

Climate Change as a Driver of Conflict? What Resource Access Reveals About Power Struggles Within the State*

Tinja Zerzer[†]

October 13, 2019

Climate Change and Conflict

Climate change as a driver of conflict has become an increasingly popular hypothesis in the last decade. This is also evident when looking at recent publications by the Austrian Armed Forces. The Minister of Defense as well as the Austrian Armed Forces General Staff recently issued publications which mention climate change as a likely threat to security¹.

The hypothesis postulates that climate change, mostly through drought and subsequent scarcity of water, will lead to, or at least contribute to conflicts. Although not all studies establish the link between climate change and conflict through a drying trend, most studies do have in common that through one way or another, climate change leads to scarcity of one or several resources, leading to conflicts over those scarce resources.

Though popular, the approach is also strongly contested. Critics question its theoretical foundation, its methodological soundness, its deterministic presumptions, and its usefulness for conflict resolution. So far, no study has been able to support a definite direct or indirect link between the two factors.

*This is a summary of the master thesis with the same name written at Vienna University of Economics and Business within the Socio-ecological Economics Programme.

[†]Contact the author at tinja.zerzer@hbv.gv.at.

¹Cf.: BMLV (2019a), BMLV (2019b).

The Case of Syria

A case used as a popular example for the connection between climate change and conflict is the ongoing civil war in Syria. The chain of causation argued by several researchers is that climate change, through a lack of water, led to loss of livelihood and migration, which contributed to conflicts. None of these effects is uncontested. Neither a long-term drying trend, nor a severe long-term drought, nor a particular role of migration for the conflict can be established empirically.

What is not taken into account in most of the studies insinuating a causal relationship between climate change and conflict are other factors that can result in limited access to a resource and the role of government policies to this effect.

The most striking factor when researching the access to water in the years preceding the conflict in Syria is the hike in diesel fuel prices due to subsidy cuts. Diesel fuel, crucial to many Syrian agricultures for pumping water from the ground, experienced a steep increase in cost in the late 2000s. In 2007, the Syrian regime announced that the subsidy for diesel fuel would be cut, raising the price of one liter of diesel from SYP 7 to SYP 25. This was detrimental to many farmers, who relied on diesel fuel for groundwater irrigation.

Gaining Deeper Insights

In light of these findings, an alternative approach to the problem is called for, in order to gain more detailed insights into the causes and effect. Two criteria seem inevitable for a more comprehensive approach. One, establishing a proper theoretical foundation, and two, attributing a more prominent role to the state in issues of resource access. A suitable basis for the theoretical foundation can be found in political ecology. Its comprehensive view of ecological phenomena and environment-society relations allows for a rigorous analysis of the relationship between water access and conflict. Particularly the distinctive feature of seeing the environment as power-laden instead of politically neutral contributes to this.

Above other things, political ecology, as the theoretical foundation for the study of water and conflict relations, points out the need to reframe resource-related problems as an environment and conflict issue, instead of a mainly scarcity-based climate and conflict issue. This makes it possible to see how social processes and state governance contribute to the accessibility and usage of a resource.

Additionally, this approach shows how the state is not a monochromatic entity, but a set of social relations that change over time. Through different modes of representation, modes of articulation, and modes of state intervention, some actors within these social relations are strategically favored over others. When there is a change in whom is favored by these mechanisms, the social basis of a regime shifts, which can, in its most drastic form, lead to civil war².

The Shifting Social Basis of the Syrian State

In the case of Syria, the social basis of the state shifted from the rural, agrarian segment of society, to the urban, commercial segment. The rural population was an important part of the social basis of the Syrian state in the beginning of the Ba'ath party, due to the party's roots in the countryside and the regime's goal to reach food self-sufficiency. Economic growth and large development aid incomes provided the financial liberty to support state interventions in favor of the social basis, including redistribution and fuel and fertilizer subsidies. Through declining growth rates and decreasing foreign aid in the 1980s, however, the resources for state interventions through money decreased and called for new sources to finance state interventions. This new source was found in private capital.

The reorientation towards private capital implicated new modes of state intervention in favor of the renewed social basis. This included economic liberalization policies that benefitted mainly banks, technology, and trade, which cities and particularly the urban bourgeoisie could profit from. Agriculture and the rural population, however, suffered severe cuts, including the removal of the diesel fuel subsidy. All in all, the dependence on a source of income for state interventions, the decrease of publicly funded economic growth and the loss of development aid as a relevant source of income, together, led to a strengthening of private capital and a weakening of rural farmers. Rather than being a cause of the conflict, the agricultural failures due to a lack of water are better analyzed as a symptom of a long term shift of forces that led to the decline of the role of the rural population.

Conclusion

While claiming that climate change will lead to conflict is simplistic, the role of a particular resource in a state can be an informative point of departure for an analysis. In this sense, the environment serves as a carrier of

²Cf.: Jessop (2015).

information. Particularly a resource's governance can be a valuable source of insight into power struggles within a state. Needless to say, this covers only a minuscule aspect of the conflict in Syria. This study intends to be a mere point of departure of an ecological-economic environment and conflict approach to the conflict in Syria. Its goal is to open up room for maneuver in conflict resolution instead of spreading deterministic theories of environmental doom.

References

- BMLV (2019a). Effektive Landesverteidigung - ein Appell. <http://www.bundesheer.at/cms/artikel.php?ID=9932>. Last accessed: 2019-06-15.
- BMLV (2019b). Unser Heer 2030. Die Antwort auf zukünftige Bedrohungen. http://www.bundesheer.at/archiv/a2019/unserheer2030/pdf/zustandsbericht_unserheer2030.pdf. Last accessed: 2019-10-13.
- Jessop, B. (2015). *The state: past, present, future*. John Wiley & Sons.