

Is climate change a key factor in the Syrian Civil War?



Word count: 1967 (including citations)
SCN.

In 2006 Syria became host to its worst drought on record (Figure 1) which continued till 2010. This caused a significant decrease in the density of vegetation (Figure 2) which increased food prices and resulted in a mass migration of rural families to the cities.¹ Syria also received 1.5 million refugees from the conflict in Iraq. These factors helped intensify the civil unrest which sparked the 2011 uprising and lead to the Syrian Civil War.² The ongoing war has claimed over 210,000 casualties with nearly half being civilians. Within Syria over 7.6 million people are internally displaced and around 4 million refugees³ in neighboring countries with Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan taking the majority. The growing refugee population in these countries have put huge strain on the respective governments especially on public services.

Many high profile figures such as Barack Obama and Prince Charles have backed claims that enhanced global warming played a key role in sparking the conflict.⁴ But some believe that this information is fueled by politics and that initial evidence was dramatized.⁵ Scientists have taken both sides to this debate, while all agree that global warming has an effect on conflict many argue to what degree.

Figure 1. Seasonal Percent of Normal Rainfall Comparison

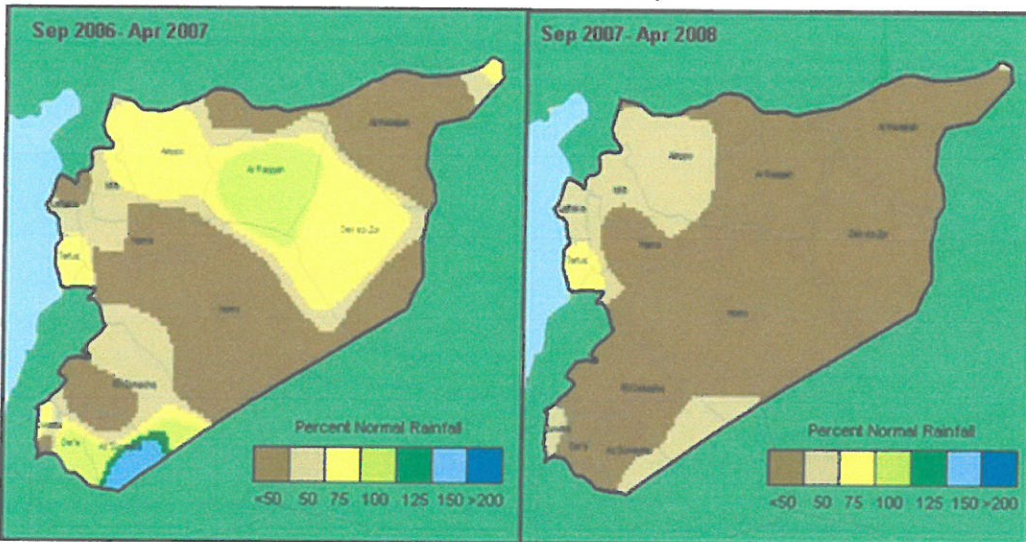
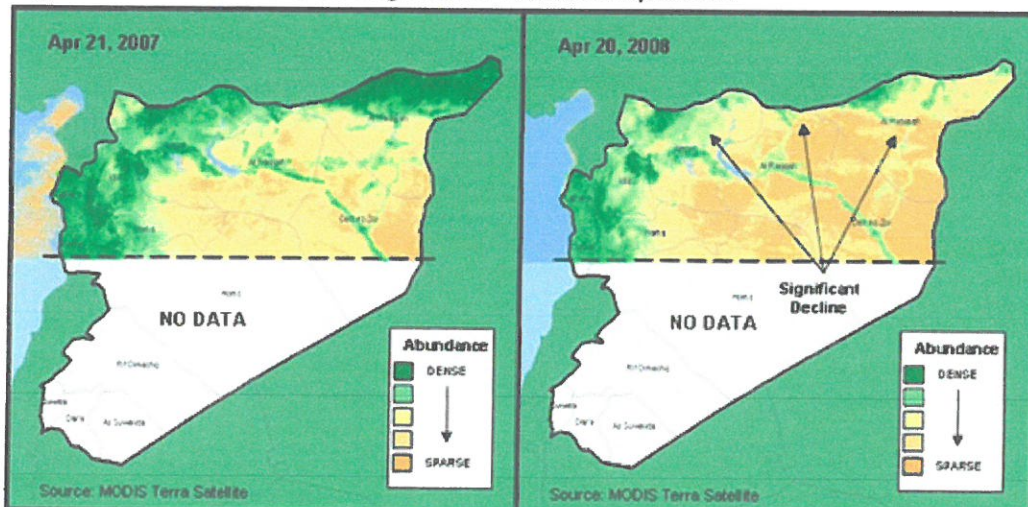


Figure 2. Satellite-Derived Vegetation Index Comparison¹



Source 1 – **The Guardian** – *Jan Selby & Mike Hulme* – Is climate change really to blame for Syria's civil war?

