

Global Security Briefing – July 2017

Climate Change, Migration and Security

Paul Rogers

Summary

Notwithstanding the populist and securitised backlash of recent years, mass migration from Africa and the Middle East to Europe is near certain to continue for the foreseeable future. This is due not so much to the continuation of violent conflict, which is difficult to predict, as to the near certainties of economic marginalisation and climate change. Effective, just responses are possible, but only if we recognise that migration and climate change are now inextricably related and that this is an issue for the “now”, not the future.

Introduction

Last [October's briefing](#) examined European attitudes to migration, especially in relation to the substantial numbers of often desperate war refugees trying to get to Europe from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and elsewhere. It pointed to the deep antagonism that had developed in the destination countries, not just to refugees from violence but to migration as a whole, with this prompting the enhancement of far-right political ideas and associated parties, not least in Eastern Europe.

On an apparently unrelated topic, an [earlier briefing](#) last year took a wider look at the issue of climate change, pointing to the evidence of an increase in the rate of warming and asking whether that would be sufficient to prompt intergovernmental action. It concluded that much depended on the results of the US presidential election. In the event, Donald Trump's success did not show much promise but last [November's briefing](#) pointed to the increase in commitments by a number of governments as well as impressive technological improvements in the exploitation of renewable energy resources.

That somewhat optimistic conclusion in no way diminishes the problems faced, and this briefing examines one of the most fundamental of these – the impact of climate change on migration in the context of the social attitudes cited above.

Migratory Pressures

One of the most substantial migratory movements in the century to 1940 was from Europe to the United States and a second was to Australia after 1945, with both countries now experiencing political moods that are particularly antagonistic to further inward migration. For Western Europe the much more recent experience after 1945 has

been of immigrants from former colonies or the Middle East, which also led to periods of considerable antagonism and social unrest.

In the past decade there has been a further substantial increase in migration, primarily into Europe. The origins draw broadly from two areas - firstly, the refugee flows from war zones already mentioned and, secondly, what are often described as economic migrants, not least from sub-Saharan Africa. These latter movements have been made more possible because of the chaos in the failed state of Libya following the western-supported regime termination in 2011.

The continuing of refugee flows from war zones will depend substantially on the levels of violence that are experienced across the Middle East and North Africa. This cannot be predicted with much certainty, but the movements from sub-Saharan Africa are more clearly predictable and are likely to increase substantially due to the combination of one existing element and one that is only just becoming apparent.

Economic Factors

The first is the awareness among some millions of relatively marginalised peoples that their life chances may both be dismal and unlikely to improve. For many hundreds of thousands of people one such response is to seek to migrate to wealthier regions where work may be available. Typically in such circumstances, extended families or even wider communities may share resources to enable a fit young man to attempt the journey, hoping to succeed, find work and then send money back home and perhaps even enable relatives to join him. The journey may be fraught with danger but the rewards are sufficient when measured against the levels of desperation.

Such migratory pressures may be difficult to explain generically, given that many countries across sub-Saharan Africa are experiencing modest degrees of economic growth, but there is abundant evidence that this economic success is not shared equitably. At the same time, improving literacy and communications make marginalised communities all too aware of their predicaments. Given that there appears to be little prospect of moving towards more equitable economies, the expectation must be that migratory pressures will be maintained.

The political and social consequences will also persist, especially the anti-immigrant attitudes that are so prevalent across much of the North Atlantic community, and this may become more intense as migration becomes conflated with fear of political violence from extreme Islamist elements. A clear current example is Australia where immigration is seen more blatantly than in most countries as a security threat. As one analyst, Waleed Ali of Monash University, has [put it](#) recently:

“Australia began this century with a Department for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. Back then, the department’s slogan was “Enriching Australia through Migration.” Just over a decade ago it dropped the multiculturalism portfolio entirely, creating instead a Department of Immigration and Citizenship. Now it’s to be rolled into a national security department. Thus, we can chart Australia’s public

conception of migration from being a celebrated aspect of its multicultural character to a civic idea whose highest ultimate expression is citizenship to a threat to be managed.”

