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Climate Change: the Multiplier of Political Conflict

Climate change, the long-term increase in global temperatures, is an adversary of societal growth and a multiplier of political conflicts. What seems like an unlikely link between two complex phenomena, global warming and societal strife, has been explored thoroughly by both scientists and political scholars alike. When comparing several quantitative analyses, there seems to be no clear answer, a ‘cacophony of different findings’ as expert Idean Salehyan puts it. Despite studies resulting in ambiguity, a clear trend emerges from the statistical literature: climate change disproportionately affects developing nations. Regions where there are high levels of ethnic fractionalization and resource scarcity, particularly in Central Asia and Africa, are more susceptible to experience an increase in conflict in response to climatic shock. Unsurprisingly, nations that have higher percentages of “fragility”, according to the Fragile States Index, are nations that are most impacted by global temperature increases. Climate change induced disasters such as drought, hurricanes, desertification, and rising sea levels can instigate mass migrations out of affected areas. Many predict that even the slightest increase in temperatures could result in insufficient agricultural production, again, exacerbating the struggle for resources and ultimately forcing people to relocate to more fertile grounds. In any case, such large movements of people puts strain on receiving communities’ abilities to provide basic needs.

An 18 month long study of Sudan conducted by the UN Environment Programme concluded that a 30% decrease in rainfall over 40 years was likely the cause of rising hostility between herders and farmers in Darfur, a region that was heavily afflicted in 2003 by a civil war. While the immediate causes of the Darfur conflict were linked to a regional rebellion that eventually lead to an ethnic cleansing of anywhere from 200,000 to 500,000 people, the underlying issue, however, has been found to be associated with a sharp decline in precipitation levels and the expedited growth of the Sahara. The armed conflict in Darfur, in turn, has played its own role in environmental degradation by leading to the drainage of underground aquifers and the destruction of forests; in conjunction with other political, economic, and social issues, the disappearance of safe, habitable space has forced more than 2 million Sudanese to seek refuge in neighboring countries. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident.

The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011 as an immediate reaction to regime change, can find its roots traced to years of economic instability due to climate variability and drought. Historically, the Mesopotamian area has been plagued with centuries of water insecurity and terrorism linked to competition over access to water infrastructure. The first recorded instance of using water as a weapon occurred nearly 4500 years ago when Urlama, king of Lagash in ancient Mesopotamia, cut off irrigation to the neighboring nation of Umma, bereaving them of water. More recent times, too, have seen surmounting political pressures linked to water scarcity. Syria is one of the driest regions in the world, receiving on average less than 250 mm of water annually; within the period of just over a century (1900 to 2011), the country has faced seven

significant droughts - the last of which is largely associated with the recent Syrian migrant crisis. Beginning in 2006 and lasting into 2011, the protracted period of drought has led to crop failures, rural abandonment, and economic disarray.

Many argue that it was these climatic developments in tandem with governmental mismanagements that led to the extreme social unrest prior to the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. The UN estimates that between 2 to 3 million inhabitants have been affected by this Syrian agricultural depression, with approximately 1 million of these people becoming food insecure. 1.5 million of mostly farmers and families have left rural regions in favor for the larger cities of Aleppo, Damascus, Dara'a, Deir ez-Zour, Hama, and Homs - increasing competition for resources and jobs. While the Bashar al-Assad has in the past prioritized the heavy subsidization of water intensive crops, the regime's most recent failures to implement economic measures in accompanying the major influx of people into urban areas is, many people believe, what fostered dissent towards the Syrian government. As the crisis evolves, both sides have realized that cutting access to water and taking hold of prominent water infrastructure have strategic value. In 2012, for instance, the major pipeline carrying water into Aleppo was ruptured by anti-Assad forces, leaving 3 million civilians without access to a steady water source and leaving them exposed to violence from both ISIL groups and the Assad Regime. It was this that forced people to flee the country.

The link between climate change and political conflicts is one that has been explored for decades, and most scholars come to the conclusion that "climate change could have significant geopolitical impacts around the world, contributing to poverty,

environmental degradation, and the further weakening of fragile governments" (U.S. Department of Defense 2010). Given the current acceleration in climate change rates, prospects are not promising for political equilibrium in many regions, specifically those in the Middle East and in North Africa. To find a solution, however, it is important to analyze not only the climatic contexts in which conflicts are birthed but also the various socio-political and economic factors, as the causes of violent conflicts are almost always multi-faceted. Approaches to this increasingly critical issue rely on the cooperation of national governments to both combat the adverse effects of climate change and to implement sustainable economic resolutions in order to help assimilate displaced peoples into local economies. In Syria, it is crucial to depart from the prominent yet inefficient system of flood irrigation; instead, given a moment of political stability, the country should immediately implement agricultural reform and modernize water production to increase crop yield and reduce waste. Revamping and refocusing efforts to ensure all populations are receiving basic necessities is not only key to stymying resource competition but also in providing an avenue to introduce agricultural engineering markets, allowing relief from the job shortage. International agreements, too, must make conscious efforts to abandon short-term rigid resolutions in favor of explicative policies that provide possible solutions in the event of climatic volatility.