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**Climate Change Displacement:
Through the Lens of Citizenship and Belonging
With Case Studies from the Middle East and North Africa**

Throughout 2019 and 2020, the Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies will release a series of bulletins examining how citizenship is located at the nexus of several overlapping issues related to displacement, human rights, and the role of civil society in the Arab Region.

I.

Introduction: The Issue & its Importance



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Although the connection between climate change and human migration was first noted in 1976, that connection only became part of public discourse in the 2000s.¹

Every year, more people around the world are forced to leave their homes due to climate-related events; by 2050, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that 200 million people may be displaced in this way.²

However, the international regime on refugees as it exists today is ill-suited to accommodate ‘climate migrants’ as a group, and climate migrants do not receive the same legal protections as those termed ‘refugees.’

This terminology, and the consequences of being labeled a ‘refugee’ or ‘climate migrant,’ create gaps in protection; this speaks to the international legal regime’s overdue need to consider more broadly the drivers of migration and how to best protect people on the move as those drivers expand beyond conflict.

Furthermore, as the magnitude of both climate displacement and conflict displacement increase, it is necessary to acknowledge a major driver underlying both types of migration: *ineffective citizenship*. By ineffective citizenship, we mean where the state fails to secure the human rights of its citizenry.³

¹ Brown, Lester Russell, Patricia L. McGrath, and Bruce Stokes, Twenty-Two Dimensions of the Population Problem, WorldWatch Paper 5 (Washington, D.C.: WorldWatch Institute, 1976).

² Brown, Oli, “Migration and Climate Change,” IOM Migration Research Series (Geneva: IOM International Organization for Migration, 2008). p.11. https://www.iom.cz/files/Migration_and_Climate_Change_-_IOM_Migration_Research_Series_No_31.pdf

³ Broadly speaking, the substance of human rights and citizenship rights overlap, albeit with a few exceptions.

I.

Introduction: The Issue & its Importance

Define: what is ineffective citizenship?

Just as the state is responsible for maintaining stability in times of conflict or crisis, so too is it responsible for mitigating issues related to climate change and its processes. When we say “ineffective citizenship,” we refer to the failure of a state to take action to secure the human rights of their citizens in any scenario.⁴



Ineffective citizenship underscores migration related to both climate and conflict. Therefore climate migrants must be given the same legal protections afforded to refugees in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (the Refugee Convention).

To ensure equal protection for climate migrants, states must mitigate the burden of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) by:

(1) increasing refugee resettlement quotas, (2) initiating research into the climate-migration nexus, and (3) adhering to multilateral climate treaties to combat climate change to prevent climate-related migration.

Ultimately, states must take normative action in conjunction with international lawmakers and the public to make avoidance of climate displacement an international legal norm.

⁴ For a further explanation of this concept, please refer to [the BCARS podcast, “On the Move,”](#) Episode 5 with Rami Khouri, internationally syndicated columnist.

II.

Citizenship Rights & Climate Migration

The core responsibility of the state is to ensure safety and security for those living within its borders, which is executed via the concept of citizenship; citizenship is thus a “concept” as well as a legal “status” that allows individual citizens the ability to exercise their human rights. Thus, in bestowing citizenship to individuals, states undertake to promote an environment in which the rights of their citizens can be exercised and enjoyed to the fullest extent.

When states fail to do so, the resulting scenario is one of ineffective citizenship. When individuals migrate for reasons related to climate, it is because the state has failed to ensure their human right to security (and freedom) of residence.⁵

Moreover, when citizenship becomes ineffective, individuals have the right to migrate to an area in which their right to security may be better realized.

Violation of the right to security of residence may manifest itself in two tangential violations: that of the right to live free of conflict and right to subsistence.

Firstly, competition over dwindling resources precipitated by climate change is likely to develop into ‘climate-induced conflict,’ which may be internal (as in the cases of mass protest or civil war) or cross-border (as in the cases of political tension or armed conflict between states).

When conflict is connected to climate change, state failure to mitigate climate change as a driver is a fundamental part of its failure to protect and uphold the human rights of its citizens.

Moreover, there is a human right to an adequate standard of living, and to security from the state in the event of uncontrollable livelihood loss.⁶

Climate change processes like natural disasters, drought, desertification, and ocean acidification can devastate economies, particularly those reliant on agriculture, herding, or fishing.

