

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE SPREAD OF TERRORISM

The Indirect Linkage

Madison Scholar

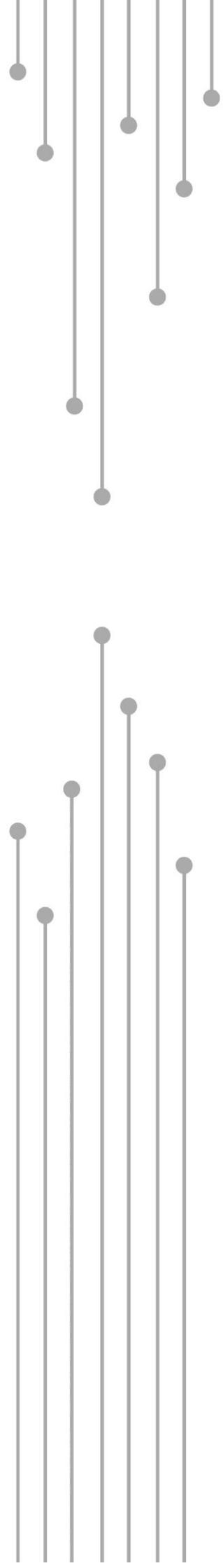


European Intelligence Academy

Research Paper Series #4

July 2022

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About the Author

Madison Scholar received her Bachelor's degree in Intelligence and National Security from Coastal Carolina University, where she published multiple reports for the European Intelligence Academy. At the same time, she was also a contributing member in the United States Coast Guard as a Law Enforcement Specialist. She then went on to complete a Master's degree in Peace and Conflict Resolution at the University of Manchester, United Kingdom, as a Rotary Global Grant Scholar. Upon returning home, she founded her own business, The Red Letter Project, through which she travels around the country teaching self-defense.

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Introduction

This paper will explore and analyze the links between the impact of climate change and the rise of terrorist groups, using the case study of Boko Haram and its presence around the Lake Chad Basin. It must be clarified that the argument of this paper is tailored towards fragile states that are already experiencing conflict or have the high potential to do so. It also focuses on the impact of climate change, rather than its causes. It will begin by explaining the motives of the sources producing literature on the linkage between climate change and terrorist groups. Then it will look at the academic debates that discuss whether climate change directly or indirectly affects terrorist groups and their targets, as well as explain the importance in making this distinction. The next section will include an explanation as to why developing countries experience climate change more drastically than Western countries, focusing on political, economic, and social aspects. Subsequently, it will analyze two main factors linking climate change's impact on terrorism: recruitment of vulnerable communities and the weaponization of vital resources. This will be demonstrated through analysis of the case study in conjunction with think-tank project findings and backed with academic literature. Finally, it will conclude by summarizing the main findings of the essay. It will also restate the main argument, which is that the impact of climate change can be indirectly linked to the rise of terrorist groups in certain fragile states.

Agendas Behind the Literature

Before examining the literature, it is important to examine the sources producing the literature. There is an abundance of academic studies that focus on the link between climate

change and widespread conflict, as well as the physical impact of climate change on volatile regions. However, the literature specifically linking climate change with the rise of terrorist groups appears to be relatively new. Think-tanks funded by the G7 countries, the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), Canada, Japan, Germany, France, Italy, and the European Union, have been publishing a sizeable volume of literature on this topic beginning around 2016. For example, Adelphi, an independent think tank, has partnered with the German Federal Foreign Office to create the Climate Diplomacy Initiative (CDI) to push for “a stronger role for [...] international climate policy”.¹ The CDI explains that since there is a substantial lack of academic literature focusing on the theoretical links between climate and non-state armed groups; Its goal, therefore, is to “bridge the gap” by analyzing case studies exemplifying these links and connecting them to the pre-existing academic literature on general climate conflict.² This is one of many examples of think tank projects that specifically call upon foreign policy makers to “play an active role in breaking the vicious cycle of increasing climate impacts”.³ The Center for Climate Security (CCS) in conjunction with the American Security Project (ASP) and five other well-known American think-tanks, also launched a study specifically focusing on the weaponization of vital resources in connection to climate change.⁴ Furthermore, the European Union deemed climate change to be a strategic priority in 2016. It is important to note that much of the literature being produced about the climate-terrorism link is dated around this time.⁵

