



CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION AND ME

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

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INTRODUCTION

The Syrian conflict and unrest led to large flows of refugees seeking protection in Europe and countries surrounding Syria. The civil war was the result of numerous interrelated and complex factors such as socio-political uncertainty, religious tensions, reform movements, economic policies among others (Gleick 2014). Climate change, particularly years of drought preceding the war along with water conflicts and its linkages with the Syrian crisis was an issue that gained prominence soon after the unrest broke out. Whether there was a linkage is a separate question, but this was eagerly picked up and popularized by the media, while very few and substantial empirical findings were available to support the argument. Famously, Prince Charles argued in an interview with Sky News that global warming was one of the key factors leading up to the Syrian conflict and that a failure to tackle climate change would spark similar problems in future. Among researchers, Colin Kelley and his colleagues in their work "Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian Drought" linked agricultural insecurity due to droughts causing rural to urban mass migration (1.5 million) prior to the war as a cause for the outbreak of protests in Syria (Kelley et al. 2015). Gleick's work in 2014 was in line with Kelley's argument who saw water shortages, ineffective watershed management, and the impacts of climate variability and change on regional hydrology as direct and indirect factors causing the Syrian civil war. These numbers and direct consequences could be alarmist as later critiqued systematically by Jan Selby and colleagues who refuted the climate-migration thesis leading to the onset of the Syrian war (Selby et al. 2017). Limited research and narrow findings on this critical issue makes the need for climate-migration-conflict research very relevant.

CASE

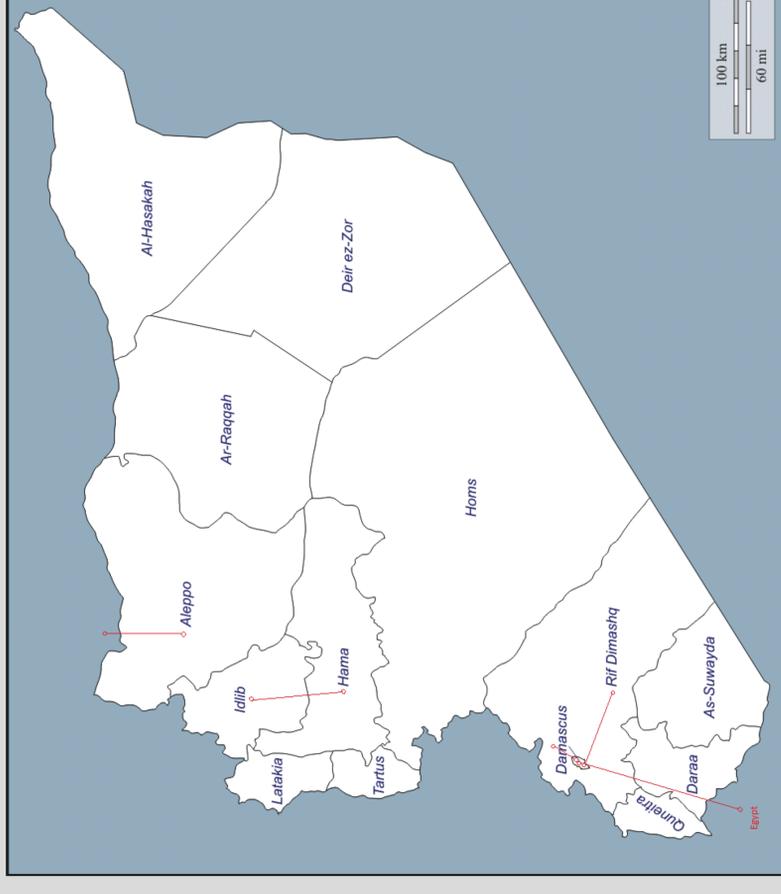
Given this uncertainty of the role that the environment has played, this research has been conducted to further delve into:

- i. If there were connections between climate change and migration in Syria that contributed to the culmination of the war,
- ii. Whether water, its availability and access caused migration within Syria and;
- iii. The perceptions of Syrian refugees living in Netherlands, associating it with the literature available.

