



Climate - Change - Migration - Conflict. What's the Connection?

Christiane Fröhlich

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Climate change and human migration are often presented as threats to national and international security. But what is the actual link between these phenomena and conflict?

Author's Note: *This commentary presents key arguments from the articles Christiane J. Fröhlich (2016) [Climate migrants as protestors? Dispelling misconceptions about global environmental change in pre-revolutionary Syria, Contemporary Levant, 1:1, 38-50, DOI: 10.1080/20581831.2016.1149355](#) (available online [here](#)), and Michael Brzoska & Christiane Fröhlich (2015): [Climate change, migration and violent conflict: vulnerabilities, pathways and adaptation strategies](#), *Migration and Development*, DOI: [10.1080/21632324.2015.1022973](#) (available online [here](#)).*

Climate Change and Conflict

Today, climate change is often perceived predominantly as a security risk. The most common argument behind this train of thought is that many societies' adaptive capacities will be overstretched by the effects of global warming within the short- to midterm, potentially leading to destabilization and violence, and jeopardizing national and international security in a way that is unprecedented (see [WBGU, 2007](#); [UNSC, 2007](#); [UNGA, 2009](#)). One additional concern is that, should the international community fail to adopt an effective and globally coordinated climate policy, climate change may deepen pre-existing lines of conflict on the local, national, inter- and transnational levels. Another worry are conflicts over natural resources, since reduced availability and changes in the

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distribution of water, food and arable land are considered by some to potentially trigger violent conflicts (Hsiang et al., 2013; Burke et al., 2009). Other hypothesized pathways from climate change to the onset of violent conflict are a deterioration of the governance capacities of formal and informal institutions as well as the increase in horizontal inequality among groups (see Gleditsch, 2012; Scheffran et al., 2012).

Bringing Migration in

Very much the same is true for human mobility: Large migration movements have frequently been presented as a threat to national and international security, particularly when crossing into the United States and Europe (see Huysmans 2000; Ceccirulli & Labanca, 2014; Adamson, 2006; Alexseev, 2006; Waever, Buzan, Kelstrup, & Lemaitre, 1993). The underlying assumption is that in a globalised world, states enjoy growing benefits and opportunities stemming from increasing human mobility, but are also threatened by an unknown and equally growing potential for crime, trafficking, drugs and terrorism within these new migratory flows. Therefore, human mobility is framed as a matter of security, leading to what has become known as the 'migration-security nexus'.

“Climate Migration”

With global warming well under way, climate change-induced migration has come to the forefront of such risk assessments (see Myers 1998; Myers 2005; Myers and Kent 1995; Brown 2008; Barnett 2003, Smith and Vivekananda 2007; Boano 2008; Hummel *et al.* 2012; Warner *et al.* 2013). The underlying assumed causality is that climate change will engender or exacerbate resource scarcities, which in turn might drive migration as well as

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conflict. In its first assessment report, for instance, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) **warned** as early as 1990: 'the gravest effects of climate change may be those on human migration as millions are displaced by shoreline erosion, coastal flooding and severe drought'. This was the basis for predictions of major conflict in receiving regions both within countries suffering from climate change and internationally. In 2008, the European Commission and the EU's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy **released a report** on climate change and international security in which they stressed that as a result of climate change, 'Europe must expect substantially increased migratory pressure'.

But reality is much less linear and simple, and empirical data is scant. The underlying *imaginaire*, which assumes linear causality between global environmental change and conflict via environmentally-induced migration, contains several misconceptions. Firstly, migration decisions are complex and not determined by environmental factors alone. **Scholarship** has identified five main drivers for (internal and international) human mobility, namely economic, political, demographic, social and environmental factors, which are deeply interconnected and mediated through socially, politically and economically determined institutions and structures. Secondly, chain migration and migration networks need to be **taken into account as factors** that guide migration streams in certain directions and not others. Thirdly, there are few systematic studies researching the assumed causality between climate change and migration (Reuveny 2007, 2008; Raleigh, 2010; Raleigh et al., 2010) or between (climate) migration movements and (violent) conflict. In fact, there is very limited evidence for both propositions. Fourthly, it remains disputed how many people will leave their habitat due to climate change: So-called maximalists assume a simple, direct relationship between migration and

climate change and thus project comparatively large numbers of environmental migrants. Estimates reach from some 200 million up to 1 billion refugees globally by 2050 (Jacobson 1988; Myers 1997, 2002; Stern 2006).