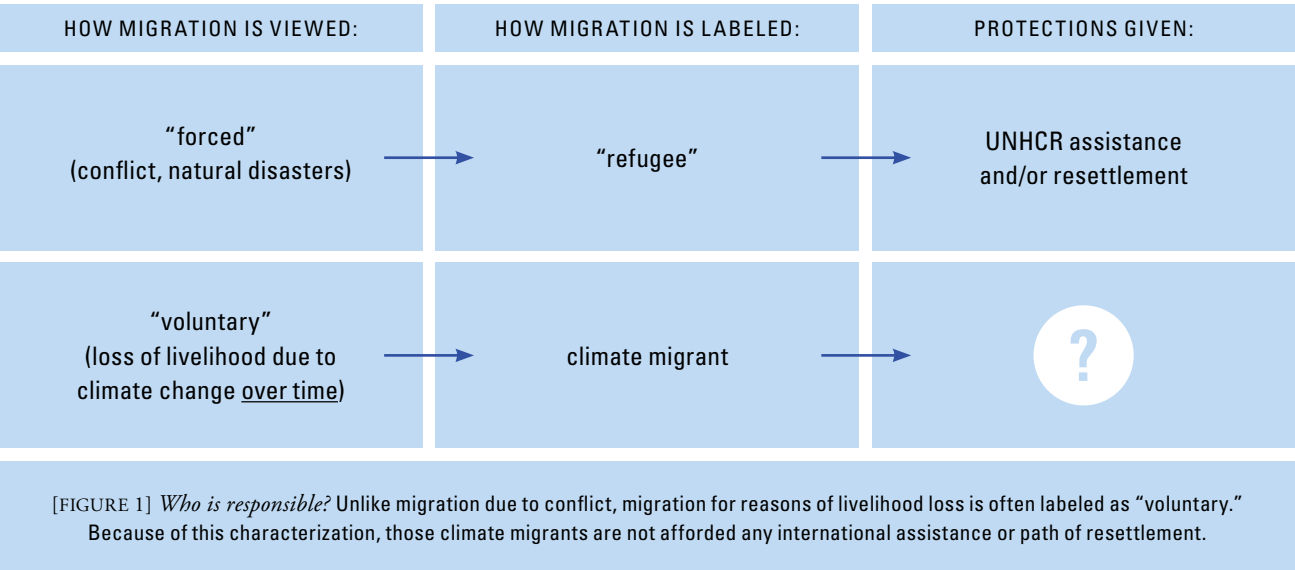
Individuals may face job loss as industries deteriorate, or may be unable to produce food adequate for subsistence. When a state (a) fails to mitigate climate drivers and (b) fails to provide contingencies for these dynamics, affected individuals are compelled to migrate, and the state again fails to effectively fulfill the human rights of citizenship.

⁵ United Nations, “Universal Declaration on Human Rights,” 217 A (III) § (1948), Art. 13.

⁶ United Nations, UDHR, Article 25.

III.

Incompatibility of the Legal Framework



While ineffective citizenship is a root cause of migration, it is not considered by the international legal system in assessing paths forward for migrants. Rather, the system sorts migrants by the manner in which their citizenship has become ineffective, e.g., by conflict or by economic reasons.

The category that each individual is placed into then determines which protections and assistance each will receive, regardless of

the common driver of ineffective citizenship.

As [FIGURE 1] demonstrates, the responsibility to protect climate migrants is not adequately addressed in the current system, and climate migrants are unable to gain access to effective citizenship despite migrating.

Migrants who are legally labeled *refugees* within this system “have a kind of privileged status among

other migrants” in that they are afforded clear pathways to citizenship under the auspices of the UNHCR.⁷

Although climate migrants are eligible for UNHCR assistance if they have also been affected by armed conflict, there is no legal recognition of ‘climate migrants’ as a group. There is no legal framework for their resettlement, so they must seek to do so through the legal systems of states.

⁷ Choe-Smith, Un, “Political Refugees and Economic Migrants: A Distinction Without a Difference?” *Refugees Now: Rethinking Borders, Hospitality, and Citizenship*, London: Rowan and Littlefield International (2019), p.106.

III.

Incompatibility of the Legal Framework



A differentiation must be made here between ‘resettlement’ and ‘citizenship,’ and between ‘citizenship’ and ‘effective citizenship.’

Subsistence climate migrants may resettle, or gain residence in a state, by legal (e.g., obtaining a visa) or illegal means (e.g., overstaying a visa or entering illegally), but both scenarios constitute a displacement period that is characterized by “limited and disadvantaged access to jobs, lack of access to education for children, lack of access to health services, and the inability ... to claim ... other rights in society, including freedom of movement.”⁸

These “margizens”⁹—citizens of “elsewhere” living on the margins in another society—may enjoy certain rights, but do not hold

the foundational right of security of residence. Because security of residence is a foundation of citizenship, host states fail to fully incorporate climate migrants into their social contracts and often allow them to live on the fringes of society.

