

Exploring the Climate-Terror Nexus in the MENA Region

RETHINKING **SECURITY** IN THE 2020s SERIES – Commentary

By Clémentine Lienard – BIC Climate Security Analyst

INTRODUCTION

For the past two decades, literature has been exploring the interconnection between conflicts and climate change. However, their link is still debated, the latter being commonly identified as a ‘threat multiplier’ on political, security and socioeconomic drivers for intrastate violence¹. Only a few literatures have yet examined specifically the interactions between climate change and terrorism², and even fewer have been applying them to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) context. Although ambiguous, there is a tangible nexus between the two phenomena, probable to broaden in the future as global warming will continue to increase, which is particularly relevant to explore in the MENA context.

The first reason is that MENA countries are still heavily impacted by terrorism and are extremely vulnerable to climate change effects. While the number of deaths from terrorist activities might have been falling by 39% since 2019³, threats posed by terrorist groups in MENA have not disappeared. Although unable to hold territories, the Islamic State’s (IS) presence in Iraq and Syria has taken the form of an ‘entrenched insurgency’⁴. IS concentrated most of its attacks in Iraq in 2021, being responsible for 71% of deaths from terrorism, while the United Nations

¹ K. Mustasilta, ‘THE FUTURE OF CONFLICT PREVENTION: preparing for a hotter, increasingly digital and fragmented 2030’, *Chaillot Paper*, EU Institute for Security Studies, May 2021

² J. O. Asaka, ‘Climate Change - Terrorism Nexus? A Preliminary Review/Analysis of the Literature’, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol.15, n° 1, 2021, pp.81-92

³ Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2022, Measuring the impact of terrorism*, Sydney, 2022

⁴ United Nations Security Council, *Twenty-eighth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities, S/2021/655*, July 2021

estimate that 10.000 fighters affiliated to Al-Qaeda and its partners are present in the region of Idlib in Syria⁵. Salafi-jihadist groups are not only active in MENA countries; they are also at their borders in the Sahel and Afghanistan.

In parallel, Syria and Iraq, among other MENA countries such as Egypt and Lebanon, are particularly at risk of global warming effects⁶. The region is considered as one of the most vulnerable to climate change and will experience additional heat of 2°C by 2040⁷, having dire consequences on water, food, housing, economic and sanitary security. A simple link of correlation between heat rise and the occurrence of terror events and their lethality rate has already been detected, however the nexus between the two phenomena is larger⁸. This commentary is a forward-gazing exploration aimed to identify to what extent climate change could intertwine and benefit existing Salafi-jihadist *modus operandi*.

Climate change interacts with violent extremism in three different ways⁹. In the case of the MENA region, climate change and environmentalism do not contribute to promote ideological drivers of radicalization. However, terror groups can capitalize on the adverse socioeconomic and political effects of climate change, which may enhance as well new tools and tactics of terror and coercion.

EXPLOITING GRIEVANCES, BREAKDOWNS AND MARGINALIZATION: CLIMATE AND RECRUITMENT

Climate change effects in MENA are broad: while the region is already prone to extreme climate events such as heatwaves, droughts and floods, natural disasters are projected to be more frequent and more intense; rains will be more erratic, temperatures will keep increasing. Regardless of the scenario, the endemic water

⁵ Op.cit *Measuring the impact of terrorism and Twenty-eighth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities*

⁶ F. Wehrey, 'Cascading Climate Effects in the Middle East and North Africa: Adapting Through Inclusive Governance', *Carnegie*, 2022 ; C. H. de Coning and all, 'Climate, Peace and Security Fact Sheet Iraq', *Norwegian Institute of International Affairs*, 2022

⁷ IPCC Interactive Atlas

⁸ C. M. Craig and all, 'A Global Analysis of Temperature, Terrorist Attacks, and Fatalities', *Studies in conflict and terrorism*, vol.44, issue 11, 2021, pp.958-970

⁹ S. D., Henkin and all, 'A Climate of Terror? Approaches to the Study of Climate Change and Terrorism', *College Park*, 2022

scarcity is projected to be aggravated further and agriculture output – in MENA and globally – is to be negatively impacted, restricting access to food¹⁰.

