

Episode Transcript

Episode Title:

The Climate-Security Nexus in Syria

Guest:

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Jon Alterman:

Marwa Daoudy is an assistant professor at Georgetown University and the author of the recently published book *The Origins of the Syrian Conflict: Climate Change and Human Security*. Marwa, welcome to Babel.

Marwa Daoudy:

Thank you very much for having me.

Jon Alterman:

In 2013, Thomas Friedman argued for the role of drought kicking off the Syrian civil war. Citing Samir Aita, he wrote that “When Assad took power in 2000, he opened up the agricultural sector to large farmers, many of them government cronies. They bought up land and they drilled for as much water as they wanted. The water table dropped and that began driving small farmers off the land into towns where they had to scrounge for work and that helped precipitate the Syrian civil war.” Does that sound basically right to you?

Marwa Daoudy:

It's interesting to contextualize such claims, and Thomas Friedman was one voice amongst many others—mainly originating in the US or in Europe—who started claiming that there was a climate-conflict nexus and that it was applicable to the Syrian case. And as you described very accurately, there was actually a drought between 2006 and 2010, and it did impact the agricultural and the farmer communities in northeastern Syria tremendously.

It caused poverty, unemployment, migration, displacement. The problem with such analysis is that it disregards the political context. The origins of the human insecurity experienced by these populations lies in the types of policies that were chosen, which were in fact motivated by ideological choices.

Jon Alterman:

Help us unpack that. The government made choices about resources, the government made choices about politics. How did people respond?

Marwa Daoudy:

The choices that were made were to liberalize the agricultural sector and to focus on the urban centers, to liberalize all of the sectors that were providing safety nets to the agricultural populations in terms of subsidies on food and fuel, at a time when there was a very, very drastic drought happening. This clearly impacted the human security of the population and this is what I show in my book.

But this is one element of several layers of human insecurity over the decades preceding the uprising which also find their roots in political discontent, political repression, economic insecurity rooted in corruption, and different policy choices which disregarded the needs of the most vulnerable populations in Syria.

Jon Alterman:

And this was true in the northeast for years. I remember being in Damascus and hearing—probably in the early 2000s—that there were disturbances in Hasakah, all the way over in the northeast of the country. Is there something different about environmental issues from other issues of governance, from other issues of what you might call government repression?

Marwa Daoudy:

What is important in understanding environmental insecurity is that you cannot understand it if you don't relate it to other types of insecurities. We need to have a multi-layered approach and analysis, which looks into what type of environmental insecurity you have, which is actually the

drought. You also have the political components, which is what choices were made by the ruling elite at the time when they decided to liberalize. And again, you mentioned Hasakah—the Northeast—there's something very specific about that region. It's one of the poorest regions in Syria, which has depended on agricultural production, food production, to sustain its livelihood. What happened is when the subsidies were abruptly removed, that precipitated increased poverty and increased displacement because of whole families who had to migrate to other areas of the country where they had relatives, because they could not sustain themselves anymore and the government did not address their needs.

That created discontent, drawing on environmental issues, but it's also the political economy and the political management of the drought that triggered that discontent. This is one of the different elements that precipitated major mobilization and uprisings, which were based on global human insecurity in Syria, where the drought was one of the elements.

Jon Alterman:

Of course, economists argue that agricultural subsidies are often distorting and that if farmers were being sustained by getting the subsidies, that suggests that this in fact was a sector that needed to be reformed anyway. Maybe there were too many people in the agricultural sector; you can make an economic argument that this was necessary. The question is, how do you handle the political consequences of your economic argument? Is that really what was going on or was something more nefarious afoot?

Marwa Daoudy:

No, that's a very good point. Clearly, the problem with subsidies is that they can encourage corruption and that's what

happened as well in Syria. People were buying the fuel at the subsidized price and selling it outside of the country. That was enriching the upper levels of society, even in the northeast of Syria where the poorest parts of the population were not always benefiting. So there was a need for reform. The problem is, even when the World Bank advised the Syrian government to reform and to remove the subsidies, their advice was to gradually remove the subsidies, not abruptly.

And again, there was a severe drought so the farmers had an even larger need for the subsidies at the time of the drought. But then the Ba'ath party and President Bashar al Assad decided to move on to what he described as a “social market economy” where he was getting inspired by the reforms implemented in Germany after the Second World War. The problem is that type of reform, which was meant to diminish corruption, increased corruption, crony capitalism, and benefits to the urban centers and the urban merchants, at the expense of the rural populations.

Jon Alterman:

What's interesting is, the more we talk, the more it feels like the real driver is politics and not economics. You can look at the economics of regulatory reform and subsidy reform, but they're really driven, in your mind, by the imperatives of elite politics, in a country where you might think, well, it's not democracy, so it doesn't matter what most of the people think. And I think the argument that I hear you make is that it actually does matter what most of the people think, because it's not that you have to get people's vote, but if you push people too much, they'll revolt.

Marwa Daoudy:

Well clearly, the more people are marginalized, the more discontented, the more they will react at some point, and I think the trigger was also the Arab Awakening, which suddenly echoed very much within Syria. Clearly the roots of the uprisings are about social injustice, about repression, about economic insecurity, but there's a political dimension to it too.

