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Progressive Foreign Policy Debrief

Intel for Advocacy

TOPLINE TAKEAWAY

- *Climate change isn't just an environmental or economic issue, it is a grave national security threat.*

WARS AND DISPLACEMENT FUELED BY CLIMATE CHANGE ARE OUR GREATEST SECURITY CHALLENGE

Climate change knows no borders. That's why, this weekend, tens of thousands of activists around the world will participate in events under the banner of the "[Rise for Climate](#)" movement, urging greater and accelerated action on reining in the use of fossil fuels and converting to a clean energy economy.

But climate change isn't just about the environment, or the health and equity of our communities, as vital as those are. It's also a national security issue, one that fuels conflict and is contributing to ongoing displacement around the world. And now that a prominent [climate change denier](#) has taken the [reins](#) of the Senate Armed Services Committee, it's important now more than ever that we recognize climate change's effect on war and mass migration, and how that affects global security.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND CONFLICT

Experts and academics [have been warning](#) about climate change's effects on war and conflict for years. More specifically, rapid population growth combined with climate-induced resource shortages (like water) has resulted in displaced and dislocated populations. These factors become drivers of conflict and forced migration.

A 2012 Center for American Progress [report](#) explored this concept: "It is difficult to fully understand the detailed causes of migration and economic and political instability," the report says. "But the growing evidence of links between climate change, migration, and conflict raise plenty of reasons for concern."

Indeed, a subsequent [series of essays](#) from CAP, the Center for Climate and Security, and the Stimson Center looked at climate change's relationship to the Arab Spring and concluded that "the consequences of climate change are stressors that can ignite a volatile mix of underlying causes that erupt into revolution." Indeed, climate change could eventually [render the Gulf](#)

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[states uninhabitable](#). And the water competitions over [the Nile](#), [the Tigris](#), and [the Euphrates](#) may only get worse amidst future drought.

The story of the Arab Spring is one of ordinary citizens collectively raising their voices for justice, equality, and an end to repression. But it's also clear that climate change [exacerbated](#) some of the underlying drivers to the Arab Spring's uprisings. Nowhere is that more clear than in the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Yemen, even though we may not necessarily think of the current conflicts in these countries as climate wars.

SYRIA'S CLIMATE INFLAMED CIVIL WAR

While the brutality and repression of the Assad regime that sparked Syria's protests rightly catch headlines, what's often overlooked is [climate change's role](#) in making life more miserable for many Syrians who already had to grapple with life under a dictator. In 2015, a study published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences concluded that, as the New York Times [put it](#), "an extreme drought in Syria between 2006 and 2009 was most likely due to climate change, and that the drought was a factor in the...uprising that began there in 2011."

The researchers in that study said the drought -- which experts [say](#) is directly related to burning fossil fuels in places like the U.S., China, and India -- "had a catalytic effect."

"They cited studies that showed that the extreme dryness, combined with other factors, including misguided agricultural and water-use policies of the Syrian government, caused crop failures that led to the migration of as many as 1.5 million people from rural to urban areas," which contributed "to social stresses that eventually resulted in the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad in March 2011."

A WATER WAR IN YEMEN

Climate change is also a major factor in another Middle East war that the United States is more directly engaged in.

The American enabled Saudi-led war in Yemen has fueled one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. In their war with Houthi rebels, the Saudi-led coalition has attacked, starved, and killed thousands of civilians. And like in Syria, climate change's role is often underreported.

Demand for water in Yemen has increased rapidly since the 1980s, as its population has more than tripled. At the same time, climate change is causing water supplies in the country to [dry up](#). Conflicts throughout Yemen's history have been driven by [resource scarcity](#), which continues to contribute significantly to Yemen's ongoing humanitarian crisis that began before Yemen's own Arab Spring protests.

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“Water scarcity in Yemen which has been exacerbated by climate change, may be a critical factor underlying the country’s instability, and prolonging and worsening its conflict,” Caitlin Werrell and Francesco Femia of the Center for Climate and Security [write](#). “In a landscape of rising populations, severe unemployment, political instability, an active and influential terrorist organization, outside interests, and dwindling water and food resources, a changing climate is likely making matters worse.”

And in addition to climate-induced water shortage contributing to the current conflict’s origins, the warring parties have tried to use its scarcity to their advantage. For example, both sides have [restricted aid](#), including water, from civilian populations, with Saudi-led airstrikes [targeting civilian water supplies](#) and farms, and Houthi rebels [confiscating](#) water from locals in areas of their control.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND DISPLACEMENT

According to the United Nations, nearly [70 million people worldwide](#) have been forcibly displaced from their homes, while 24.5 million of those are officially designated as refugees. But legally speaking, [there is no such thing](#) as a “climate refugee,” so these numbers don’t include those displaced by climate change, as a “refugee” under international law is only someone fleeing conflict or persecution.