Therefore, it appears that motivation to push this linkage stems from both advocating foreign policy and national security interests, especially of the G7 countries.⁶ Additionally, some of these reports place blame on certain governments in economically weaker regions of the world of taking advantage of this linkage.⁷ For example, the CDI blames Nigerian officials of “overemphasizing the role of climate change to cover up their inability to stem violence”.⁸ Academic experts respond by explaining that this is because, after years of failure to adapt to the effects of climate change and control terrorist groups, government officials grasp for external help by using whichever threat will draw the most attention in order to attract funding, while also diverting the blame away from their administration.⁹

However, government officials are not the only ones overemphasizing this claim. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Jamestown Foundation, piggyback off of these claims in order to push their own climate agendas.¹⁰ Using the same example of the Nigerian government, they add that if the US does not intervene to stop carbon emission in the region, it might have “effects in the long-term so dire that one day they may be felt on the US home front”.¹¹ Scholars explain that NGOs that have a strong political stance on environmental issues do not often get the attention from governmental officials that they desire.¹² Because of this, such organizations often face the choice between not being heard versus having to tactfully word claims in ways that might be more appealing to security officials.¹³ In this instance, the motivation behind these potentially exaggerated claims, crafted to frighten US policy makers, is partially to draw attention to the issue of climate change in general.¹⁴

Although much of the academic literature does not focus specifically on climate and terrorism, it does focus heavily on climate change and all-encompassing conflict. There is general consensus among scholars that the impact of climate change does create conflict. The Wilson Center accurately depicts climate change as a “threat multiplier” that exacerbates previously existing sources of conflict in an area.¹⁵ However, the disagreement lies in whether climate change directly or indirectly causes this to occur. The neo-Malthusian thesis suggests a direct effect on populations, stating that when natural resources run low, affected groups respond by directly fighting over control of what is left to use.¹⁶ Researchers also use the opportunity-cost model to explain that, as income decreases, typically violence increases as well.¹⁷ Thirdly, research studies have demonstrated the effects of extreme heat on the human mind as hotter temperatures directly cause an increase in physical aggression.¹⁸ Although it may appear obvious that climate change heightens the vulnerability for conflict, the difference in a direct versus indirect perspective is important for the climate-terrorism debate, because it specifies the type of conflict being examined. Academic researchers supporting the argument for a direct connection explain that social conflict, such as riots and intergroup disputes, is more likely to arise from climate issues, as opposed to armed conflict.¹⁹ They argue that this is because communal fighting does not require the amount of planning required of militant groups.²⁰ During a period of fighting for survival, people are less concerned with ideological and political expression as they are with striving to secure basic needs.²¹

On the other hand, the evidence supporting a specific climate-terrorism link lies heavily in the research, suggesting an indirect relationship between the two. The CDI argues that the impact of climate change is a risk-multiplier rather than a direct threat, as “it interacts and converges with other existing risks and pressures in a given context and can increase the likelihood of fragility or violent conflict”.²² This argument is based on the idea that these effects create an ideal environment for terrorist groups to operate and recruit individuals.²³ Fragile states are pushed deeper into pre-existing issues, therefore opening space for terrorist groups to step in and fill roles that society lacks.²⁴ Another G7-commissioned report highlights seven climate risk factors as following: “local resource competition, livelihood insecurity and migration, extreme weather events and disasters, volatile food prices and provision, trans-boundary water management, and unintended effects of climate policies”.²⁵ The CDI argues that an environment of fragility is exactly where terrorist groups thrive, indirectly contributing to the growth of their operations.²⁶ This paper is interested in this perspective, which argues that, although there are direct implications of climate change to conflict, the indirect effects point more specifically to terrorist groups.

