CLIMATE MIGRATION IN SYRIA
AN OVERVIEW

EAST BAY SANCTUARY COVENANT

AMPLIFYING SANCTUARY VOICES
In Syria, a ten-year civil war has incited a profound and visible refugee crisis, as water insecurity and drought exacerbates tension and fuels insurgency throughout the region. Of the 60 million displaced persons worldwide, over 40 percent originate from Southwest Asia (UNHCR).

ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

A nation heavily dependent on its agricultural production, Syria is especially vulnerable to the rising global temperatures that have lessened rainfall and resulted in the nation’s most severe drought from 2006 to 2011. Extreme weather has also stripped the Syrian landscape of its topsoil, causing a decade-long series of dust storms between 2001 and 2011.

Water insecurity and drought have fueled interstate conflict and displaced approximately 13 million people since 2006.

Rural communities who depend on agriculture and livestock are most severely impacted as they are forced to migrate due to loss of livelihoods, increasing resource competition and armed conflict.

“The entire world needs to be planning for a drier future in [the Middle East]. And there will be lots of global implications.”

GLOBAL RESPONSES

The lack of state and international unity has left tens of millions still in limbo awaiting proper resettlement. Globally, refugee admissions have declined significantly. Both the United States and the European Union have responded to increased climate migration with restrictive migration policies, enacting both physical and legislative measures to control external borders and migration flows.

How does climate change contribute to existing conflicts in Syria?

After reading “Armed Conflict in the Era of Climate Crisis: An Analysis of the Syrian Refugee Crisis Amid Water Insecurity and Drought,” by Augustina Ullman, consider the following: What roles do the pre-democracy insurrections in Egypt and Tunisia play in the ongoing war in Syria?

What can we do to support people forced to flee Syria? Research five organizations that support Syrian refugees and assess the potential impact of supporting each one.

In 2015, a Lebanese-American student interviewed a nine year old boy from Syria named Steven and published his story on Imagining Home: CCSF Oral History Project. Read “I Left My Heart In Syria,” by Serena Mokatish, and try to imagine how Steven’s sense of home and belonging have changed throughout his life.

Read “I Left My Heart In Syria,” by Serena Mokatish, and note any human rights abuses. Based on your interpretations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), analyze how Steven’s specific human rights have been abused.

Thinking about Syria within the global context of this exhibit, what similarities and differences do you see between this region and others?
ENVIRONMENTAL OVERVIEW

Syria is a small country that is reliant on its agricultural sector to generate the nation’s economy. However, less than ten percent of the country’s surface is permanently arable, making the nation especially vulnerable to the rising global temperatures that have lessened rainfall and resulted in the nation’s most severe drought from 2006 to 2011.

Extreme weather driven by climate change has also stripped the Syrian landscape of its topsoil, causing a decade-long series of dust storms between 2001 and 2011, similar to the United States’s “dust bowl.” According to researchers, natural variability alone was unlikely to account for the trends in wind, rain, and heat that led to the massive drought. Consequently, rampant unemployment threw the country into economic turmoil, and hundreds of thousands of agricultural workers and households were reduced to poverty and forced to migrate from the rural countryside to urban centers in hopes of work.

The Climate’s Role in the Syrian Civil War

With the onset of Arab Spring in 2011, revolts incited pro-democracy insurrections throughout the Middle East. In response, the Syrian government used violence to suppress demonstrators, who protested against corruption, economic stagnation, and lack of political freedom. The tension and fighting rapidly escalated, and the nation descended into a civil war within months. Since then, nearly half of the country’s total population (approximately 13 million) has been displaced. Approximately 5.7 million Syrians have fled abroad, and 6.2 million have been internally displaced.

6 Ibid.
For years, many have argued that rising temperatures will likely spur waves of human migration and battles over increasingly scarce resources—particularly water. While Daoudy (2019) argues that government policies were central to the social and political unrest that engulfed the nation into civil war, the climate-driven 2006-2010 drought in Syria likely exacerbated the displacement and discontent, culminating with the 2011 uprising.

However, the climate-conflict nexus is widely controversial as it is nearly impossible to distill any one driver of the Syrian war. Century-long observed trends in precipitation, temperature, and sea-level pressure, supported by climate model results, strongly suggest that anthropogenic forcing has increased the probability of severe and persistent droughts in this region. Moreover, Ayazi and Elsheikh (2019) underscore the interactions between these environmental changes with social and political dynamics, as escalating conflict and violence in Southwest Asia may have been exacerbated by hydrologic cycle impacts. Rural communities who depend on agriculture and livestock-related livelihoods are most severely impacted, especially amid the outbreak of war, conflict, and political strife in the region.

Current Climate of Migration

Despite having not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, neighboring countries Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan have absorbed nearly 93 percent of the refugees and asylum-seekers from Southwest Asia. Consequently, Turkey announced two migration management reforms in 2016 to comply with the influx of migrants: (i) a visa requirement for Syrians arriving from “third countries,” and (ii) a work permit for Syrians who have lived in the Turkey for over six months. Syrians without visas are still allowed entry, but many humanitarian organizations have reported a growing pushback of asylum-seekers and refugees directly crossing the Syria-Turkey border.

10Ibid.
12Ibid.
13Ibid.
The European Union’s response has been dominated by similar restrictive migration policies, enacting both physical and legislative measures to control external borders and migration flows. Since the height of the crisis in 2015, the E.U. has significantly reduced “irregular arrivals” by more than 90 percent, namely through the E.U.-Turkey deal for control of the Eastern Mediterranean route from Turkey to Greece. Moreover, there have been accounts of forced removal, mistreatment, denial of basic services, and unjust detainment that have ultimately exacerbated tension and hostility within the region.

**POLICY RESPONSES**

The ongoing war has devastated the nation and forged a new generation of Syrians who now grapple with trauma and state identity as the war enters its tenth year. The lack of state and international unity has left tens of millions of migrants still in limbo awaiting proper resettlement, despite international intervention by Russia, Iran, and others that fuel the conflict. Western states have aided from afar with financial and international support, but the crisis calls for greater action.

Properly addressing the climate crisis goes beyond mitigating greenhouse gas emissions and other empirical metrics—it means uplifting and validating those nations who are on the frontlines of our changing climate. While regional and state governance may be most effective in developing and implementing specific refugee protections, it is the responsibility of international law to delineate a human rights-first approach to the climate crisis. The nature of this issue is inherently complex and difficult to define, but expanding the ‘refugee’ category at large, developing infrastructure to assist in the movement of these persons, and shaping the capacity to adequately protect them may pressure idle countries into action and thereby compel them to bear the financial costs associated with environmental exploitation. Transformative action is needed, and it must be backed by sustained international support and political and financial commitment.