

Climate Change's Impacts on Conflict Moving from Acknowledgement to Action

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TALKING POINTS

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Ladies and Gentlemen, Excellencies

- In my intervention I want first to offer my perspective on the overall debate on climate change impact on conflicts and I will then focus on the case of Syria. My talking points are a summary of my publication on the subject.²
- In the Middle East temperatures are rising faster than global average. It is predicted that climatic extremes will worsen in the coming decades³. Compounding these effects, the region's population is

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² Saghir (2019) Climate Change and Conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, American University of Beirut. https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Pages/publications/working_papers/2018-2019/20190724-climate-change-and-conflicts-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa.aspx

³ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. https://report.ipcc.ch/sr15/pdf/sr15_spm_final.pdf

projected to double by 2050, putting the region's resources under enormous pressure.

- It has been debated that changes in global climate have been responsible for episodes of widespread violence and conflicts. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says there is “medium confidence” that climate change can *indirectly* increase risks of violent conflict by amplifying poverty and economic shocks ⁴
- Based on my research work as published at McGill University, Payne Institute for Public Policy and the American University of Beirut, I argue that climate change alone will not directly induce conflict. The link between climate change and conflict exists but is still weak and inconclusive. **However, in my opinion climate change is imposing additional pressures on already scarce resources and deepening pre-existing menaces connected to water security, land degradation, migration and forced displacement.**
- Many analyses focused on the links between climate change, increased rainfall variability, and conflict ⁵. My preliminary conclusion is that indeed a linkage between climate change and migration for the MENA region that is majorly due to water scarcity ⁶.

⁴ Thomas F. Homer-Dixon. On the Threshold: Environmental Changes as Causes of Acute Conflict. International Security. Vol. 16, No. 2 (Fall, 1991), pp. 76-116. The MIT Press.

⁵ Center for Climate and Security's multi-author volume, Epicenters of Climate and Security: The New Geostrategic Landscape of the Anthropocene. <https://climateandsecurity.org/epicenters/>

⁶ Wodon Q, Burger N, Grant A, Joseph G, Liverani A, Olesya T (2014) Climate change, extreme weather events, and migration: review of the literature for five Arab countries. In: Piguet E, Laczko F (eds) People on the move in a changing climate. The Regional Impact of Environmental Change on Migration. Global Migration Issues 2 (pp 111–134). Dordrecht: International Organization of Migration, Springer

- Seen through this lens, climate change may present a security challenge and can generate conflicts between agricultural and pastoral communities precipitated by climate-exacerbated droughts and water variability. This has been observed in Yemen and Syria. These stresses could increase tensions and conflict between communities and precipitate the need for people to move – impacting the prices of livestock and other goods. In some cases, this could also lead to an increase in malnutrition and disease outbreaks, and adversely impact food security ⁷.
- Moreover, migration can be a trigger of conflict by increasing the pressure on resources and people in the receiving areas, thus leading to a destabilization of society. On the other hand, migration can be a tool to prevent the onset of conflict because people voluntarily move to other areas to work and to send back remittances, which help increase prosperity and development in the originating areas. A literature review on the link between migration induced by climate change and environmental disasters has produced inconclusive results ⁸.

Climate Conditions and Violence in the Middle East: The Case of Syria

- Taking into account this context, let's now look at the case of Syria.
- I agree with my colleague Dr. Colin Kelley comprehensive analysis

⁷ American Journal of Agricultural Economics, Volume 96, Issue 4, 1 July 2014.

⁸ World Bank (2014) *Turn Down the Heat: Confronting the New Climate Normal*. Washington, DC: World Bank. Licence: CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 IGO. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/317301468242098870/Main-report>

- Between 2006 and 2010, the region was hit by the worst multiyear drought since 1940⁹. In 2007-08, winter rainfall across Syria fell by a third ¹⁰. The decreasing rainfall combined with rising temperatures resulted in a decline in soil moisture.
- This had dramatic consequences on Syrian agriculture. It caused the devastation of agricultural land on which at least 800,000 people depended in eastern Syria¹¹. Syria's livestock economy, which accounted for about 40 percent of total agricultural production, was also severely affected. Overall, agriculture GDP contracted by 41 percent between 2011 and 2015, following a 10 percent decline in 2010. ¹²
- As the drought continued in Syria, around 1.5 million of the rural population abandoned their land and headed to urban cities for work, a large portion of which were already overpopulated, where violence first erupted. They formed disenfranchised belts of disparate communities surrounding Hamah, Homs, and Daraa.

Climatic Conditions and Extremism

- In this context and in my opinion, Terrorist organizations like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) directly or indirectly capitalized

⁹ The intense 2007–2009 drought in the Fertile Crescent: Impacts and associated atmospheric. *Agricultural and Forest Meteorology*. Volume 150, Issue 9, 15 August 2010, Pages 1245-1257 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0168192310001334>

¹⁰ Francesca De Châtel. Climate Change in the Syrian Uprising: Untangling the Triggers of the Revolution. *Journal Middle Eastern Studies* Volume 50, 2014 - Issue 4 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2013.850076>

¹¹ John Waterbury. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/summary?doi=10.1.1.363.5511>

¹² FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) and WFP (World Food Programme). 2016. "Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Syrian Arab Republic." FAO and WFP, Rome.

on the devastation wrought by climate change to attract new members as it happened in several agricultural villages in Syria and Iraq, many of which were successfully taken by ISIS via their recruitment tactics that were created to entice impoverished farmers who had their lives and incomes devastated by a series of natural disasters as mentioned above.