I do think that the more you push people, the more you have them become vulnerable, the more there will be a reaction at some point. And the wealth gap started being very visible in Syria. If you look at the years starting from the early 2000s and the decade that preceded the uprising, there were more external signs of wealth apparent in Syrian society and increasing poverty. It showed that there was increased corruption and a new cast of ruling elites, which came after Bashar al Assad came to power, who were getting a lot of the benefits of these new reforms, the new economy which was supposed to benefit everyone.

And if you look at the official statements of the time, it was to end the era of corruption. It actually increased corruption in Syria. So I would say it's a mix of political and economic elements, but the issue of social justice was very important for the people who felt completely marginalized in these efforts.

Jon Alterman:

So I wouldn't ask you to give advice to Bashar al Assad. But if you're in the position where you're in the Syrian government and you are trying to preside over a weakening economy, what do you compromise on? What do you try to accentuate? How do you create a balance to move forward when it doesn't feel like there are a lot of very good options?

Marwa Daoudy:

It's interesting, because at the time when these reforms were taking place there were very interesting debates happening between Syrian experts in Damascus.

They were meeting, writing papers about the reforms, about the need to modernize, about the need to change the economy and the social distribution of resources. They were focusing on the fact that of course reforms were needed, but the pace of the reforms and the need to preserve safety nets for vulnerable parts of the population was very much present in those papers. And these were economists, irrigation specialists, agricultural specialists, etc., who at the time were able to write quite openly.

Of course, their opinion was not taken into account, but their main take on all of this is that we need reform, but it has to be done by keeping in mind the need for safety nets, which were completely removed very abruptly, and taking into account also the drought that was happening at the same time. I believe the Syrian government at the time did not listen to these different voices and opinions. When it decided to reinstall the subsidies, it was already too late to do so.

They did not securitize the drought. They did not take into account what was happening in the remote areas of the country, which ended up impacting the urban-rural divide, which is one of the root causes of the uprising as well. And it's not a coincidence that some of the mobilizations took place in Damascus and in some of the urban centers, but they really, really increased in the rural areas where people felt completely marginalized.

So I would say it's hard to give advice. Of course, this is retroactive advice. But if you go back to the papers written at the time by these experts who were debating all of these reforms, they had very clear guidance, which was, “yes, we need to reform the agricultural sector, we need to modernize irrigation, we need to modernize the agricultural production, the subsidies that are provided to the population.” But again, keep in mind they're telling us it needs to be done gradually, which was not how it was done.

Jon Alterman:

One of the broader threats that Syria faces now is the threat of Covid-19. There are cases within Syria, the health infrastructure is relatively weak, and the level of poverty in Syria is relatively high. There are a lot of people crowded together. Should we be thinking about the threat of Covid-19 and the government's potential inability to respond effectively to that as a similar kind of threat to the environmental threat that you described in your book, or is it somehow different?

Marwa Daoudy:

This is an added security threat for the vulnerable populations, which is unfortunately the same way the water and the drought security threat was not managed—is currently mismanaged—by the government, which is more keen on having statements saying “the threat is being contained effectively, that there are only a few cases.” These are very, very underestimated when it comes to Syria.

The problem is it's combined with increasing poverty levels. We know that the food prices have doubled in recent months, that people are actually hungry, and that not much is being done to address their needs. So my concern with this is that a lot of

people are dying and we're not hearing exactly how many are. The healthcare system and the hospitals are not equipped to address the needs of these populations.

In addition, I would say the refugees outside of Syria, the Syrian refugees are the first victims of all this, because there are also far reaching economic consequences for them in their host countries.

Jon Alterman:

I know that you have spent most of your academic career looking at issues of the environment in Syria. How much of what you're describing is generalizable to the region? Should people who are interested in Iraq read your book to see a possible future for Iraq? Should people interested in Jordan look at your book to think about possible futures for Jordan? Are the phenomena that you've seen largely true throughout water scarce countries in the Middle East? Or is there something particular about the way these issues came together in Syria that made them explosive which aren't generalizable to the rest of the region?

Marwa Daoudy: I believe it is generalizable, and my book has a conceptual component, which is generalizable to other cases of climate and security, and I will explain why. And for example, I developed a new conceptual framework which I call human-environmental-climate security to show the interactions between human security, climate security, and political and economic structures. And by doing so I tried to outline the unequal power structures that cause or encourage human suffering, with the significant implications for climate and security and its consequences.

This is relevant for power relations between the global north and the south or a central government and its marginalized subjects.

My next project actually is to look into climate and security and food insecurity, comparing the Middle East and Syria and beyond, Syria and a few African countries which experienced the same level of environmental insecurity. So this combined, multi-layered, conceptual analysis is applicable. I think by looking at all of these different layers of economic, climate, political factors it is applicable to cases other than the Syrian case.

Jon Alterman: We will look forward to reading it. Thank you very much for joining us.

Marwa Daoudy: Thank you very much for this interesting conversation Jon.