

Climate Change, Social Stress and Violent Conflict
State of the Art and Research Needs
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Abstract

Altering regional security dynamics – climate change impacts on Iraq

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The aim of this paper is threefold: Assessing current and potential hot spots in Iraq, where climate change may lead to tensions or violent conflicts; subsequently, identifying the wider regional implications of climate-induced instability in Iraq; and finally contributing to the theoretical debate on climate change and security by applying Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as originally developed by Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan.

Today already, water shortages repeatedly cause domestic conflicts between tribes and regions within Iraq and lead to tensions with neighbouring countries. Additionally, three wars within the last three decades, mismanagement, pollution and intentional environmental destruction heavily degraded Iraq's environment. Scientific projections imply that climate change will worsen environmental conditions in Iraq and threaten peoples' livelihoods. Current studies discussing potential security implications of climate change allude to the fact that it may exacerbate already existing tensions and scarcities and act as a "threat multiplier". The cascading effects of climate change may even provide tipping points for non-violent contentions to turn into violent conflicts. With water availability likely to decrease further, Iraq being a downstream country and no water sharing agreements in existence for the region, tensions could be severely aggregated.

The paper chooses the following approach: (1) Developing an analytical perspective, drawing particularly on the conflict constellation approach of the German Advisory Council on Global Change (WBGU) and the review of the implications of climate change for armed conflict by Halvard Buhaug et al. (2) Applying the analytical perspective to identify impacts of climate change on Iraq. (3) Assessing how impacts of climate change and potential hot spot areas could affect domestic security and regional relations by using RSCT. This theoretical framework allows a broader incorporation of the transnationally intertwined political, socio-economic and ethno-religious conditions in Iraq and the region. A particular focus will be to explain how local and regional level may interact. The recently developed concept of "Regional Environment Security Complex" by Guen Lee and its potential added value will be discussed as well.

The paper will thus address two gaps in the current climate change and security literature: First, it will address a region which so far has not been reviewed in depth despite a well-developed body of studies. Indeed, many studies focusing on the 'Middle East' actually address North Africa or the Levant countries. Second, while climate change is a transboundary issue, many studies and papers take either a global or continental perspective or have a focus on single countries and sub-national regions. The middle ground has been so far only limitedly theoretically addressed.