

The Impact of Climate Change on the Syrian Refugee Crisis

Manuela Figueiredo

Temple of Understanding

Since the breakout of the Syrian Civil War in March of 2011, the country has been in a situation of turmoil that has impacted not only its own communities but hundreds of other societies as well. This crisis, which has led to nearly 11 million Syrian refugees around the globe, was brought on by several factors: a brutal and out of touch regime, economic stress,

population growth, and most importantly, environmental and climate stress. Climate change was a driving factor in the 2006-2011 Syrian drought, which eventually led to social upheaval and the large scale displacement of people.

Climate change can be seen as the root problem in the analysis of the Syrian Civil war and the current refugee crisis. Climate change is viewed as a long term change in Earth's overall temperature resulting in massive and permanent ramifications, exemplified in the 1 degree C increase of temperature since 1880. These warmer temperatures have not only caused ocean levels to rise but they have also caused increased aridity in the eastern Mediterranean. Changes in temperature have been induced by human activity because increased consumption of natural resources by humans results in an increased release of greenhouse gases.

In 1992, the Kyoto Protocol was created by the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) to respond to manmade climate change. This document not only addressed ways to reduce greenhouse emissions based on the ideas that both global warming exists and that manmade CO₂ emissions have caused it, but it also promoted sustainable forms of agriculture. These suggestions were to be implemented to minimize the effects of climate change in developing countries; however, progress was minimal without a set framework. Last year, world leaders met at COP21 and agreed on the Paris Climate Change Agreement. This document emphasized the relationship of climate change actions, responses, and impacts rather than just the solutions, which was a tremendous step forward for the global community. Not only did it stress the importance of interconnectedness, but it touched on the need for effective and progressive responses for climate change that take into account the several crises occurring in our world.

Although climate change is causing sea levels to rise, it is also unfortunately causing a decrease in the supply of freshwater available. Oceans contain 96% of the Earth's water, but unfortunately it contains saline, so it is undrinkable. Of the 4% of freshwater, 70% is used for agriculture, 20% for industry, and 10% for domestic purposes such as drinking or bathing. Unfortunately, around 500 million people around the world have scarce access to water because of the uneven distribution of precipitation. With this in mind, water is a necessary part of human life and has no substitute, yet it is still extremely underappreciated. In Middle Eastern countries where governments are already unstable, water disputes can lead to conflict and social, economic, and ecological instability.

Jan Eliasson, the Deputy Secretary General of the United Nations, has commented several times on the importance of water and how it can lead to conflict in several areas. He commented that water holds the key to sparing suffering and averting death, therefore, degraded access to water fuels social instability (Eliasson, n.pag.). He believes that rapid urbanization has put pressure on water use and infrastructure. Although the Millennium Development Goals made progress, they left the most vulnerable people behind, so the focus of the Sustainable Development Goals for the 2030 Agenda is to “leave no one behind.” The world needs to fully understand the interconnectedness of water, peace, and stability. Access to clean freshwater is both expensive for the poor and marginalized and the primary risk for developing countries.

With an environment that has been severely affected by climate change and a lack of water, Syria is a global example of how water can lead to conflict. In 1916, Egyptologist James Henry Breasted coined the term Fertile Crescent used to describe the area of Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Syria, Northern Egypt, and the Persian Gulf. Several scholars identify this as the “birthplace of civilization, urbanization, trade, writing, science, history, and organized religion,” and it is known for its unusually fertile soil. Unfortunately, as the Earth’s temperature increased, the Fertile Crescent became cracked and dry. Not only is this land extremely un-fertile but Northern Syria borders the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers which leads to constant conflict with Iraq over water rights.

Not only is the Syrian geography a source of conflict with other Middle Eastern nation, but its diverse ethnic and religious background is a source of tension between the people and the current government regime. Ever since President Bashar al-Assad’s election in 2000, the country has been in turmoil. Although the president attempted to establish a period of openness of political reform, this change alarmed the people of Syria and therefore led to more violent Arab Spring protests in 2011. This long standing Assad regime has been a source of conflict for many decades now. In the 1970’s, president Hafez al-Assad attempted to achieve agricultural self-sufficiency but did not take into consideration the amount of rainfall and groundwater needed to raise these crops. When water supply dwindled and farmers sought to drill into the ground to get more water, the government did not allow it. This led to the people’s severe resentment of the Syrian government.

