From Rising Heat Comes Rising Tension in Syria: How Global Warming Started a War & Threatens Homeland Security

D'Andre D Lampkin, William & Mary Law School
From Rising Heat Comes Rising Tension in Syria: How Global Warming Started a War & Threatens Homeland Security

D’Andre Lampkin

National University
Abstract

This essay investigates the links of climate change as it relates to civil unrest and terrorism in Syria and the ongoing civil war occurring in the region. The goal is to explore how climate change lead to instability in a region and give rise to the spread of terrorist organizations and suggest solutions to lay the foundation for restoring economic, social, and political stability in the region.
Area of Interest

The area of interest for this essay is the cause-effect-relationships of global warming and the collapse of homeland security in Syria. There is interest in analyzing how global warming lead to the civil war and exploitation of political instability by DAESH (al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham).

Research Questions

What circumstances lead up to pro-democracy protest and civil war in Syria?

Did climate change lead to the rise of civil war and spread of DAESH (al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham) or ISIS in Syria?

Discussion

When we look at the reason a country falls into civil war, we often analyze the relationship between people and its government. In the case of Syria, media reports and political analyst suggest that the civil war in Syria started with pro-democracy protest. Syria’s conflict gained widespread attention in 2012 as journalists began to report that the protests were violently quelled by the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. But recent research suggests the conflict may have started with climate change. Prior to the rise of pro-democracy protest, Syria was already three years into the worst drought in the country’s history. This paper argues that the drought led to desertification and put extreme pressure on Syria’s already strained economy. The instability in Syria eventually lead to political instability and paved the way for DAESH to enter...
the country and exploit the growing problem. Climate change, a condition that cannot be singularly accredited to one country, caused the current conflict in Syria and continues to threaten the security of their homeland.

In 2013, co-founders of Center for Climate Change and Security, Francesco Femia and Caitlin Werrell described the chain of events that preceded the outbreak of revolt that started in Dar’a and has now spread across the entire nation. The researchers explain they first looked at climate changes occurring between 2006 and 2011. During that time, up to 60 percent of Syria’s farmland experienced the most severe drought in modern history.¹

![Figure 1. Satellite photo of Daraa, Daraa Governate, Syria as it appeared by satellite in 2006. Data source: Google Earth Engine time-lapse: https://earthengine.google.com/timelapse/](image)

The drought in Dar’a, however, was not the beginning of Syria’s problems. Meanwhile, as water sources in Dar’a began to dry up in the south of Syria, Bashar al-Asaad’s authoritarian regime switch its focus on wheat production in the northeast region of the country. The

government had already been engaged in overambitious agricultural projects. Femia and Werrell suggest that Bashar al-Assad subsidized water intensive crops like wheat and cotton farming and mismanaged natural water resources. Poor irrigation techniques forced farmers to turn to ground water which came into the country via the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. 1.5 million people within Syria became displaced as they began to migrate into Urban areas. According to World Population Review, populations in Syria’s urban areas nearly doubled:

Population Estimates:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>1.71 million</td>
<td>2.6 million</td>
<td>1.56 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>1.08 million (by 2004 estimates)</td>
<td>3.16 million</td>
<td>1.6 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Satellite photo of Daraa, Daraa Governate, Syria as it appeared by satellite in 2016. Data source: Google Earth Engine time-lapse: https://earthengine.google.com/timelapse/

Figure 3. Comparison of Syria’s most populated urban area. Data shows population in 2011 prior to mass migration after desertification and population during start of pro-democracy revolt.²


The study conducted by Center for Climate Change and Security estimates 75 percent of farmers in Dar’a suffered from total crop failure while farmers in the northeast region lost approximately 80 percent of their livestock.\textsuperscript{4} In another study conducted by The League of Arab States, the Arab Center for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands, it is estimated 2 to 3 million people (9 – 13% of Syrians) were driven into poverty.\textsuperscript{5} Simultaneously, Iraqi’s and Palestinians fleeing from harsh conditions in their country had already began migrating into Syria’s urban centers and therefore, Syrian farmers who sought new lives in the city were attempting to join an economy that was already strained.

These conditions led to settlements being created around the city edges, poor living conditions, increased poverty, growing political unrest, and growing unemployment. By January 2011, conditions had worsened to a point where protesters began to demand democratic reforms and the state of the homeland was threatened. Farmers who refused to leave their hometown of Dar’a had already began protesting and were met with military and police resistance.

The pro-democracy protest, which grew in the cities of Aleppo and Damascus through March 2011, gave rise to an unpresented challenge to the authority of President Bashar al-Assad and the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. Because Syria is an Arab majority country, the period of protest was internationally publicized by social media and mainstream media outlets as being

\textsuperscript{4} NOAA study: Human-caused climate change a major factor in more frequent Mediterranean droughts. (2011, October 27). Retrieved December 12, 2016, from \url{http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories2011/20111027_drought.html}

\textsuperscript{5} Erian, W., Katlan, B., & Babah, O. (2011). Drought Vulnerability in the Arab region: Special case study: Syria, 2010 – 2011. The League of Arab States, the Arab Center for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands - ACSAD.
Global Warming Syria

a part of the Arab Spring or The Democracy Spring. The protest gained worldwide attention as journalist and content creators, using social media like Twitter and Facebook, began to report that Bashar al-Assad’s government was shooting down peaceful demonstrators. In June 2011, protesters acquired their own weapons and began to shoot back. Syrian troops and protest sympathizers began to defect from al-Assad’s army. The situation evolved from a civil uprising to an armed rebellion, and eventually a civil war. A platform for militant opposition was formed and on June 29th, the Free Syrian Army was created.