Source 1 is from British national newspaper The Guardian which is co-authored by Jan Selby (Professor of International Relations at the University of Sussex)⁹ and Mike Hulme (Professor of Climate & Culture at King's College London).¹⁰

The professors state that recent evidence of climate change playing a key role in the Syrian conflict may not be accurate. Key figures such as the US President have claimed a relationship between global warming and the civil war to be true, however after analysis the authors counterclaim that the evidence is politically biased and suggest that exaggerated military reports were used to sway public opinion in favor of intervention. This argument is backed up by a National Geographic article stating the U.S. military have “*argued for years*” but have been “*proved controversial*”.¹² While they admitted some scientific studies show global warming does have an effect on conflicts, they argue that there are just as many that contradict the claim. The authors then exemplify the conflict in Sudan, stating similar claims about climate change were false and dismissed by the majority of experts. They reference a study by Columbia University only to discredit its findings. The article ends with them stating the vague evidence is only used to biased arguments and that public figures shouldn't associate themselves with the findings. The article also includes a video clip from Question Time showing activist Charlotte Church with the title “*Charlotte Church blames climate change for Syrian War*” which may be a misleading heading as she says in the video that it is a contributing factor.

The article is shown to be robust and credible due to the authors being professors in subjects relevant to the text. Their extended use of references to reliable sources show a wealth of further reading. They point out that “*there is good reason to doubt the veracity of these claims*” and after analysing the evidence “*most of the public and policy discourse on the conflict implications of climate change is driven by politics, not science*”. This shows that neither professor are convinced that climate change played a key role in the conflict whilst including an alternative reason. They also claim that the “*earliest reports on the subject were not scientific studies but military-led attempts to dramatise the importance of climate change by linking it to security interests*”. This controversial viewpoint is backed up by reliable evidence from a geopolitical study on Rethinking Climate Change, Conflict and Security.⁷

They make a compelling argument when disputing opposing statistics by using powerful word choice such as “*almost certainly wrong*” and “*completely out of line*” as well as being backed up

with robust statistics from the Syrian government and the UN among others. After stating *“some scientific studies do find that climate change has conflict and security implications”* they include a study by scientists at Columbia University but only to discredit it using powerful language *“The problem is the study is deeply flawed.”* before pointing out every issue. The reliability of the sources used is then attacked in the study, stating that *“The basis for their claims is twofold: testimony from a single Syrian farmer”* showing the unrepresentative nature of the evidence. The strong conclusion is delivered by the professors use of persuasive language *“relying on dubious evidence”* to *“achieve sensational headlines”*.

Source 2 – **Reuters** – **Jack Goldstone** – Syria, Yemen, Libya – one factor unites these failed states, and it isn't religion

The second source is from international news agency Reuters written by Jack Goldstone a political scientist and expert on revolutions at the Woodrow Wilson Center⁸ and George Mason University while also being a global fellow at PS21.

In the opinion piece the author states the Arab Spring was not the only influence in the Syrian uprising and that the thriving country was paralyzed by severe drought for several years. Poor resource management led to crop failure and rural families traveled to the cities for employment.¹³ Combined with refugees from neighboring conflicts draining services, it helped spark the uprising. He admits that climate change isn't the most significant cause of destabilisation, but without a strong, varied economy with a democratic government it can strain resources forcing lifestyle change. He then states that if natural disasters are not fully addressed by governments it weakens the countries leaving them vulnerable to exploit by militants such as ISIL. The writer concludes the article saying militants grow powerful in failed countries and if we do not fully address globally warming the geopolitical implications could be much worse than the rise in temperature itself.

Goldstone gives no references to back up his claims which weakens his arguments. Despite this, he presents a factual viewpoint that produces a convincing case. He creates a more balanced argument by stating some neutral and opposing views such as *“climate change is never the single most important cause of conflict”*. This is reinforced by an article in The Courier, it states *“...it is only one factor in amongst many, and I think it's important to keep a perspective around that.”*¹⁵ This balanced argument is weakened by a lack of statistical evidence. He uses powerful phrases to add impact to his views *“Terrorism thrives among weak and failed states”* which creates a more convincing opinion. His final line *“If we fail to prevent continued global warming, the rise in political temperature may far outstrip the warming of the weather outside”* combines the two

issues to observe the relationship between climate change and politics. It suggests how important the stability of countries will be in the future, possibly an even greater issue than global warming.