Minimalists, on the other hand, underscore the complex nature of migration decisions and stress the respective society's vulnerability and adaptive capacity as a major factor for reducing the expected number of climate migrants (Suhrke 1994; Castles 2002; Morrissey 2009; Gemenne 2011, Morrissey 2012 gives a good overview). Fifthly, migration has been identified as a potentially powerful adaptation mechanism with regard to global warming, a view which is not reflected by the simple causality cited above. In a nutshell, the theoretical foundation and empirical support for propositions of a causal linearity between climate change, human mobility and conflict are thin. This does not mean that climate change will be irrelevant for future patterns of migration, including migration that may be linked to conflict. But the links are complex and defy simple and sensationalist conclusions.

Case Study Syria: A Climate War?

One case in point is Syria. The Syrian Arab Republic, as most of the Middle East and North Africa, has been suffering from long-term environmental changes linked to anthropogenic climate change. In recent years, a particularly long drought period immediately preceding the beginning of the Syrian uprising has negatively impacted what used to be the breadbasket of the Fertile Crescent, with consecutive crop failures in parts of the country, loss of livestock, the demise of whole villages and a distinct increase in internal migration. This has led an increasing number of commentators to believe that this "century drought" was at least partly responsible for the timing and intensity of social upheaval in Syria (Werrell, Femia, and Sternberg 2015; Kelley et al. 2015, as

well as numerous media contributions, for instance in [The Independent](#) and [The New York Times](#). From the [United States government](#) to the [European Union](#), from American to [European think tanks](#), this powerful supposed 'pre-story' of the Syrian revolution is continuously gaining traction and has even been introduced into the overall discussion of the migration flows to Europe by assuming that the timing and magnitude of the current migration flows from the Middle East to Europe was at least partly environmentally motivated.

However, the existing studies of this link, while having received a lot of public attention, do not present authoritative evidence on the issue. On the contrary, they overstress environmental drivers of migration while tuning out other factors that influence migration decisions. [For instance](#), the Syrian state only created around 36,000 new jobs per year between 2001 and 2007, with the agricultural sector losing 69,000 per annum, making (un)employment a very serious issue in the Syrian economy and powerful driver of migration long before the drought began. Modernisation, rapid de-peasantisation and slow replacement of agricultural employment with waged work in industry or services in the formal sector had taken their toll on both rural and urban environments before the drought even began.

Also, macro-economic policies of the Syrian government, which had for decades regulated agricultural crops, worked as economic push factor, too. The state-led system which had been imposed on the agricultural sector in the mid-20th century was characterised by subsidies for farm inputs and fuels, especially for strategic crops such as wheat, cotton and barley. These state-led structures introduced strong dependencies into the agricultural sector that became liabilities when Bashar al-Assad started to deregulate the Syrian economy into what the 10th five-year-plan calls "[an open competitive](#)

economy". Parallel to his reforms, an economy that had been based on rents from the oil sector started to give way to demographic pressures, a decrease in oil-production, depleting oil reserves and economic stagnation.

Socio-political drivers for migration also played a role in pre-revolutionary Syria. The rule of law was ambivalent, state institutions were characterized by manipulation and poor performance, the business environment was extremely fragile, corruption abounded, and Syrian citizens had little to no avenue to participate in political decision-making processes. Power and wealth were being distributed along highly informal but extremely resilient patronage networks. But the decade-old strategy of repressing those who advocated *taghyir* (change), while at the same time attempting to bind those advocating *islah* (reform) in patronage networks, began to crumble.

Finally, the assumed causality between climate change induced migration and social unrest is based on the idea that the migrants were the driving force behind the Syrian uprising. However, orchestrating popular protest requires social networks built on trust and at least some kind of organizational structure (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; Tarrow 1998; Diani and McAdam 2003; Chesters and Welsh 2011). There is no evidence that new migrants, who were often living below the poverty line, could initiate large-scale, long-lasting popular uprisings, especially in repressive autocratic regimes like Syria.

Photo by Martine Perret/UNMIT via [Flickr](#).

Christiane Fröhlich is Mercator-IPC-Fellow at the Istanbul Policy Center of Sabanci University and Research Fellow at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at Hamburg University. Her research focuses on reasons for migration, with a particular focus on environmental drivers. She has done

extensive ethnographic field research on the impact of a prolonged and climate change-related drought period in Syria which immediately preceded the Syrian war. Moreover, she inquires into the role of the Global North for current migration movements from the Global South from a Postcolonial Perspective. In the past, she has worked extensively on water conflicts on the international, national and local levels, as well as on the Israeli-Palestinian core conflict and its role for Middle Eastern geopolitics. She holds a PhD from the Center for Conflict Studies at Marburg University, and a Master in Peace Research and Security Policy from Hamburg University. More information is available at www.christianefroehlich.de

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