Thus, for many climate migrants, the insecurity and loss of livelihoods that might have driven them to migrate in the first place are not addressed adequately in the host state either.

Refugees, in contrast, may be afforded the access in host countries that migrants lack by the international framework.

For example, states are legally bound to facilitate refugee access to wage-earning employment and

to provide public education for children.¹⁰ Moreover, recognition under the Refugee Convention affords migrants with a sense of acknowledgement or self-fulfillment, which is part of what makes citizenship effective.

By affixing migrants with the label of “refugee,” the international community recognizes the severity of their plight; it confirms that a harm has been done.

This recognition does not extend to subsistence climate migrants, and, as such, separates them from effective citizenship by one more degree.

⁸ Mehta, Lyla and Rebecca Napier-Moore. “Citizenship and Displacement,” *Institute of Development Studies*, Special Issue: Citizenship and Displacement, 09 February 2011, no. 354 (December 2010): 1–42, p.12.

⁹ Ibid, p.12

¹⁰ United Nations, Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Art.17, 22.

IV.

Climate Migration in the Arab Region



The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is one critical locus of a dual crisis facing the entire globe: increased vulnerability to both climate change and migrant flow.

The MENA as a whole is particularly vulnerable to desertification and drought as a result of global warming, which occurs twice as fast in the region as it does in the rest of the world.¹¹ World Bank analysts conducted household surveys amongst respondents in Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Syria, and the Republic of Yemen, and

found that 52% of respondents experienced more frequent livestock loss and 55% experienced more frequent crop failure as a result of drought.¹²

Since many MENA states employ over half of their populations in the pastoral and/or agricultural sectors, the systemic consequences of drought in the region are especially dire.¹³ A decades-long trend—the “ruralization of cities”—continues unabated; rural workers continue to internally migrate to urban areas, adding even more

stress to urban economies already affected by climate change and increased social tensions.¹⁴ These issues are compounded by the fact that MENA countries, many of which are struggling with internal or international conflicts, often also have a “low coping capacity” to address climate change.¹⁵

Thus, due to the nature of the economy as well as the state of conflict, the impacts of climate change may be felt at a greater magnitude in MENA than they would elsewhere.

¹¹ Max Plank Society, “Climate-Exodus Expected in the Middle East and North Africa,” *phys.org*, May 20, 2016. Accessed November 15, 2019. <https://phys.org/news/2016-05-climate-exodus-middle-east-north-africa.html>.

¹² The World Bank. “Climate Change and Migration: Evidence from the Middle East and North Africa,” March 2014, p.xv.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.164

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ “Global Peace Index 2019: Measuring Peace in a Complex World,” Sydney: Institute for Economics and Peace, June 2019, p.46.

Violations in Action: the Case of Syria



Syria is one of the most potent examples of climate conflict. The Syrian civil war is attributable, in part, to a four-stage climate process. First, a major drought from 2006-2009; second, devastation of the Syrian agricultural economy; third, massive internal migration from rural to urban areas; and, finally, inflammation of existing grievances and sociopolitical tensions by that migration.¹⁶

Syria is a case study in the violation of both the right to subsistence and the right to live free from conflict. The right to subsistence was not fulfilled when the Syrian state allowed the demise of the agricultural economy, which made it nearly impossible for Syrians to live in rural areas.

Additionally, when the inevitable economic and social tensions rose and people took to the streets in protest, the state acted with violence and exacerbated resulting tensions rather than ameliorate them.

Despite the role played by the combination of major drought and state violation of the right to subsistence, the Syrian refugee crisis is seen through the lens of the Arab Uprisings and resulting conflict.

Indeed, Syrian cross-border migrants would not be called ‘refugees’ if that violence did not exist. By virtue of that label, Syrian refugees are eligible for access to the refugee camps, international humanitarian assistance, and the resettlement process managed through UNHCR.

Although it is likely that the number of refugees fleeing Syria would be far fewer had the 2006–2009 drought not fueled the uprisings of 2011, it is important to emphasize that migrants crossing borders solely due to that drought would not fall into the same legal framework that Syrian refugees do. In fact, they would fall under the umbrella of subsistence climate migrants, who are not adequately protected by international law.

¹⁶ Ide, Tobias. “Climate War in the Middle East? Drought, the Syrian Civil War and the State of Climate-Conflict Research,” *Current Climate Change Reports* 4, no. 4 (December 2018): 347–54, p.1.

