinkling them with a small amount of salt.¹⁴ Smoking was another preservation method.

Wood smoke contains chemical substances, especially certain antioxidant phenols. It coated food with tar, killed bacteria, and reduced exposure to air, thereby helping to prevent decay. Smoking did not eliminate all microbial activity and was usually preceded by salting or drying.¹⁵ Pickling involved immersing food in acidic liquids or pickling solutions. This raised acidity and made the food environment less favorable to bacteria.¹⁶

6- Factors Affecting Food Security:

a- Natural Factors and Climatic Conditions:

Food production is clearly affected by the natural and climatic conditions associated with a country's geographical location. These include rainfall levels, temperatures, and frost waves. Agricultural products that depend on irrigation and rainfall are among those most strongly affected by such natural and climatic factors.

b- Cultivated Areas and Their Output:

The size of cultivated areas and the volume of crop production affect the quantity of food available. This, in turn, influences market prices and the extent to which food is accessible to individuals.

¹ Shihab al-Din Ahmad ibn Idris al-Qarafi, *Al-Dhakhira*, ed. Muhammad Bu Khubza, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, Beirut, 1st ed., 1994, vol. 3, p. 412.

² Ibn Khaldun, previous source, p. 421.

³ Al-Burzuli, *Fatawa al-Burzuli: Jami Masail al-Ahkam*, ed. Muhammad al-Habib al-Hila, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, Beirut, 1st ed., 2002, vol. 4, p. 222.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

⁵ Al-Burzuli, previous source, vol. 2, p. 11.

⁶ Cathy K. Kaufman, *Cooking in Ancient Civilizations*, Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority, Abu Dhabi, 1st ed., 2012, p. 59.

⁷ Ahmad Mahmud Alyan, *Preservation and Processing of Fruit and Vegetable Products*, Arab House for Publishing and Distribution, Cairo, 1998, 1st ed., p. 11.

⁸ Kaufman, previous reference, p. 59.

⁹ Fawziya Abd al-Latif Shahada, *The Art of Cooking and Dining in the Abbasid Period*, PhD dissertation, Saint Joseph University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Beirut, 1985, p. 22.

¹⁰ Kaufman, previous reference, pp. 59, 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹² Alyan, previous reference, p. 22.

¹³ Kaufman, previous reference, p. 11.

¹⁴ Fawziya Abd al-Latif, previous reference, p. 22.

¹⁵ Kaufman, previous reference, p. 11.

¹⁶ Fawziya Abd al-Latif, previous reference, p. 22.

c- Individual Income Level:

Income is one of the main factors that determine a person's ability to obtain different types and quantities of food. Food consumption and access are closely related to individual income levels and to the prices of food commodities offered in the market.¹

d- Prices of Consumer Goods:

Food prices, especially in comparison with the prices of other goods, are among the main factors affecting demand for food and limiting consumers' ability to obtain it.

e- Availability of Production Inputs:

Improved varieties and seeds, together with fertilizers, pesticides, tractors, and agricultural machinery, are important factors in raising agricultural output and increasing food production. Limited use of improved varieties can negatively affect agricultural productivity by reducing yields per hectare. This lowers farmers' profits and weakens their ability to compete in domestic and foreign markets.

f- Food Aid:

In some countries, certain regions and population groups are vulnerable to food shortages because of unfavorable natural conditions and drought. These conditions reduce food production and, in turn, lower individual income levels. Displacement, instability, conflict, and civil war can also contribute to food insecurity. States therefore seek to support such regions and groups by providing food aid, developing infrastructure and social services, and supporting agricultural development.²

7- Food among the Wealthy and the Poor:**a- Food of Kings:**

Royal food was one expression of monarchical distinction. The king's diet differed from that of others in the state, and the royal table had a special symbolic meaning. It represented royal status and reflected human culture. It was distinguished by coordination, varied colors, multiple dishes, and abundance.³

Royal tables were marked by variety and careful arrangement. Kings frequently held large banquets for visitors on political and religious occasions. Feasts were also organized in preparation for military campaigns or to celebrate victories. Such banquets could continue for fifteen days or even for an entire month.⁴

Royal food and drink included many kinds of dishes derived from both animal and plant sources. One example was a dish called "isfriya," a meat preparation. It was made by mincing red meat and mixing it with a little water, eggs, salt, pepper, saffron, cumin, and coriander. Oil was heated in a pan. Spoonfuls of the mixture were then placed gently in the hot oil until they set. The process continued until all the mixture had been cooked. A sauce was then prepared and the small meat pieces were placed in it.⁵

Another dish was roast calf. Its preparation involved taking a fat, skinned, and cleaned ram, opening it between the thighs, and removing its entrails. A roasted goose was placed inside it. A roasted chicken was placed inside the goose, a roasted young pigeon inside the chicken, and a roasted starling inside the pigeon.