- These ISIS recruiters even offered money, food, and other resources to rural Syrian and Iraqis to lure them into joining the ranks of the jihadist group. With no means to sustain themselves through agricultural means, many farmers and other rural Iraqis accepted ISIS's bribes for both monetary and morale support.
- The importance resources hold for terrorist organizations is emphasized by the ISIS efforts to capture the Mosul and Fallujah dams in Iraq, as well as the Iraqi regions of Zumar, Sinjar, and Rabiah, in order to gain control of the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers as well as water sources in Syria, and fertile regions suitable for agriculture in both countries.
- **In fact, agriculture has received limited attention compared to other sources of ISIS revenues such as oil, looting, ransom, and various forms of taxation, although it was an important source of income for ISIS, which in 2014-2015 controlled over large parts of the breadbaskets of Syria as well Iraq¹³.**
- **Similar situations occurred with respect to the conflict in Darfur,** in western Sudan and in Northern Nigeria. In Darfur rainfall had declined by 30% and agricultural production had fallen by 70%, while the average annual temperature rose by 1.5 degrees,

¹³ Hadi H. Jaafar, Eckart Woertz/ Agriculture as a funding source of ISIS: A GIS and remote sensing Analysis. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0306919216303219>

contributing to conflict between pastoral and agricultural tribes over the use of land for grazing livestock or growing crops¹⁴.

- **The emergence of Boko Haram group in Nigeria** can be traced to environmental developments and climate change, linking the founding of Boko Haram to the proliferation of victims of environmental crises in North Nigeria, who lacked food, shelter, and other basic necessities of life. Boko Haram's ranks then swelled after the migration of Chadian farmers as a result of droughts and desertification in Chad. **So where all of this take us? Climate change: An early warning**
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- Whilst many policymakers, researchers, analysts and media commentators paint a bleak picture of climate-fueled conflict on an almost incomprehensible scale of the conflict in and climatic conditions have played a direct role in the deterioration of their economic conditions, in my opinion, caution must be applied in attributing climate change to conflicts and more empirical evidence are needed. The research of Dr. Kelley and others need to be pursued to collect more data to provide concise evidence-based analysis.
- Climate change could indeed aggravate existing fragile situations and contribute to social upheaval or even violent conflict. Food supply, water scarcity, migration patterns, and the occurrence of conflicts can be affected by climatic factors, **however, there is not a mono-causal relationship with global warming. Other political and socioeconomic factors must be considered.**
- In my opinion, a review of current evidence and facts reveals that **there is no clear evidence that there is direct and linear**

¹⁴ The World Bank. <http://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/climate-change-conflict-mena>

relationship between climate change and the eruption of violent conflicts, particularly extensive inter and intra-state conflicts ¹⁵. **Sequences of events leading to outbreaks of violence are always multifactorial and complex and it is usually not possible to identify** single triggering factors, but impact of climate change is one important factor ¹⁶.

- In fact, it could contribute to violence in two different routes, one which is more like the case of Syria and another one through being a “weapon” in the hands of terrorist groups and contributing to their uprising.
 - On the other hand, the conflict in Syria shows that impact of climate change more likely served as an **early warning** that could have put pressure on already scarce resources and exacerbated pre-existing issues, such as political instability, poverty, and unemployment, underscoring the importance of a conflict-sensitive approach to climate change in this context.
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Conclusion

- Even though climate change contribution to conflict and migration has not been proven to have a direct link but rather a contributing factor in interaction with other elements nevertheless countries should build their resilience to reduce the risks of climate change and reduce its influence on those factors.

¹⁵ SIDA. The Relation between Climate Change and Violent Conflict.

<https://www.sida.se/contentassets/c571800e01e448ac9dce2d097ba125a1/working-paper---climate-change-and-conflict.pdf>

¹⁶ Tänzler, Carius, Maas. The Need for Conflict-Sensitive Adaptation to Climate

https://www.adelphi.de/de/system/files/mediathek/bilder/the_need_for_conflict_sensitive_adaptation_to_climate_change_1.pdf. United Nations. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/01/1031322>

- The link between climate and conflict could be mediated by a range of political, institutional and societal factors ¹⁷. However, if designed and implemented properly, such adaptation measures could help to reduce tensions and catalyze processes that promote stability. The ways in which adaptation measures are designed and implemented can therefore be a key determinant of climate change resilience in the region.
 - The climate change and security issues challenges for the Middle East are primarily about adaptation and making development climate-resilient in these countries.
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¹⁷ WBGU (2007). Welt im Wandel: Sicherheitsrisiko Klimawandel. Berlin: Springer, Rüttinger, L., Stang, G., Smith D., Tänzler D. and Vivekananda J. et al. (2015). A New Climate for Peace – Taking Action on Climate and Fragility Risks. Berlin/London/ Washington/Paris: adelphi, International Alert, The Wilson Center, EUISS.