Livelihood Insecurity and Water Management

According to the European Parliament, fragile and developing states suffer the most from climate change; even more specifically, the poorest groups of people within these states are primarily affected.²⁷ This is because low-income countries located in the Global South often rely on local agriculture to sustain the population.²⁸ Escalated hardship is also due to dense

populations often living in geographical “hazard zones”.²⁹ Hazard zones refer to environments that are more prone to the effects of climate change, such as areas that experience extreme droughts or flooding.³⁰ These hardships can be traced back to an adaptation deficit —meaning lack of capacity to cope with changes resulting from the environment.³¹ Institutions capable of handling these problems are few and far between in low-income countries, which in turn leaves locals without access to information, insurance, and so on.³² Natural disasters occurring as a result of climate change also have the power to devastate economic growth by causing residual damage to vital infrastructure and housing, making it more difficult to cultivate a healthy economy.³³ These factors exaggerate the fragility of the state and expose weaknesses in state and local governments.³⁴

Both economic instability and lack of capable government can cause the local population to turn to other sources for help. These sources, typically militant groups, take control of vulnerable populations by recruiting youth and weaponizing resources. This is evident in the case study of Boko Haram. This case was chosen because of the substantial amount of scientific data that supports claims that the region is being severely affected by climate change, as well as the fact that the region is historically unstable and prone to conflict. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has consistently categorized in various reports the countries of Chad, Cameroon, and Niger as being under the highest level of severity for political, societal, economic, environmental, and security fragility.³⁵ Nigeria is categorized as slightly less severely positioned in these areas, except when it comes to environmental fragility, which is given a similarly low fragility ranking.³⁶ Up until recently, Lake Chad was shrinking and rainfall in the area has become extremely unpredictable as a result of rising temperatures and drought.³⁷ During the period of shrinkage, the terrorist group Boko Haram managed to gain control over significant swathes of territory around the basin, particularly in the most economically deprived neighborhoods bordering the lake.³⁸ In northeast Nigeria, 71.5 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty and over 50 percent is malnourished —these numbers being similar to those of other areas along the lake.³⁹

The population bordering Lake Chad is home to roughly seventy or more ethnic groups, all of which rely solely on the lake for natural resources.⁴⁰ Boko Haram is responsible for the displacement of over 2.6 million local people, \$9 billion worth of damage in the basin area, and over 100,000 deaths since its birth and counting.⁴¹ April of 2020 was recorded as one of the group’s deadliest months, with the Council on Foreign Relations reporting that nearly 1,500 deaths were linked to the terrorist group, competing only with the months of March of 2014 and February of 2015, when close to 6,000 died.⁴² The group came into existence as an ideologically based Sunni group that became increasingly violent after their leader, Mohammed Yusuf, was assassinated in 2009.⁴³ This case study highlights a few of the G7 risk factors, namely livelihood insecurity and trans-boundary water management.⁴⁴

Livelihood insecurity is explained in the G7 report as a phenomenon in which climate change causes those who are dependent on natural resources to seek alternative livelihoods.⁴⁵ Seeking alternate livelihoods possibly entails that, “some will move to urban areas that already suffer from high levels of unemployment and poor living conditions, while

others may be forced to turn to informal or illegal sources of income”.⁴⁶ The second factor, trans-boundary water management, denotes when a source of water becomes the cause of tension in a community or region.⁴⁷ This tension encompasses local disputes over water, changes in the power balance as new infrastructure is built, or by fueling violence.⁴⁸

Lack of state presence to provide basic needs and security as well as exposed corruption has led people to distrust a central authority.⁴⁹ This results in the local population being forced to depend upon Boko Haram to fulfill these basic needs, which, in turn, leads livelihood insecurity to become a reason behind a community susceptible to the recruitment of young adults.⁵⁰ One of many aspects that dependency can stem from is socio-economic hardship. Security experts explain that, “individuals whose basic needs are denied are bound to fall back on violence as an approach to express their complaints”.⁵¹ Specifically, poverty resulting from unemployment has been identified as another root cause of Boko Haram’s growing membership.⁵² A Human Rights Watch representative explains that, in this specific case, youth recruitment “has nothing to do with religion, but a lot to do with economic resources”.⁵³ The agricultural and fishing employers have been forced to drastically reduce their number of employees as water supplies are reduced periodically.⁵⁴ Long droughts or extreme flooding also make farming insecure, as it is a job largely dependent on the environment.⁵⁵ Although there is much demand for agricultural products in the region, suppliers are not able to keep up, making productivity scarce.⁵⁶ Since the government is not upholding its responsibility of providing employment opportunity, economic incentives offered by Boko Haram have become especially appealing to young adults.⁵⁷