There is therefore a risk that conflicts of resource use between economic sectors and people will increase. Farmers and rural populations are particularly exposed to the loss of their livelihoods, provoking displacements of populations to cities, increasing the risk of unmanaged urbanisation and proliferation of informal dwellings¹¹. It is not the environmental aftermath caused by climate change that directly impact terrorist groups' empowerment. Yet, it is precisely the deterioration of climatic conditions that create favourable opportunities for recruitment and expansion of influence as they trigger socioeconomic disruptions, political instability, and favour isolation¹².

This pattern has already taken root: deleterious climatic conditions have created fruitful opportunities for terror groups, fostering pre-conditions and drivers to radicalisation. In Somalia in 2016 and 2017, Al-Shabaab had taken advantage of the impoverishment of thousands of displaced people living in informal camps in urban periphery, leaving their land because of harsh climatic conditions – protracted droughts and floods – for recruitment purposes and the flourishing of illicit activities¹³.

The same way, ISIS exploited despair in the Kirkuk region in Iraq from communities highly impacted by severe climate conditions to attract new recruits and increase control over population and territories: 'with every flood or bout of extreme heat or cold, the jihadists would reappear, often supplementing their sales pitches with gifts; they doled out food baskets; they distributed cash'¹⁴.

There is a common profile to the foreign fighters who joined IS in Syria: they were mostly young men, lacking sense of life, being marginalized, and dealing with socioeconomic difficulties. Most foreign fighters originating from Morocco were

¹⁰ F. Gaub, C. Lienard, 'Arab Climate Futures: of risk and readiness', *Chaillot Paper*, EU Institute for Security Studies, November 2021

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Op. cit. 'Climate Change – Terrorism Nexus? A Preliminary Review/Analysis of the Literature' and M. Bourekba, 'Climate Change and Violent Extremism in North Africa', *Barcelona Centre for International Affairs* (CIDOB), October 2021

¹³ F. Krampe, 'Climate Change Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace', Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, June 2019

¹⁴ Climate Diplomacy, 'Climate Change and Water Woes Drove ISIS recruiting in Iraq', November 2017

coming from slums area in Tangiers and Fnideq, where living conditions are very harsh¹⁵.

The importance of climate issues in MENA is not simply to do with the imminent need to mitigate climate change; the main issue is to ensure that its effects will not have negative repercussions on water, food, decent housing access, livelihoods, and social inclusion. It is also about managing fairly and efficiently the socioeconomic consequences of the energy transition, notably in countries dependent on fossil rent such as Libya and Iraq. Failing to address those challenges will pose serious national and regional security threats: it is as much the severity of climate change effects on MENA as the public capacity to cope and mitigate them that will cause a greater risk of radicalisation and expansion of terrorist activities.

Misapprehended environmental policies or failed governance can boost grievances against institutions and can favour feelings of being excluded or mistreated. This could be exploited by terrorist groups for propagandist opportunities, territorial control, and recruitment¹⁶. The failure from the public authorities to address the consequences of the prolonged drought in Northern Syria in 2010 and 2011 aggravated the grievances of the population against the regime and contributed to instore an unstable environment, fruitful for the expansion of existing terrorist groups - ISIS, already established in Iraq¹⁷. The severe food insecurity and loss of livelihoods in the North of the country facilitated recruitment opportunities for ISIS, offering an economically attractive alternative to the impoverished population¹⁸.

EXPLOITING THE ENVIRONMENT: CLIMATE AND MEANS OF COERCION

Climate change can also leverage instruments for the use of terror. At war, controlling or destroying natural resources has always been a way to exert pressure on the enemy, populations, or other armed groups. Since the 1980s, there is a rising trend in the MENA region where terrorist groups target environmental resources (food, water and energy) and their related

¹⁵ 'Climate Change and Violent Extremism in North Africa'

¹⁶ L. Raineri, 'Sahel Climate Conflicts ? When (fighting) climate change fuels terrorism), *Conflict Series*, EU Institute for Security Studies, November 2020

¹⁷ Climate Diplomacy, *Insurgency, Terrorism and Organised Crime in a Warming Climate, Analysing the Links Between Climate Change and Non-State Armed Groups*, Berlin, October 2016

¹⁸ Ibid

infrastructures¹⁹. In the past, IS strategically used its control over water to exert coercive population control, sometimes as a weapon against civilians, and allegedly poisoned waters several times in Syria and Iraq²⁰.

