

Water security

LESSONS LEARNED FROM SYRIAN WAR



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While the goal of decreasing the carbon footprint is of the utmost importance, the issue of water security is equally urgent. As the Earth becomes warmer, in areas like Syria, where the country is facing a drought more than a decade long, the Northeast Passage and Northern Sea Route, and the current water crisis being faced by the citizens of Cape Town, South Africa, it has become paramount that problem of water scarcity be addressed and acted on. This should be one of the top priorities of the upcoming COP24 meeting in Katowice December this year. It should be also raised at the UN Security Council, where Poland will be a non-permanent member until the end of 2019.

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The water crises have been ever present for many decades. Organisations such as the World Wildlife Fund, World Economic Forum and the United Nations have highlighted issues regarding water security, even enshrining the ideas of environmental sustainability and climate action in the UN's Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals. With today's largest conflict being the civil war in Syria, it is important to understand that water security was one of many causes for the conflict.

Water security and Syrian war

Umar was a well-digger in northern Syria for almost 30 years. He was successful in his job and could make a fortune out of his hard work. He had everything which was needed for his job: A crane driver for installing the plumbs, a broken truck for transportation and few workers for working in the field. Moreover, he had a good instinct for finding water. Over the long course of his professional life, he also established good ties with local authorities who could help him to do his job much easier. But things changed in the winter of 2006-2007. The level of groundwater dropped dramatically. Prior to the drought, Umar had to dig only 60-70 meters in order to get to

the water. However, during the drought he was digging up to 200 meters to get to even a drop of water. When the situation escalated, he had to even dig up to 500 meters. The level of groundwater was dropping lower and lower and Umar had to dig deeper and deeper.

From that winter onward, Syria is experiencing the most serious drought in its history. Umar's profession just disappeared, leaving him jobless. He actively looked for jobs but to no avail. When the Syrian revolution began in 2011, his situation, just like many others, got worse. In one point, he even was close to being shot and killed. Now, Umar is sitting in a wheelchair at the Lesbos refugee camp in Greece. Ecologists believe that what is occurring in Syria is just one example of what will happen to the entirety of the Middle East, Mediterranean countries and finally the entire world. They believe that climate change has affected the duration of droughts all around the world.

The "Fertile Crescent," which was the first place where 1,200 years ago, human beings started to grow their food, is drying out. The Syrian drought caused the loss of agriculture, pastoralism and left 1.5 million Syrian farmers displaced. Some observers believe that the consequences of the Syrian drought

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could be one of the fundamental causes of the Syrian revolution which has led to a brutal civil war. Many Syrians who were working in agriculture and now are sitting hopelessly in Greek and Turkish refugee camps can agree with such statement.

Destruction of ecosystem

In 2009, Gianluca Serra, an environmental scholar and activist, made a brave assumption: if the decertification process which has been going on in the Syrian steppes does not stop immediately, the destruction of the ecosystem can cause social instability and even a civil war. In those days, Syrian officials were denying/ignoring almost every warning sent by NGOs and IOs concerning the Syrian steppes, an area which covers more than half of the country.

It's been a decade from the time when Gianluca Serra and others were warning the Syrian government about the overgrazing in the Syrian steppes and how it can cause unexpected changes in the ecosystem. During this time, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (UNFAO), made a four year long research project on the same issue in Syria. One of the results was stress-

ing the fact that overgrazing was one of the reasons of the ecological distraction and decertification. However, it was much easier for Syrian officials to put the blame on external sources like global warming or drought. At any rate, the drought is the inherent reality of a semi-arid climate like Syria and global warming was a fissile term in those days. The Syrian government was willing to focus on such justifications instead of facing the reality.

Cause of the war?

In 2015, Alex Kirby claimed that the drought of 2006-2010 was one of the probable causes of the Syrian conflict, however, it can be one of the immediate causes.¹ The root cause of this crisis can be found in the unsuitable exploitation of the fragile Syrian steppes ecosystem. In the 1970s, international organisations like UN- FAO asked for an end to profit-maximization principles policies in the Syrian steppe. During the same time, the

¹ <https://theecologist.org/2015/mar/06/climate-change-sparked-syrias-ruinous-war>

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Syrian government under the rule of Hafiz Al-Assad, implemented the Food Independency policy without taking into account the capacity of the Syrian ecosystem. Since it was common sense that rain cannot be expected in such a semi-arid climate, the government began issuing permissions for well-digging to everyone who would request for one. Overuse of the groundwater left Syria desperate for water in the following years. In 2005, the Bashar Al- Assad administration banned water excavations, however, the lack of oversight kept the *status quo*.

Look at the photo taken in 2008



The right side of the above picture shows the area in which grazing was banned for almost ten years. This area was protected by fences and its ecosystem remained healthy and sustainable. On the other hand, the left side was left without protection and overgrazing made it dry, just like the moon's surface. This picture can easily prove that the Syrian steppe can survive long droughts, even the most unusual ones. However, such ecosystem can't survive human's indifference and lack of management. The situation spiralled out of control by the beginning of 2003, when Iraqi refugees and Syrian farmers rushed into the cities from villages. The Syrian urban population grew from 8.9 million in 2002 (right before the American invasion of Iraq) to 13.8 million in 2010. The American Journal of Science summarised what has happened in Syria in the following way: "The rapid increase in urbanism mostly in the form of overpopulated and illegal slums with no infrastructure has led to growing unemployment and thus crime rate. This phenomenon was undermined by the

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Syrian regime and caused the social dissatisfaction and instability.”