But while, as noted above, climate change is actually partly a cause of many legal refugee statuses, there have been, on average since 2008, an additional [24 million people](#) per year displaced by catastrophic weather events (including Americans in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria). And that number doesn’t include those displaced by rising sea levels, which is happening [this very moment](#), from remote [Pacific islands](#) to the American Gulf Coast. Climate change may also be a [key factor](#) forcing people to flee Central America and could have a [negative impact](#) on Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Indeed, experts [estimate](#) that by 2050, between 50 million and 200 million people could be displaced because of climate change.

“If Europe thinks they have a problem with migration today ... wait 20 years,” retired US military brigadier general Stephen Cheney [said](#) last November. “See what happens when climate change drives people out of Africa – the Sahel [sub-Saharan area] especially – and we’re talking now not just one or two million, but 10 or 20 [million]. They are not going to south Africa [in which Cape Town almost ran out of water this year], they are going across the Mediterranean.”

However, a move toward official recognition of climate refugees may begin this December when the Intergovernmental Conference to Adopt the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration will be held in Marrakech, Morocco. The conference will take place under the auspices of the UN, which [calls](#) the global compact for migration “the first, intergovernmentally negotiated

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agreement...to cover all dimensions of international migration in a holistic and comprehensive manner.”

“In one area, at least, the Compact represents a significant breakthrough,” Jane McAdam and Walter Kalin of the Lowy Institute [write](#). “It expressly recognises that climate change, disasters and environmental degradation can drive people to leave their homes.”

Of course, the U.S. [withdrew](#) from the process last December at the behest of the Trump administration, which is increasingly [at odds](#) with military and intelligence officials on the issue of climate change.

THE AMERICAN SECURITY ESTABLISHMENT IS PREPARING WITHOUT TRUMP

Despite Trump’s aversion to recognizing any reality related to climate change, the Pentagon has called it a “[threat multiplier](#)” and has been [begging Congress](#) to allocate funds to study the issue and mitigate its impact. In fact, a recent DOD [study](#) found that nearly half of U.S. military sites around the world are threatened by climate change.

But it’s not just the U.S. military that recognizes climate change as a national security threat. The U.S. Intelligence Community’s [Worldwide Threat Assessment](#) released earlier this year notes that “the impacts of the long-term trends toward a warming climate, more air pollution, biodiversity loss, and water scarcity are likely to fuel economic and social discontent -- and possibly upheaval -- through 2018.”

So it looks like Team Trump’s efforts to [scrub](#) the words “climate change” from U.S. government websites wasn’t too successful on dni.gov. Meanwhile, Trump will carry on [publicly clowning himself](#) on the issue, and continue to reinforce Defense Secretary James Mattis’s view that Trump has the understanding of “[a fifth- or sixth-grader](#),” which [might even be an insult](#) to 11 year olds.

BURIED LEDES

Just weeks after a series of recent Saudi airstrikes in Yemen that killed more civilians and children, a group of House Democrats [are renewing efforts to withdraw U.S. refueling and intelligence assistance](#) to the Saudi-led war against Houthis in Yemen.

Meanwhile, the Spanish took [concrete action](#) on Yemen this week, with the government announcing that it will **cancel a delivery to Saudi Arabia of 400 laser-guided munitions**.

Also on Yemen this week, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [faces](#) a Congressionally mandated September 12 deadline **to certify whether the Saudi-led coalition is doing enough to limit civilian casualties** or face cutbacks in U.S. assistance.

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U.S. officials are warning Russia and Syria against civilian casualties and the use of chemical weapons [during their impending offensive](#) to retake the last rebel stronghold in Idlib. Read Win Without War's backgrounder with key messaging points [here](#).

South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un **will have their next summit on September 18-20** to [further explore ways](#) to establish a lasting peace and denuclearize the Korean Peninsula.

The Europeans are still working to prevent the United States from completely dismantling the Iran anti-nuclear deal by continuing to [explore ways](#) European companies can still do business in Iran despite impending U.S. sanctions.

The departing American commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan [said this week](#) that **"it is time for this war...to end."**

Muslim Advocates spoke out against Jon Kyl taking John McCain's senate seat this week. "The bigoted activists, ideas, and conspiracy theories that McCain was applauded for rejecting are the same people and ideas that Kyl has fully embraced and championed in the past," the group said in a [statement](#).

The Chinese have [forced](#) around **1 million Chinese Muslims, most of whom are Uighurs, into internment and "re-education" camps.** And [similar](#) to what Trump is doing here at home, Chinese authorities are separating the children from their parents.

After **a Burmese judge sentenced two Reuters journalists to seven years in prison** for investigating the genocide against the Rohingya, U.S. officials [spoke out](#), saying they are "deeply troubled" by the ruling and that the men are "in prison for telling the truth."

The UK government [announced](#) this week that **it will boost its contribution to the UN agency that provides aid to Palestinian refugees** after the Trump administration announced it would cut all funding. J Street [said](#) the U.S. move "will ratchet up the risk of greater destabilization and conflict across the Middle East, undermining the security of Israel and countries throughout the region."

And finally, [it sure looks like](#) **Brett Kavanaugh lied to the Senate in 2006** when he [said](#) he wasn't involved in George W. Bush's warrantless surveillance program.