A roasted sparrow was placed inside the starling. The stuffed contents were then placed inside the calf. The calf was roasted, coated with a special roasting sauce, and kept over the fire until fully cooked.⁶

Another dish was known as "al-amkhakh" (brains). It was an important item on royal tables and was favored by many kings and rulers.

It was prepared by taking a sheep's brain and adding fresh ghee, eggs, milk, and a small amount of sugar. The mixture was used as a filling.

It was then cooked in water with salt and a small amount of spices. It remained over the fire until the brain was cooked, after which it was cooled and served.⁷

Royal tables also included a dish known as the "royal Sanhaji," which differed from the common version of the Sanhaji dish and was prepared for leading figures in Almohad society.⁸ A large, deep tagine was filled with lean pieces of red beef. Oil, vinegar, a little milk, pepper, saffron, cumin, and garlic were added. Red mutton was then added and cooked.

¹ Sufyan Akroud, "Food Security: The Problem of Defining the Concept and Its Dimensions," *Maalim Journal for Media and Communication Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, University of Algiers 3, December 2022, p. 61.

² Akroud, previous reference, pp. 61–62.

³ Izz al-Din Allam, *Al-Adab al-Sultaniyya: Dirasa fi Binyat wa-Thawabit al-Khitab al-Siyasi* [Sultanic Literature: A Study of the Structure and Constants of Political Discourse], Alam al-Marifa, no. 324, National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, Kuwait, 1st ed., 1427 AH/2006 CE, pp. 221, 225.

⁴ Ibn Sahib al-Salat, *Al-Mann bi-l-Imama*, ed. Dr. Abd al-Hadi al-Nazi, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, Beirut, Lebanon, 1988, 2nd ed., pp. 182, 185.

⁵ Anonymous author, *Kitab al-Tabikh fi al-Maghrib wa-l-Andalus fi Asr al-Muwahhidin* [Book of Cooking in the Maghrib and al-Andalus in the Almohad Period], p. 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁷ Anonymous author, previous source, p. 28.

⁸ Muhammad al-Baraka, *The Food System in the Maghrib and al-Andalus during the Medieval Period: A Sociology of Values, Judgments, and Customs*, Ministry of Culture, Matbaat Bani Iznas, Sale, Morocco, October 2016, p. 59.

Chicken, partridge, young birds, pigeons, doves, sparrows, and other small birds were subsequently added. Split almonds were scattered over the dish, salt was adjusted, and the tagine was placed in the oven until fully cooked.¹

Elite cuisine was not limited to local dishes. It also included foods associated with the eastern Islamic lands. The sources attribute some dishes to the Abbasids, such as the “Abbasid chicken,”² while others were associated with Damascus, including certain chicken dishes.³ Preparing such foods clearly required experienced and skilled cooks. For this reason, elite households relied on a particular group of women from Bilad al-Sudan who were renowned for their skill in preparing them. They were brought from Awdaghust and sold for one hundred dinars or more because of their culinary expertise, especially in sweets such as lawzinaj, jawziniyyat, qahirat, kunafa, and qatayif. The source states that no one was more skilled than these women in preparing such foods.⁴

Elite food was distinguished not only by its variety but also by the way it was served and by the vessels used.

Some groups used large dining cloths known as “al-sabani.”

The most expensive types were made from cotton and fine linen. This reflected the material prosperity and comfort enjoyed by the royal class.

Their tables therefore contained many kinds and colors of food, presented in an ordered and organized manner.⁵

b- Food of the Common People:

The diet of ordinary people often depended on different kinds of bread.

A barley soup served as a basic food. Dates were another important element of the diet, and at times some people ate little else. They also consumed dried, ground meat over which melted fat or ghee was poured. In some communities, bread was so unfamiliar that a person might die without ever having eaten it. Bread was eaten only when traders from other Muslim lands passed through and offered it. Porridges were also among the foods most closely associated with ordinary people. These were prepared from wheat flour cooked in water and ghee, then sweetened with honey or sugar. Their ingredients varied according to the season, and they were commonly eaten in winter.⁶

Another dish was al-lamutiyya, prepared in al-Andalus and the Maghrib. It could be made from different birds, including chicken, goose, young fowl, and quail. The meat was partially cooked, then coated with a roasting sauce made from spices, ghee, and water. It was kept over the fire until cooked and browned. Some people fried it instead. It was then simmered in the same sauce with garlic, walnuts, and almonds. Bread made from fine darmak flour was prepared, crumbled, and added to the dish. The pot was returned to the fire and seasoned with cumin and pepper. When fully cooked, cheese was grated over it before serving.⁷