Source 3 – **Fox News** – *Cal Thomas* – Mr. Obama, climate change didn't create ISIS, Boko Haram -

Source 3 is from conservative American news company Fox News. It is written by political columnist Cal Thomas.

In his opinion column Thomas attacks Barack Obama over a speech he made on the link between climate change and the civil war. The President stated that while global warming wasn't the only factor, the destabilisation it caused allowed Syria to be exploited. The columnist counters by saying climate change is not to blame for civil unrest and terrorism in the Middle-East. In a New York Times article a director of a research group argues that "There's no question that the drought had a role to play in the displacement of people"¹⁴ If the displacement helped spark the violence, this weakens the reporter's argument. He argues that even if droughts made civilians jobless that didn't spark the violence. If that were the case the unemployed of America would do the same. He instead asks Obama to explain why before global warming was a problem is there a history of religious extremist violence. He then backs up his claims with an array of scientific studies before exemplifying California's droughts stating rainfall levels have recovered from the most recent one. He argues that even with decades of multiyear droughts the state has prospered with a double in population without help of additional reservoirs. The author ends the article stating that the majority of Americas have a hard time recognising climate change as a threat and Islamic extremism is a much more pressing issue.

At first the journalist appears to lack evidence for his strong opinions on climate change such as "*If unemployment causes terrorism, millions of jobless Americans would be taking up arms*". He uses emotive language to convey atrocities committed in these countries "*Are young girls and women being raped and forced into slavery*" which convinces readers that as climate change didn't directly cause this, it therefore isn't a threat we should worry about. Thomas also uses rhetorical questions to invite the audience to agree with his statements "*Really?...religious fanatics can't grow crops on arid land?...Which is it?*" the repeated use of this persuasive device emphasises his previous statements and engages the reader to become active in the article. His word choice of "climate change cultist" reveals his biased view with the use of alliteration to damage the credibility of opposing views. Each time he uses the words climate change he adds quotation marks as if he is debating the very existence.

The writer criticises the opposition *"No amount of evidence will dissuade a climate change cultist that he is wrong"* suggesting that they don't care about facts only their own views. He uses powerful word choice such as *"farcical"* to describe Obama's speech, proposing that not only is it misleading and wrong but absurd. Humor is used as a persuasive device to show how ridiculous Thomas finds the argument against him stating *"At least Kermit the Frog -- who "spoke" at Southampton College on Long Island in 1996 -- was entertaining"*. He personally attacks The President saying *"The Coast Guard Academy graduates deserved better from their command-in-chief"* this powerful statement reveals that as the head of the armed services, Obama should have prepared a more balanced speech for the graduates.

In conclusion, the first source written by two skeptical professors for The Guardian, create a convincing balanced article backed up with references from a geopolitical study and credible sources such as the United Nations. Their experience and knowledge in the field gives them extended credibility when they suggest that much of the media coverage of climate change *"is driven by politics, not science."* Source two by scientist Jack Goldstone for Reuters news agency reveals a slight biased view that climate change is more significant than many believe and it is vital we act now. Although he presents a factual viewpoint, his stance is weakened by a lack of references to corroborate his views. The final source from Fox News authored by Cal Thomas begins opinionated, heavily criticising Obama on a recent speech. At first it looks as though his claims are unsupported, however this creates a larger impact once he reveals the evidence to substantiate the argument.

It is safe to conclude that although climate change didn't directly begin the Syrian Civil War it was a significant factor that sparked the initial uprising and it will continue to be a causing factor of conflicts unless significant changes are made. In 2007 the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon described the conflict in Sudan's Darfur region as the world's first climate change conflict. The rainfall patterns cause by climate change led to water scarcity with findings showing that conflict is likely to be higher in years of low precipitation. In the article for The Washington Post Ki-moon states *"It is no accident that the violence in Darfur erupted during the drought"*¹¹ In Political Geography⁶ (2007) Ragnhild Nordas and Nils Petter Gleditsch revealed from a study that *"If the international community makes progress towards a reduction of the greenhouse effect and in efforts to ameliorate its consequences, the security scenario may nevertheless have played a useful role as a self-denying prophecy"*

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Cover page photo: A man inspects parched fields in Raqqa province, Syria, in 2010.

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