

# The Syrian war, the refugee crisis and the role of the environment

## Who is we?

Dr. Ingrid Boas: I am Assistant Professor at the Environmental Policy Group at Wageningen University. I have been working on climate migration since 2007. Between 2007-2009, together with Prof. Frank Biermann, I developed a proposal for a new Protocol under the UN Framework Convention of Climate Change to protect people displaced by climate change. This is needed, as currently people displaced by climate change face a lack of protection. Our work has informed international policy discussions and the work of NGOs. After that, I conducted my PhD on the subject, focused on a discursive analysis of how and why and with what consequences the topic got increasingly seen as a security threat.

Since 2013 I work at the Environmental Policy Group at Wageningen University as Assistant Professor. Here I do research and teach on the subject of climate governance, climate resilience, and climate migration. In 2016 I have been awarded a VENI research grant for 4 years on the subject of environmentally-related migration in the digital age, which for which I am currently doing research in Bangladesh and Kenya. In addition to doing research, I have also several times advised the United Nations, international NGOs and the EU on the governance of climate migration with a focus on how to design protection mechanisms.

The Environmental Policy Group is a social science research group in Wageningen University and we study issues around environmental policy, focused on the themes of Marine, Food, Urban, Climate and Mobilities. For more information, please see [www.enp.wur.nl](http://www.enp.wur.nl)

Jelmer Mommers: I'm the climate and energy reporter for The Correspondent. We're a Dutch journalism platform that focuses on background, analysis, and investigative reporting. We are entirely ad-free and self-sustainable thanks to over 50.000 paying members. According to The Guardian, our 'way of approaching the news business is almost the purest expression of a humane kind of journalism'. Please see <https://thecorrespondent.com/> to find out more about us.

The best introduction on my work is this collection of stories:

<https://thecorrespondent.com/10180/climate-change-101-our-future-on-a-warming-planet/1121927620-88ea965d> or this TEDx-talk <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtu9GHhiK0o>

## The case:

Ever since the Syrian conflict has led to large flows of refugees seeking protection in Europe, people have been asking whether this has something to do with climate change; a question that has eagerly been picked up by the media. Even Prince Charles has argued in an interview with Sky News that global warming has been one of the key factors leading up to the Syrian conflict and that a failure to tackle climate change will spark similar problems in future (see: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/nov/23/prince-charles-climate-change-may-have-helped-cause-syrian-civil-war>)

This debate about Syria and climate change started with the publication of an article by Colin Kelley and his colleagues in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in March 2015, entitled “Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian Drought”. The key argument is that in the years prior to the outbreak of the protests in Syria there has been a severe drought causing agricultural insecurity. According to Kelley et al, this drought has led to mass migration of 1.5 million people from rural areas to urban centers. These problems were magnified because of a lack of governmental aid. For instance, president al-Assad had cut fuel subsidies on which many farmers depended. Well, the story then continues to emphasize that this drought-induced migration led to overcrowded and overburdened city centers, thus adding to the unrest that eventually led to protests and the war. See this link for the full article:

<http://www.pnas.org/content/112/11/3241.abstract>

This publication has led to a big debate within academia as to whether or not the thesis is correct. Jan Selby and colleagues have recently published an article in Political Geography completely refuting the climate-migration-conflict thesis in Syria. Please open this link (you will also receive a PDF)

<http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/69311/1/Climate%20Change%20and%20the%20Syrian%20Civil%20War%20Revisited.%20Accepted%20version.pdf> (you will also receive the PDF). Please also see:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/29/climate-change-syria-civil-war-prince-charles>

