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A Decade of War in Syria: Between Climate Change and Political Stability

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March 2021 marked ten years of a civil war in Syria that has left a shattered and destroyed country, with most of the population displaced within and outside the state and, with many on the brink of starvation, suffering an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. One of the main factors driving the internal revolt against the Bashar al-Assad regime was climate change and an ensuing drought, which highlighted both the regime's failure in managing natural resources and its neglect of the agricultural sector. The climate trends that preceded the war continue unabated, hindering prospects for Syria's reconstruction. In addition, many countries across the Middle East are vulnerable to climate change and characterized by similar governance failures. Therefore, Israel would do well to examine the Syrian case both in its local and regional context, and develop strategies for addressing the implications of climate change for political and social stability in the region.

Ten years of war in Syria have claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, created 12 million refugees and displaced persons, destroyed half the country's infrastructure, and forced 90 percent of the Syrian population below the poverty line. At the same time, there are few prospects for a viable political process that can help bring Syria toward stability. The onset of the events that unfolded into this tragic reality is commonly ascribed to the violent arrest and torture of youths who sprayed the anti-regime graffiti "Your turn has come, Dr." The graffiti called for the overthrow of ophthalmologist Dr. Bashar al-Assad, in the first stage in a wave of protests that swept through the Middle East in the so-called Arab Spring, which brought down the regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Egypt. The popular protests against the arrest began in Daraa, in southern Syria, and spread like wildfire throughout the country.

However, instability in Syria did not begin in March 2011. Like other countries in the Middle East, Syria had long suffered from fundamental problems: demographic pressures, limited resources, high unemployment, and above all, deficient and corrupt management. In addition, Syria faced a severe drought that directly affected over 15,000 small farmers, and led to a drop of some 48 percent in national wheat production. This

spurred the mass migration of about 1.5 million farmers to the cities, adding pressure on the infrastructure in urban centers – particularly around Damascus – which were already strained, partly as a result of the influx of over a million Iraqi refugees who arrived in Syria in 2003-2007.

Joining the drought fueling the protests were other catalysts related to climate issues and the mismanagement of natural resources, including decades of poor management of water resources dating back to the regime of Hafez al-Assad, coupled with the expansion of agricultural land and irrigation needs, which undermined Syria's water security. One of the severe implications of this approach was the rising depletion of ground water. Indeed, the years of severe drought, beginning in the winter of 2007, led to the collapse of agriculture in northeastern Syria and consequent steep rises in food prices all over the country.

When he came to power, President Bashar al-Assad tried to promote a neo-liberal economic policy, intended to open the country to the global economy and increase the activity of the private sector. Instead of doing this gradually, however, his regime quickly reduced the subsidies and economic support to the agricultural sector. The result was a weakening of the rural population, a strengthening of the upper economic echelon, and deeper divides in Syrian society. Moreover, this abrupt policy shift significantly affected the farmers' support for the Assad regime. This changing support should also be seen in the context of demographic shifts, including population growth, resulting from one of the highest birthrates in the world, and growing urbanization: Syria's urban population, which almost doubled from 2002 to 2010, from 8.9 million to 13.8 million, only exacerbated the pressure on resources that were already strained.

This combination of factors was the writing on the wall before the civil war broke out. In the two years prior to the war, numerous studies defined Syria as an economic and social powder keg. In February 2010, the United Nations warned of the effects of the drought on food and fuel prices, and consequently on societal resilience and the ability of Syrian citizens to cope. A publication by the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) and the Arab Center for the study of Arid Zones and Dry Lands (ACSAD) surveyed the rise in temperature and increasing drought in Syria in the decade prior to 2011, and showed that the droughts of 2007-2009 had worsened the situation of millions of people in the Hasakah, Raqqah, Aleppo, and Deir ez-Zur regions, causing socio-economic unrest, health problems, and poor food security.