This increased lack of freshwater resources lead to the drought experienced from 2006-2011. It is said that human interference with the climate increased the likelihood of a drought in

Syria and 75% of Syrians in the North experienced crop failure (Fountain, n.pag.). Over 800,000 Syrians moved to cities because of these droughts and food insecurity was also increasing. By 2011, more than 1 million Syrians were food insecure, which led to social upheaval. Along with the drought, the Syrian economy became less self-sufficient because oil reserves decreased. A country that once was a large exporter of goods began to import many items due to the decrease in foreign investments. “These social, economic, and environmental changes in Syria eroded the social contract between the citizens and the government.” (Friedman, n.pag.).

At around the same time, the Syrian Civil War broke out and coupled with the lack of water and growing food insecurity, especially in the north, people began to migrate. “The rapidly growing urban peripheries of Syria, marked by illegal settlements, overcrowding, poor infrastructure, unemployment and crime, were neglected by the Assad government and became the heart of the developing unrest.” (Wendle, n.pag.). Farmers in the north were migrating because of climate change; however, they were also pressured by the rebels and Syrian army. The government’s oppressive regime was also leading to the large scale displacement and migration of people.

Although there are many Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Syria, a large amount of Syrians are refugees in neighboring countries. As Syria is bordering four other countries in the Middle East, it is easier for refugees to travel to those countries by land rather than to travel to Europe by sea; however, these countries are struggling to provide adequate resources to these Syrian refugees. Jordan, in particular, has been faced with a tremendous growth in population. There are approximately 1.2 million Syrian refugees in Jordan, which composes 20% of the Jordanian population. The majority of these refugees are lower middle class, uneducated families who are stretching the already limited resources that Jordan is able to provide them. Refugees spend about 17 years away from their homes, so ‘host’ countries such as Jordan need to accommodate their needs. Jordanian schools have started to work double-shifts, more police has been recruited, and more hospitals have been built; however, it is still difficult to sustain such a large amount of refugees. In Amman, Jordan, over 600,000 refugees are living in tented camps with little to no supply of food, medicine, and clean water (Sweis, n.pag.). Jordan has not only been suffering from a lack of resources, but an increase in unemployment because Syrian refugees are willing to work for less money.

Developing countries like Jordan should not be held accountable for hosting so many refugees with such little supplies, so organizations such as the IOM (International Organization for Migration) work to improve these conditions. Some of their goals include supporting community stabilization and infrastructure, providing migrants with equitable services, and reducing the amount of irregular migrants. These goals can only be accomplished with the cooperation of all member states, which is what the Global Forum on Migration and Development seeks to achieve. This platform works to bring all member states together and discuss issues of global migration. They emphasize that migration should be viewed in a positive light where ideas, culture, and skills all can contribute to the eradication of poverty and economic growth. The Forum's ideal of creating a comprehensive framework with an emphasis on regional dialogue is imperative to resolving this pressing issue.

Although the Syrian Conflict cannot be resolved today and climate change is far from being resolved, there are several actions that civil society and governing bodies can take to prevent such crises from occurring again. Middle Eastern countries should begin to practice more sustainable forms of agriculture such as drip irrigation rather than flooding fields (Siegel, n.pag.). The United States, and other democratic, developed countries should foster democratic movements, peace, stability, and security. Investments should also be made in climate-adaptive infrastructure and improvements in water management. The 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals are a crucial part of the United Nations current framework, and in eradicating these ecological and political crises, the goals can be achieved. Each goal is so interconnected that there is no way to achieve clean water and sanitation without climate action and vice versa. Peace, justice, and strong institutions will not be achieved without environmental stability. All of the goals need to be fulfilled with a cohesive and cooperative framework that addresses crises such as the Syrian Civil War and the current refugee crisis.

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