This points to the progressive securitisation of migration, which is already problematic but likely to become more so with the onset of the impact of the second factor, climate change.

Environmental Factors

In relation to climate change, two elements concerning migration are particularly relevant. One is that in many parts of the world the process is accelerating and the second is that its effects are geographically asymmetric. The rate of change in the near Arctic is currently exceeding the prediction of the most reliable computer simulations but there is also growing evidence that this is also happening in many regions across the tropics and sub-tropics. In these regions the main effects are increases in temperature and decreases in rainfall, the latter because of a trend for rainfall to be distributed away from land masses and towards the oceans and the polar region. The primary impact of this is on the ecological carrying capacity of tropical and sub-tropical agricultural systems, with the capacity to produce food much diminished.

Perhaps most important of all, this is a phenomenon that is already apparent in many parts of the Global South – it is not something for the future but is happening now. Moreover, it is directly affecting the displacement of people. Last month the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) published its Global Trends report ahead of World Refugee Day on 20 June. According to the [report](#), a record high of 65.6 million people were forcibly displaced from their homes in 2016. The UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) last month [predicted](#) that:

“By 2025, 1.8 billion people will experience absolute water scarcity, and two thirds of the world will be living under water-stressed conditions.”

That means that nearly one-quarter of the world’s population could be living on less than 500m³ of total available fresh water per year. That is Currently, World Bank data lists at least 27 countries surviving under such conditions. While a few of them, like Israel, Singapore, Malta and the Gulf States, have the wealth to invest in desalination, storage, imports or draining aquifers of millennia of deposited water, this will not be the experience of most. Indeed, even most such high-tech schemes may only last for decades, as long as the aquifers or oil wealth available.

Notably, the list of countries already experiencing absolute water scarcity includes all of the Arabian peninsula, North Africa (except Morocco) and the Levant (except Lebanon) and large parts of Central and Southwest Asia and the Horn of Africa. Some of the most critically affected countries included Yemen, Sudan, Somalia and Syria. It may be no coincidence that these countries are some of the world’s most conflict-affected, nor that they have produced some of the largest volumes of refugees in recent years.

Looking from Europe, where not one mainland country is yet threatened by such water scarcity at a national level, populations are largely static and the effects of climate change relatively subdued, violent competition for such a basic resource may seem remote. Yet it is striking how closely the map of water-stress aligns with the maps of global conflict and displacement in the first decades of this century. As populations in the stressed Southern regions are growing and fresh water supplies there constant or, far more likely, decreasing, the Mediterranean is likely to look like a very narrow moat indeed between the water-rich and water-poor worlds.

Conclusion: Responding to the Impact on Migration

It is simply not possible to be precise on the figures but the trend is clear – existing migration pressures stemming mainly from economic pressures are already being exacerbated by the impact of climate change and this will intensify greatly. Moreover, securitising the problem in terms of a “close the castle gates” mentality simply cannot work in a globalised and interconnected world and is a futile response. Effective responses obviously need to address the failings of the prevailing neoliberal economic approach but the environmental element is also crucial. This element needs much greater action in four respects:

- A much more rapid transition to ultra-low carbon economies across the industrialised world in order to mitigate the causes of climate change.
- Assistance to the countries across the Global South that are most affected by climate change to mitigate the effects, not least in changes in agricultural practice.
- Assistance to the same countries to develop low-carbon economies such that they may further develop and industrialise without amplifying climate change.
- Investment in water storage and carbon-neutral desalination technologies to mitigate the impact of fresh water shortages, especially in the Global South.

Probably the greatest current challenges are to recognise much more fully that migration and climate change are now inextricably related and that that this is an issue for the “now”, not the future.

About the Author

*Paul Rogers is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His [‘Monthly Global Security Briefings’](#) are available from our website. His new book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* will be published by I B Tauris in June 2016. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please consider making a donation to ORG, if you are able to do so.*

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