Shortly after the armed rebellion and formation of the Free Syrian Army, Muslim extremists throughout the region began to enter the conflict. Iran, Syria’s closest ally, began to intervene by sending troops into the region. Lebanese Hezbollah fighters backed by Iran and members of DAESH entered the war; each having their own agenda. Simultaneously, Bashar al-Assad released jihadist prisoners (Amr ‘Abu Atheer’ al-Absi, Hassan Abboud, Zahran Alloush, and Abu Khaled al-Suri) to indirectly quell protesters using extremist tactics. These groups created a new front for the Free Syrian Army. Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states sent weapons and money to counter Iran’s influence. The government of Jordan facilitated the transfer of weapons to rebel forces. And the middle east become a region divided between Sunni national leaders supporting the rebels and Shiite national leaders who support Bashar al-Assad. In April 2013, United States President Barack Obama authorized the Central Intelligence Agency

---


Global Warming Syria

to train and equip Syrian rebels⁹ and made request to the gulf states to stop funding extremist.¹⁰ During the same period, DAESH leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sent rebels into the region and announced control over all joint Al-Qaeda forces in Iraq and Syria and DAESH was formed. By August 2013, reports confirmed Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons against the civilian population and anti-Assad forces.¹¹

Beginning in February 2014, DAESH was fighting Syrian rebels and Syrian Kurdish forces in the north (known as Rojava). By June, D AESH built an army in Syria large enough to occupy a large part of the country. Once known as ISI (Islamic State of Iraq), DAESH changed its name to ISIS or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. In September 2014, the Russian government intervened on behalf of President Bashar al-Assad but Russian forces only bombed anti-Assad forces, not DAESH, while the United States focuses on training rebel groups to fight DAESH. Meanwhile DAESH focused on attacking the Free Syrian Army and establishing a caliphate state within the borders of Syria and Iraq.

Potential Solutions

Today, western leaders participating in Syria’s proxy war agree that the only way to resolve the conflict in Syria is to remove the current president, Bashar al-Assad, from power. Public justification for his removal has been limited to his use of chemical weapons against the civilian population. However, perhaps a more undisputable justification for the removal of al-Assad is a resolution to an underlying problem: poor resource management and economic corruption that crippled the future of the nation’s homeland security. Without desertification, the conflict may not have reached the complexity we see today. Eastern and western powers also play a role. They could admit they played a role in the climate change and continue reconciliation by pushing for a more environmentally-intuitive leader in Syria. Hopefully the admission and humble approach will be the beginning of the region’s recovery.

Resolving the complex multi-level and multi-nation war in Syria will need a different approach. But once new leadership is in place, there could be greater focus on stabilizing the economic conditions of the country. Perhaps one solution is to negotiate a settlement agreement between Turkey and Syria to end the violence and address the basic needs of the Syrian and Turkish people. Create transboundary treaties and agreements for shared water resources between the two countries. Such a resolution could open the doors for negotiations to share water resources, like opening the dams so that the Syrian people can began farming again near the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers.

Syria should also explore diversifying their economy and reducing the significance of their agriculture sector along with passing legislation for stricter enforcement of laws governing water resources. Because of Syria’s position in the Middle East Region, they could negotiate
trade agreements where they provide energy produced by solar resources to neighboring countries. This could re-establish Syria as a key player in ensuring economic stability and energy independence in the region.

**Conclusion**

On November 6, 2016, the United States Secretary of State, John Kerry addressed nation leaders and diplomats at the Conference of the Parties in Marrakech, Morocco. During his address, he noted global climate change has had a negative effect on national security. According to Secretary Kerry, military leaders within the Pentagon called climate change a “threat multiplier”. It exacerbates conflicts all over the world and is viewed as a threat to military readiness at the military bases. The conditions of climate change have significantly altered countries that once possessed sustainable agricultural markets. In the case of Syria, climate change also laid the foundation for terrorist groups like DAESH to expand.

In a September 2016 memorandum published by the United States Office of the Director of National Intelligence titled, ‘Implications for US National Security of Anticipated Climate Change’ the authors illustrate how climate change influenced terrorist activity in Somalia and Mali. Between the years 2011 and 2013, the terrorist group Al-Shabaab exploited the famine in Somalia to coerce and tax international aid agencies. According to Human Rights Watch, food

---

13 Ibid
was also withheld from those deemed to be uncooperative. In 2015, insurgent groups in Mali, like Tuareg-led separatists and the rebel Movement for the National Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), engaged in a “food for jihad” arrangement where they exploited people leaving farmlands and agriculture due to desertification exacerbated by persistent drought. The situation in Somalia and Mali are proof that the potential for climate change to lead to security instability are real and widespread.

Climate change: Increase in the number of hot days, the persistent downpour of rain, and the changing of weather patterns, place additional burdens on already fragile nations. Cost of food, likelihood of political instability, and risk to human health increases. Greater effort should be made by national leaders to reduce green-house gasses and the causes of climate change, not only for the sake of already stricken countries, but for the future of their own homeland security. All countries are vulnerable and therefore they all have an obligation to come up with solutions for their own and their ally’s future.

---


16 Ibid
References