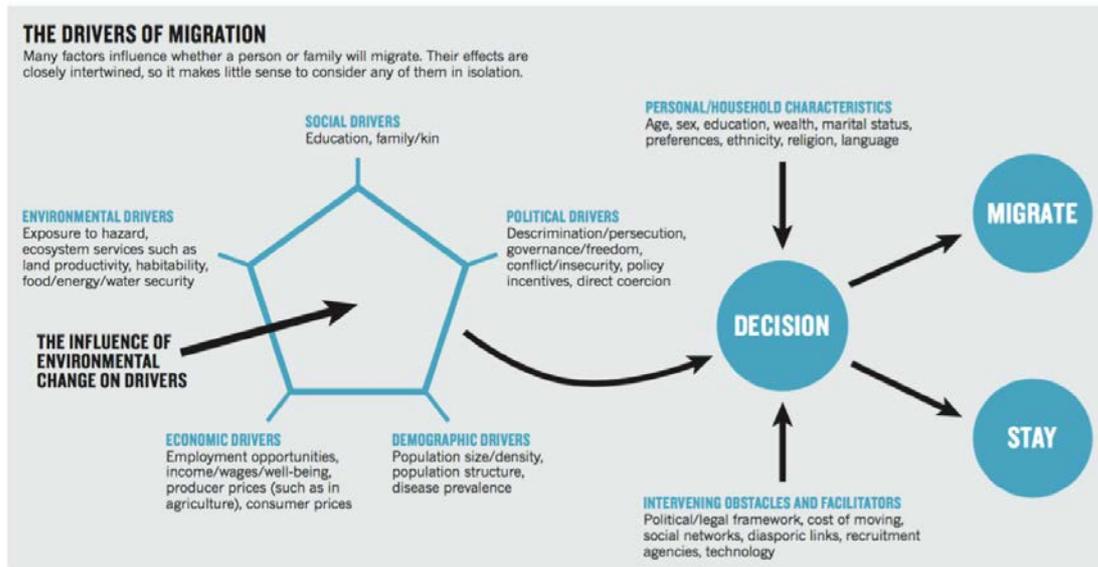
Please also check out this video summarizing and reflecting on this academic dispute, from Alex Randall of the climate and migration coalition:

<http://climatemigration.org.uk/climate-conflict-syria/>

**What you should do:** Given this uncertainty of the role that the environment has played, it is of interest to further delve into what happened. You will do so through in-depth interviews with Syrian refugees residing in the Netherlands. The aim is to gather their stories and experiences of what happened in Syria and of why they left, and by doing so identify the key drivers of their migration.

You can use this migration driver’s model as a basis, by Back et al 2011:

## COMMENT



You can find details about this model in the following two readings by Richard Black et al, which you should read carefully as preparation in addition to the links provided in the above texts:

<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v478/n7370/full/478477a.html?foxtrotcallback=true>

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959378011001531>

(We will also be provided with the PDFs of these two readings)

### Interview preparation:

- 1) Try to create an open atmosphere in which the interviewee feels at ease to share his or her story. Be aware that they faced a great tragedy, so they may be uncomfortable in sharing certain details. Treat your interviewee with the greatest respect and dignity.
- 2) Do not ask directly about environmental drivers, as that may lead to a biased result. Instead, ask openly about what they have experienced in Syria, where they lived and moved from, and why. From that you can distill what drivers played a role in their situation (political, economic, environment, social, demographic) and can get in further details about these drivers and their relations through follow-up questions.
- 3) Do not use scientific terms (such as drivers) during the interview, but ask questions in a normal and understandable manner.
- 4) Try to make your questions as specific as possible. So do not ask about climate change generally, but about drought, or problems with their farmlands, etc, and how this became worse over time and for what reasons (environmental/ economic/ political, etc).

- 5) Try to do at least 50 in-depth interviews, with both men and women, possibly coming from different areas in Syria, including rural and urban residents.
- 6) It is important to separate drivers for internal and international migration; as whilst so far there is evidence that environmental and climate change can be one of the drivers of internal migration, or of migration to a neighboring country, there is little evidence suggesting that environmental change drives long-distance migration to another continent. In case of long-distance migration (such as the refugees going to Europe) usually other drivers (e.g., political conflict) have a larger role to play. So in your analysis, it is useful to separately examine the internal migration in Syria, and the actual flight to Europe.

Your results will inform our research on the subject of environmental change and human mobility (which includes immobility, temporary displacement and long-term migration).

**Ingrid Boas:** I do research on this in different parts of the world, currently Bangladesh around cyclones and river erosion. Although it is often clear that the environment has some role, it often remains very vague what role it exactly plays and how important or minor it has been, and how it is related to other drivers. Once these relations become clearer, policies and assistance can also become more effective.

I also occasionally provide policy advice on this subject to the UN, NGOs and the EU. Your results may also inform that.

**Jelmer Mommers:** I write about the current and expected effects of climate change, which I consider to be a kind of 'slow violence' against people, places and species. Understanding the way in which droughts, extreme weather events and the like play into human migration, is very important to my future pieces. I look forward to report on your findings.