IV.

Climate Migration in the Arab Region



MENA states are under added pressure because they experience internal migration in addition to receiving record-high numbers of migrants. North African states in particular act as “transit countries” through which many climate migrants move from Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe.¹⁷ Invariably, many migrants undertaking this path are absorbed by the North African states.

Such settlement is due in part to incentives given to North African states by European states to prevent migrants from reaching their

borders.¹⁸ These incentives may contribute to the characterization that Algeria is transitioning “from an emigration country to an immigration country due to climate change.”¹⁹

The substantial influx of migrants into MENA states places tremendous stress on already scarce resources. Water availability, already diminished by climate change, will face additional pressure as the population continues to grow. Jordan is a particularly potent example. Jordan is an extremely water-scarce country to begin with, but “Syrian

refugees have increased [its] water needs by 21 percent.”²⁰ Before Syrian refugees started seeking refuge in the country, Jordan was the fourth water-poorest country in the world; today, Jordan ranks as third poorest.²¹ Thus, climate change plays a dual role in that it both diminishes resources and increases demand for them.

Often, that nexus results in conflict, political instability (at home and among neighboring states), and in further migration.

¹⁷ Elkins, Charles. “Environment, Security and Migration in the Middle East and North Africa: Looking to the Future,” Event Report (The East-West Institute, May 17, 2018).

¹⁸ The Population Council, ed., “Effects of Future Climate Change on Cross-Border Migration in North Africa and India,” *Population and Development Review* 36, no. 2 (June 16, 2010): 408–12, p.410.

¹⁹ Elkins, “Environment, Security, and Migration.”

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ USAID. “Jordan Water Management Initiative,” March 2018.

There are a number of steps policy-makers, international lawmakers, and individuals can take to reconcile the international legal frameworks related to migration *writ large*, keeping in mind the realities of climate migration and the needs of those affected:

Erasure of the ‘Migrant v. Refugee’ Distinction

The issue remains that only those termed refugees are eligible to participate in the UNHCR resettlement process, not those termed *migrants*.

Climate migrants should receive the same protections afforded to refugees by the Refugee Convention, which entail both resettlement and recognition. Migrants deserve these protections on the grounds not of political persecution but of ineffective citizenship. Citizenship is a vehicle of human rights, and, therefore, all humans

who lack it *in its fullest form* are entitled to seek it elsewhere to maintain their human dignity.

Increased Responsibility-Sharing

The case studies of Jordan and the North African states demonstrate that states shouldering the largest influx of migrants and refugees are often those with the least environmental capacity to sustain them. The US and Europe, on the other hand, on the other hand, consistently lower annual resettlement quotas and provide incentives to transit countries to contain migration.^{22,23}

States with the resources to do so need to increase their annual resettlement quotas or become resettlement states if they are not already. This way, MENA states may refocus their energy on combating climate change and its effects within their borders.

Further Research into Climate-Driven Displacement

Although some research has been done regarding the nexus between climate processes and displacement, much more is needed.

Due to the multi-causal nature of climate displacement, generating statistics surrounding direct climate displacement is difficult. However, insights can be made into the causal chains that precipitate displacement in hopes of highlighting climate change as an underlying cause.

Recognize Climate Displacement

States act, as a matter of diplomacy and self-interest, to prevent conflict and to prevent the creation of refugees. States need to recognize climate change as a driver of migration, and act to mitigate climate change just as they traditionally mitigate conflict.

²² The Population Council, “Effects of Future Climate Change.”

²³ Abderrahim, Tasnim, “North Africa, Europe’s Last Resort on Migration,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Middle East Analysis*, February 23, 2017.

V.

Conclusion and Key Recommendations



This necessitates both further research, as detailed above, and the leadership of the international community.

While the Global Compact on Migration, a UN-global agreement attempting to create a common approach to international migration, strives to be comprehensive, it is not legally binding. Additionally, although state parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have an obligation to combat climate change, they are not bound to do so for reasons of displacement.

Therefore, recognizing climate displacement and developing actionable mechanisms to address the links between climate change and migration are vital.

Global Adherence to Climate Change Legislation

Finally, the linkage between climate change and displacement cannot be made clear without a global effort to combat climate change before displacement takes place. The effort must be undertaken particularly by developed states like the United States by virtue of their increased ability to do so.

The Paris Agreement to the UNFCCC must be made universal, and states must make tangible efforts to combat climate change as a matter of self-preservation, national interest, and in accordance with the Nationally Determined Contributions set forth in the Paris Agreement.

For more information and access to an extended version of this paper, please contact:

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