Low levels of education among youth, combined with aggravated poverty, enhance the ideological allure of Boko Haram and “foster conditions in which people are recruited into armed conflicts”, according to the United Nations.⁵⁸ The scholars discussed in the above sections indicate that violence is often a result of unemployment.⁵⁹ This argument is evidently true, but this paper would like to take a closer look into the exact type of conflict that terrorist groups produce. Unemployment has been a cause of conflict throughout the region for decades, even before Boko Haram developed. Therefore, the devastating blow on agriculture simply makes the situation worse.⁶⁰ Pre-existing employment conditions exacerbated by climate change open up more space for terrorist groups to take advantage of, hence the indirect link to the specific type of conflict that terrorist groups produce because climate issues act as an enhancement to pre-existing issues.⁶¹

As Lake Chad shrunk, it became harder for people to access water to irrigate agriculture and increased water stress led to a depletion of fish in the lake.⁶² Water shortages have also caused a decrease of grazing land for animals, leading farmers to switch from larger livestock, such as cattle, to smaller animals, such as sheep and goats.⁶³ Even before Boko Haram grew, Nigeria ranked third in the world for having the most people without access to a clean water supply —the national average being only about 34% of the population being able to access basic sanitation equipment.⁶⁴ This calls upon the G7’s risk factor of “trans-boundary water management”.⁶⁵ Boko Haram has intensified the problem by using this basic need for tactical advantage.⁶⁶ The CCS launched a study that categorized water weaponization into three parts: strategic, tactical, and coercive.⁶⁷ Although there are

many examples predominately throughout the Middle Eastern region of terrorist groups using strategic weaponization, it is apparent that Boko Haram seems to use coercion and tactical methods most often.⁶⁸ Weaponization in the form of coercion means to utilize a resource in order to instill fear into a population or group of civilians.⁶⁹ Boko Haram has been known to use coercion by dumping dead bodies and human waste into water wells, as a way of announcing its presence in the area.⁷⁰ Tactical weaponization, on the other hand, means to utilize a resource strictly for military purposes.⁷¹ For example, it was reported in 2015 that militants directly poisoned the water with the intention of ruining the existing irrigation infrastructure in areas where they felt threatened.⁷² This was done in response to the Nigerian military operating in certain areas that had experienced extreme agricultural devastation to prevent Boko Haram's territorial spread.⁷³ As mentioned previously, Boko Haram tends to recruit from the poorest areas of the basin, and the Nigerian Army began to target these areas during raids.⁷⁴ Boko Haram's attacks spread fear amidst the civilian community and exemplified the power the group has over the forces that opposes it.⁷⁵ With resources running low, Boko Haram's leveraging of its ability to turn water into a weapon demonstrates the indirect connection between the two. Terrorist groups would most likely be able to carry out these inhumane acts regardless of climate change. However, the addition of water scarcity as a factor contributes to the argument that the impact of climate change serves as a risk-multiplier; therefore indirectly contributing to terrorism-based conflict.⁷⁶

Outlook

Boko Haram has used the effects of climate change to further its mission in recruiting the youth in the Lake Chad Basin and to gain territory in the most devastated parts of the region. It has done this by offering economic incentives that West African governments are unable to provide, such as employment opportunities and basic necessities. It has also taken advantage of depleting resources by inciting fear in the population through the weaponization of water. This strategy is employed in opposition against government forces seeking to exterminate the group, serving as both a coercive and tactical use of natural resources. In conclusion, the two climate-conflict risks of "livelihood security" and "trans-boundary water management" found in this case study demonstrate an indirect linkage between climate change and the rise of terrorist organizations.⁷⁷ This is because, although academic research provides us with an explanation of the direct linkage between climate change and broader conflict, certain projects provide closer insight into the segmented types of conflict. They show that terrorist groups are indirectly affected by climate change. In conclusion, the impact of climate change can be indirectly associated to the rise of terrorist groups in certain fragile regions, such as the Chad basin.

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