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# WikiLeaks, Drought and Syria

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In the 1970s, I got both my bachelor's and master's degrees in modern Middle East studies, and I can assure you that at no time did environmental or climate issues appear anywhere in the syllabi of my courses. Today, you can't understand the Arab awakenings — or their solutions — without considering climate, environment and population stresses.

I've been reporting on the connection between the Syrian drought and the uprising there for a Showtime documentary that will air in April, but recently our researchers came across a WikiLeaks cable that brilliantly foreshadowed how environmental stresses would fuel the uprising. Sent on Nov. 8, 2008, from the U.S. Embassy in Damascus to the State Department, the cable details how, in light of what was a devastating Syrian drought — it lasted from 2006-10 — Syria's U.N. food and agriculture representative, Abdullah bin Yehia, was seeking drought assistance from the U.N. and wanted the U.S. to contribute. Here are some key lines:

■ “The U.N. Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs launched an appeal on September 29 requesting roughly \$20.23 million to assist an estimated one million people impacted by what the U.N. describes as the country's worst drought in four decades.”

■ “Yehia proposes to use money from the appeal to provide seed and technical assistance to 15,000 small-holding farmers in northeast Syria in an effort to preserve the social and economic fabric of this rural, agricultural community. If UNFAO efforts fail, Yehia predicts mass migration from the northeast, which could act as a multiplier on social and economic pressures already at play and undermine stability.”

■ “Yehia does not believe that the [government of Bashar al-Assad] will

allow any Syrian citizen to starve. ... However, Yehia told us that the Syrian minister of agriculture ... stated publicly that economic and social fallout from the drought was ‘beyond our capacity as a country to deal with.’ What the U.N. is trying to combat through this appeal, Yehia says, is the potential for ‘social destruction’ that would accompany erosion of the agricultural industry in rural Syria. This social destruction would lead to political instability.”

■ “Without direct assistance, Yehia predicts that most of these 15,000 small-holding farmers would be forced to depart Al Hasakah Province to seek work in larger cities in western Syria. Approximately 100,000 dependents — women, children and the elderly or infirm — would be left behind to live in poverty, he said. Children would be likely to be pulled from school, he warned, in order to seek a source of income for families left behind. In addition, the migration of 15,000 unskilled laborers would add to the social and economic pressures presently at play in major Syrian cities. A system already burdened by a large Iraqi refugee population may not be able to absorb another influx of displaced persons, Yehia explained, particularly at this time of rising costs, growing dissatisfaction of the middle class, and a perceived weakening of the social fabric and security structures that Syrians have come to expect and — in some cases — rely on.”

Yehia was prophetic. By 2010, roughly one million Syrian farmers, herders and their families were forced off the land into already overpopulated and underserved cities. These climate refugees were crowded together with one million Iraqi war refugees. The Assad regime failed to effectively help any of them, so when the Arab awakenings erupted in Tunisia and Egypt, Syrian democrats followed suit and quickly found many willing recruits from all those dislocated by the drought.

But also consider this: Last May 9, The Times of Israel quoted Israeli geographer Arnon Soffer as observing that in the past 60 years, the population in the Middle East has twice doubled. “There is no example of this anywhere else on earth.”

And this: Last March, the International Journal of Climatology published a study, “Changes in extreme temperature and precipitation in the Arab region,” that found “consistent warming trends since the middle of the 20th century across the region,” manifested in “increasing frequencies of warm nights, fewer cool days and cool nights.”

And then consider this: Syria’s government couldn’t respond to a

prolonged drought *when there was a Syrian government*. So imagine what could happen if Syria is faced by another drought after much of its infrastructure has been ravaged by civil war.

And, finally, consider this: “In the future, who will help a country like Syria when it gets devastated by its next drought if we are in a world where everyone is dealing with something like a Superstorm Sandy,” which alone cost the U.S. \$60 billion to clean up? asks Joe Romm, founder of ClimateProgress.org.

So to Iran and Saudi Arabia, who are funding the proxy war in Syria between Sunnis and Shiites/Alawites, all I can say is that you’re fighting for control of a potential human/ecological disaster zone. You need to be working together to rebuild Syria’s resiliency, and its commons, not destroying it. I know that in saying this I am shouting into a dust storm. But there is nothing else worth saying.

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