Throughout the years of the war, the international community's interest in resolving the crisis has been an ongoing question. Back in 2008, Syria asked the UN for aid due to "climate change damage," but the UN rejected the request and noted that Syria had not

activated its emergency plans for drought years. In July 2008, the representative of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Abdullah Ibn Yahya, contacted the US Embassy in Damascus for emergency aid to rural regions, warning that "the social and economic damage caused by the drought is beyond our ability to handle as a country." The gloomy prediction came true in the spring of 2011.

Problematic environmental factors and the absence of a suitable response could also hamper reconstruction efforts. Ten years of brutal fighting and attacks by all sides on wells and oil installations in many areas have caused enormous environmental damage in Syria, leading to massive ground, water, and air pollution. Moreover, uprooting trees and burying chemicals in agricultural land have further shrunk the agricultural sector. In addition, Assad's forces and others have used water as a weapon by attacking and diverting water sources. Consequently some 90 percent of the Syrian population does not have access to potable water. All these factors affect Syria's humanitarian needs and the country's ability to promote future food and economic security, when the war ends. Nonetheless, these goals are not high on the agenda of the international community.

Significance

The regime's violent response to the demonstrators, and not climate change, ignited the fire in Syria. However, the civil war in Syria is an example of how climate change and environmental issues can fan the flame and undermine the stability and resilience of a country. The failure of countries across the Middle East to prepare for climate change and adapt to its conditions, and thereby cope with climatic effects and continue supplying basic needs, above all water and food, could lead to government failures. This governance vacuum, as the Syrian example shows, becomes fertile breeding ground for radical Islamist organizations such as ISIS, which exploit the population's weakness and loss of income from agriculture to recruit volunteers to their ranks.

In the reality of a changing climate and a steady rise in temperatures, the Syrian case should be seen as a regional warning sign. Most of Israel's neighbors – Arab countries in Western Asia and North Africa – are situated in areas classified as arid or very arid. Average annual rainfall is approximately 400mm. Consequently, climate change, and above all global warming and desertification, endangers the regional agricultural sector (a source of income for some 60 percent of the region's population) and undermines food security. In Egypt, climate changes and sub-optimal management of limited natural resources could lead to significant decline in food security, and in turn, aggravate social unrest, and undermine government stability. Models predict that rising temperatures will cause droughts, while rising sea levels will increase the salinization of the Nile and affect the quality of irrigation water. These forecasts, combined with high population growth,

could induce internal conflicts with the potential to affect the stability and security of Israel's southern border.

Implications for Israel

The Syrian civil war illustrates well the blurred line between national security in the narrow sense of the term and its broader interpretation. Indeed, responses to the war still show the common trend among researchers to examine events in international relations mainly through political and military prisms, while paying less attention to climate and environmental issues. This tendency also characterizes the intelligence community in Israel and overseas, as explicitly stated in a September 2020 report from the US House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, which argues that intelligence agencies pay insufficient attention to long term threats to national security, including climate change.

Israel should learn the lessons of the Syrian case, and in its security assessments include environmental and climate developments and its neighboring states' ability to cope with them. Moreover, climate and environmental issues are cross-border in nature and require a move from a siloed approach to a regional and even global one. Furthermore, while intelligence agencies tend to rely on classified material, climate change assessments require specialization in advanced analytical and methodological tools from scientific open sources. Advanced modeling capabilities should be integrated into geopolitical risk assessments to comprehensively analyze the nexus between environmental and climate impacts and political, economic, and security developments in the region, and its implications for Israel's national security.

Beyond risks, the climate crisis also offers Israel opportunities for regional cooperation, whereby Israel and its partners can promote environmental rehabilitation and prioritize investments in areas where Israel has an advantage, including renewable energies, water production and purification technologies, and desert agriculture. Allocating resources to these fields, particularly when combined with regional coordination, could help countries in the region cope more effectively with climate change effects, which are already present and are expected to worsen in the coming years.