Overexploitation of an ecosystem

The Syrian steppe covers almost 55% of the Syrian territory. For centuries, Bedouin communities which were located in present day Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria, were feeding their livestock in a sustainable way. Each tribe was taking its limited number of livestock for grazing in a specific season to a specific part of the steppe. A process which was in line with the need of that area’s vegetation to recover itself. Accent Arab farmers of these areas were the first ones who followed the idea of sustainable agriculture in the region. They were banning grazing in some places during specific times of the year. These areas were so called “Hema.”² Such protective measures could

keep the ecosystem healthy and reproductive for ages.

However, the creation of modern nation-states in the region, especially in Syria, meant the destruction of the sustainable order of agriculture, therefore weakening the ecosystem. The idea of profit maximisation which was taken from the USSR, the closest ally of the Syrian regime back then, had been implemented without any critical overview. In 1958, the Syrian regime nationalised its steppe and thus left it open for grazing to everyone.³ By doing so, the traditional and organic relation between sources and users was collapsed. The traditional way of agriculture was considered as something outdated and urbanist investors started to implement unsustainable techniques just for the sake of more gain.

protection.

² There is no specific translation for this word. it comes from the word “Hemayat” which means

³ <http://www.fao.org/docrep/x5303e/x5303e05.htm>

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One of the characteristics of the semi-arid and fragile climates is the periodic change of raining and soil moisture; periods which can last up to 5-7 years. Irrational destruction of such climate's ecosystem can decrease the level of its resistance slowly, but continuously. Also, global warming had an impact on the duration of such periodic dry seasons and made them longer than usual. This should be said that the increase in resistance is an adaptation technique which can be applied by nature itself in order to make itself compatible with the current climate status. In the past, the Syrian steppe's ecosystem had higher a resistance capability, therefore they could survive the longer droughts.

Ecological crisis causes instability

The unusual drought which took place between 2006 and 2010, the cut in government subsidies and the jump in the price of fuel which was needed for well-digging finally distorted the whole agriculture industry in eastern Syria. A journalist in eastern Syria, in an interview

with the ICG⁴ said: "In fact the drought put the spot-light on this manmade crisis which was not visible before."⁵ It's not a coincidence that riots started from Syrian villages and rural areas not from the big cities in 2011. This is why some scholars like Gianluca Serra called it "Rural Intifada" in which the tribe and tribalism had a key role to play.⁶ In 2008, Syria, a food exporting country and well known for its food independence in the region, asked desperately for international food aid. Analysis of the conflict in Darfur which took place between 2003 and 2010 shows a similar phenomenon.⁷ Darfur, like Syria, has a semi-arid climate and the same profit-maximizing principles were implemented there.

⁴ International Crisis Group

⁵ <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/55376?lang=en>

⁶ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/haian-dukhan/tribes-and-tribalism-in-syrian-revolution>>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2007/jun/23/sudan.climatechange>

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The role of ecological condition in forming the socio-economic life of each civilisation and society is something which is newly discovered. In the consumerist culture of the modern world, nature is rather considered as a beautiful picture in the “National Geographic” magazine. There is no doubt, however, that our lifestyle and economy is highly related to the sources and their function in providing the ecosystem services.⁸ In a way, “Economy” and “Ecology” both contain the word “Eco” within them, which came from the Greek word “Oikos” meaning “Home”.

Lessons learned

Climate change is a big threat to human civilisation in the medium and long term. These threats are obvious in eastern Mediterranean states, Syria and other places in the world. This big challenge can be the earth’s last call for asking us to change our “anti-life” way of living.⁹ As David Suzuki, an environmental activist and scholar, says: *“There are some things in the world which cannot change. Gravity, entropy, the velocity of the light and our basic living needs; which are clean air, clean water, clean soul, clean energy and living diversity. The protection of the planet should be our first priority unless we are going to become sick and go extinct. There are other things like capitalism, free trade order, economy, money and market which are not natural, but manmade. These are not static and we*

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/may/09/biodiversity-its-the-ecology-stupid?CMP=twtd>

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/01/how-economic-growth-has-become-anti-life>

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can be formed in other ways. Putting economy above life is meaningless.”

The experience of the Syrian War can be the beginning of a new era. It's time to synchronise the “household management” (the meaning of economy in Greek) with “the knowledge about the home” (the meaning of ecology in Greek). Perhaps if we cannot achieve such an ambitious goal, our civilisation will be doomed to have the same destiny that prior civilisations had in history. They developed, they had prejudice in their beliefs and the right way of living but eventually disappeared due to the incapability to adapt.

COP24 which will take place in Poland at the end of 2018, provides the necessary platform for conveying this concern to the international community. 20, 000 people – politicians, social activists, scientists and business representatives from 190 countries will come to Katowice to discuss the situation of the planet. Climate change is itself a threat not only to one state's national security, but also to re-

gional and global security. The first step in the rectification of this issue is the initial conversation and even before this, its mere mentioning so that follow on action can be discussed and acted on.

Centre for International Relations (CIR) is an independent, non-government analytical centre established in 1996 which deals with Polish foreign policy and the most important issues of international politics. CIR is active in research, education and publishing, organises conferences and meetings, and participates in international projects in collaboration with similar institutions in many countries. CIR creates a forum for debate and exchange of ideas in matters of international politics, relations between states and challenges in the global world. CIR's activities are addressed above all to local-government officials and to entrepreneurs, as well as to officials of the central administration, politicians, diplomats, political scientists and the media. In 2014, CIR was again recognised as one of the best think-tanks in East-Central Europe in the study "The Leading Public Policy Research Organisations in the World" conducted by the University of Pennsylvania.