In Iraq, when ISIS took control over the Falluja water dam in 2014, it endangered 200 square kilometres of agricultural lands and displaced 60 000 people²¹. Al-Qaeda had also considered in 2008 using wildfires in Western regions vulnerable to forest fires as a mode of terror²². The temperature rise in MENA and the decline in rains will amplify water scarcity in the region; water and yields will become even more strategic resources and the region will be more vulnerable to wildfires²³. Therefore, the consequences of more severe climatic conditions will favour conditions for terrorist groups to harm and exert violence on the civilian population.

THE WAY FORWARD: CLIMATE AND COUNTERTERRORISM

The nexus between terrorism and climate change could become more tangible in the future if the world fails to undertake the climate crisis. However, to prevent this nexus to materialize further, global, national, and local governance must consent greater efforts to integrate climate change into peacebuilding process and counterterrorism strategies. For the moment, the nexus between counterterrorism and climate action is still absent from the research area whereas points of convergence between the two modes of action exist and should be explored.

From the Western side, there is a first step done by the new Strategic Concept of the Transatlantic Alliance, adopted on the 29th of June 2022. Climate change has been recognized as degrading the security landscape of the Alliance's Neighbourhood, notably the MENA and the Sahel regions, and providing 'fertile ground for the proliferation of non-state armed groups, including terrorist

¹⁹ F. Remmits, B. Torossian, 'The widening arsenal of terrorist organizations: Environmental terrorism on the rise in the Middle East and North Africa', *The Hague Center for Strategic Studies*, January 2021

²⁰ T. von Lossow, 'Water as Weapon: IS on the Euphrates and Tigris', *SWP Comments*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, January 2016

²¹ Op.cit., 'The widening arsenal of terrorist organizations: Environmental terrorism on the rise in the Middle East and North Africa'

²² Op. cit. 'Climate Change - Terrorism Nexus? A Preliminary Review/Analysis of the Literature'

²³ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 'Land-Climate Interactions' in *Climate Change and Land: an IPCC special report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security, and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems*, 2019

organisations.’ NATO pledges now for the decade ahead to integrate the climate dimension to its core tasks and operations, in particular regarding crisis management and relief operations²⁴.

The European Union has also adopted the EU Climate Change and Defence Roadmap which focuses on integrating climate change to its operational dimension and its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)²⁵. The implementation of those strategic documents proves the strong emphasis given to the climate and security nexus, but still timidly on climate and terrorism.

Beyond the narrow scope of this commentary, deeper research should be dedicated to the nexus between climate and terror in the Middle East. As climate change effects are getting more destructive, it is probable that the interplay between climate and terrorism becomes more visible in the coming decades, notably in fragile countries, both vulnerable to terrorism and global warming and with reduced capacities to cope with the climate crisis. Future analyses on the dual vulnerability to climate and terror should also focus on national and local contexts, to map and anticipate where this nexus is the most at risk to emerge.

²⁴ NATO’s three strategic core tasks are collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security – NATO, *NATO 2022, Strategic Concept*, 29 June 2022

²⁵ European Parliament, *Report on the EEAS’s Climate Change and Defence Roadmap (2021/2102(INI))*, A9-0084/2022, 04 April 2022

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

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This project takes critical aim at yesterday's approaches to security and defence, with a view towards developing proactive solutions to the evolving nature of insecurity and hybrid warfare. The series has three overarching themes, namely "New Geopolitical Landscape in the MENA Region", "Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention" and "Transnational Challenges to Water and Energy"



Author

Clémentine Lienard | BIC Climate Security Analyst



 @BICBrussels  @bicrhr  BIC

 www.bic-rhr.com  info@bic-rhr.com

 Avenue Louise, 89 1050, Brussels, Belgium  Tel:+32 027258466