A light meal consisting of bread, dried fruit, dates, boiled meat, and barley grain was also well known. It was especially popular among the people of Fez in the morning. Their diet also included quick and simple foods such as different kinds of cheese made from cow's or sheep's milk.⁸ The people of Awdaghust often cooked truffles with camel meat. They claimed that no dish on earth could equal it and regarded it as one of their finest foods. Al-Idrisi, who appears to have tasted it, confirmed this view when he wrote: “They claim that nothing on earth is like it, and they are right.”⁹

Fish dishes were also varied. Ibn Razin mentioned sardines and recorded several fish-based recipes, including fish with almonds, fish with honey, and fish with grape juice.¹⁰ Pulses were also common. Dishes based on broad beans were widespread, among them a preparation known as al-fustuqiyya. Jabal Ghumara was known for a dish called al-yasar, which was widely consumed in winter by both elites and ordinary people. It was prepared from the meat of a fat ram. The meat was cut, washed, seasoned with salt, oil, coriander, cumin, and chopped onion, and cooked over the fire. In a separate pot, broad beans were cooked with oil, onion, cumin, coriander, and salt. Once both were cooked, the beans were drained and added to the meat. The dish was allowed to cool slightly before being eaten.¹¹

Couscous was another cereal-based food. In Algerian Arabic it is also called “taam.” It remains widespread in Algeria and throughout the Maghrib. It is prepared from flour and water, which are worked into small granules to form couscous. Despite its fame, medieval sources mention this food only rarely, apart from a few brief references.

Chickpeas and lentils were also among the pulses used in the diet of the Islamic West. Chickpeas were prepared with water, oil, and cumin.¹² Vegetables were also important. Eggplant was used as food, while squash and pumpkin were

¹ Anonymous author, previous source, p. 22.

² Ibid., p. 25.

³ Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Baghdadi, *Kitab al-Tabkh* [Book of Cooking], reissued by Fakhr al-Barudi, Dar al-Kitab al-Jadid, 1st ed., 1924, p. 112.

⁴ Al-Himyari, *Al-Rawd al-Mitar fi Khabar al-Aqtar*, ed. Ihsan Abbas, Maktabat Lubnan, Beirut, 1982, 2nd ed., p. 12.

⁵ Al-Maqqari, *Nafh al-Tib*, ed. Dr. Ihsan Abbas, Dar Sadir, Beirut, n.d., n.ed., vol. 2, p. 128.

⁶ Al-Baraka, previous reference, p. 12.

⁷ Anonymous author, previous source, p. 188.

⁸ Anonymous author, previous source, p. 199.

⁹ Muhammad ibn Abd Allah al-Idrisi, *Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fi Ikhtiraq al-Afaq*, Maktabat al-Thaqafa al-Diniyya, Cairo, 1414 AH/1994 CE, p. 12.

¹⁰ Ibn Razin al-Tujibi, *Fadalat al-Khiwan fi Tayyibat al-Taam wa-l-Alwan* (The Art of Cooking in al-Andalus and the Maghrib at the Beginning of the Marinid Period), ed. and introd. Muhammad ibn Shaqrun, Matbaat al-Risala, Rabat, 1st ed., 1981, p. 122.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 82.

¹² Ibn Razin, previous source, p. 221.

among the most frequently used vegetables. Ibn Razin recorded eleven recipes based on pumpkin, including preparations associated with couscous.¹ Milk was a major drink. Some people relied on it to such an extent that a man could go for months without drinking water, while remaining physically strong and healthy.²

The inhabitants of the Central Maghrib also ate *bisla*. This food was prepared by grinding wheat or barley and mixing it with ghee and honey. It is a flavorful dish that many people in the region still eat in winter, and it is also traditionally consumed by women after childbirth.³

Conclusion:

The medieval Islamic West succeeded to a considerable extent in achieving food security because of the diversity of its natural resources, the development of agricultural techniques, and its economic organization. Food security formed an important basis for social stability and prosperity. Different social groups sought to secure food despite the challenges they faced. A clear difference nevertheless existed between the diets of the poor and the wealthy. Poorer groups relied largely on basic cereals such as wheat and barley, together with some vegetables. Wealthier groups enjoyed a more varied diet that included meat, fruit, and luxury foods. Even so, this inequality did not prevent the existence of a broader system that sought to guarantee a minimum level of food for all.

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¹ Ibid., pp. 11, 18.

² Abu Ubayd al-Bakri, *Al-Masalik wa-l-Mamalik*, Dar al-Kitab al-Islami, Cairo, n.d., n.ed., p. 181.

³ Ahmad ibn Muhammad Ibn Idhari al-Marrakushi, *Al-Bayan al-Mughrib fi Akhbar al-Andalus wa-l-Maghrib*, eds. G. S. Colin and E. Levi-Provencal, Dar al-Thaqafa, Beirut, 2nd ed., 1400 AH/1980 CE, p. 28.

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