This brief research has been undertaken over a period of 4 weeks using in-depth interviews with Syrian refugees, video documentation with research experts and literature review. With the objective to gather the Syrian stories and experiences of what happened in Syria and why they left, the research aims to identify the key drivers of refugee migration and whether climate had any role to play in this movement.

RESULTS

- The findings suggest the fleeing from Syria to Europe is primarily due to the war and political unrest in the country along with other reasons which are complex in nature. Climate change has not directly caused this movement internationally but has aided in the movement internally in Syria, especially from rural to urban areas. It is a contributing factor, but to what degree remains unknown.
- Migration from rural to urban areas prior to the war has been confirmed in the interviews (various reasons including water stress and climate factors) conducted with the Syrian refugees and literature alike. During/post the war the migration movement increasingly was away from urban areas as people fled towards rural regions which were seen as safer and less targeted during the civil unrest.
- Water conflicts were prevalent among communities before the war as farmers struggled during droughts (2006 drought among others). This water stress contributed to the rising food prices (related to rise in fuel prices) and access to clean water. Those with more wealth, power and political networks could access water and at times controlled its usage. People had to buy water and it became a political entity. Here, a link can be established between water-internal conflict-stress-(could contribute in the decision to migrate).
- Water scarcity and old irrigation facilities put stress on wells and springs that were overused causing depletion of groundwater. Owning a well or access to one seems to be an important aspect in understanding the dynamics of water and migration.
- The subsidies provided to farmers had faced a cutback from the Syrian government along with limited aid being supplied to the people. The food prices had seen a significant increase during the Syrian crisis, which bears some connection with the rise in fuel prices. There remains a lack of clarity whether the rising food prices had a direct or indirect connection with the droughts and should be looked into further. Certain respondents did make this linkage, but this would be a small sample size to make a generalization.
- Flow of people from rural to urban areas, population growth, urbanization and economic opportunities in the cities led to an increase in water demand in the cities or urban spaces while the resources were inadequate.
- An increase in internal migration and ties with droughts in the rural areas could be established through some of the interviews and backed by relevant secondary literature (Kelly et al. 2015, Selby et al. 2017). Additionally, lack of socio-economic opportunities led to internal migration (rural to urban). The scale of this migration should be used cautiously. Although we are making this connection, it would be naive and difficult to predict what the magnitude of this movement has been within Syria.
- Migration occurs due to multiple causes: Climate change and ineffective policies, both had a role to play in the movement of people internally. This could be an indirect role but the complex nature of flow of people makes it almost impossible to confirm this.
- Climate change and the connection with international migration or movement to Europe (refugee movement) was insufficient. Our results did not show this exaggerated view as proclaimed by many media outlets and certain alarmists. On the other hand, droughts caused economic losses forcing some people to move internally along with other factors. There could be a deeper linkage between droughts, local water conflicts and migration which requires further transdisciplinary enquiry.



CONCLUSION

- Migration will increase - due to demography, economic disparities, climate change, conflict and poor governance
- Migration has become more complex – blurred distinction between legal-illegal and forced-voluntary
- Migration is more temporary and circular than before
- Migration is increasingly an urban phenomenon
- More stakeholders involved in discussing migration at various forums
- But also: Increased negative public mood towards migration

Gleick, P. H. (2014). Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria. *Weather, Climate and Society*. American Meteorological Society, Volume 6, pp. 331-340. DOI: 10.1175/WCAS-D-13-00059.1

Kelley, Colin, et al. (2015). Climate change in the fertile crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 112 (11), 3241-3246

Selby, J. et al. (2015). Climate change and the Syrian civil war revisited. *Political Geography* 60, pp. 232-244. Elsevier Ltd. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.05.007>