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Climate Change, Migration, and Conflict in Northwest Africa

Rising Dangers and Policy Options Across the Arc of Tension

Michael Werz and Laura Conley April 2012



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Introduction and summary

Northwest Africa is crisscrossed with climate, migration, and security challenges. From Nigeria to Niger, Algeria, and Morocco, this region has long been marked by labor migration, bringing workers from sub-Saharan Africa north to the Mediterranean coastline and Europe. To make that land journey, migrants often cross through the Sahel and Sahel-Saharan region, an area facing increasing environmental threats from the effects of climate change. The rising coastal sea level, desertification, drought, and the numerous other potential effects of climate change have the potential to increase the numbers of migrants and make these routes more hazardous in the future. Added to these challenges are ongoing security risks in the region, such as Nigeria's struggles with homegrown insurgents and the growing reach of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which has expanded out of Algeria.

For the United States and the international community, this region is critical because of its potential for future instability. The proximity of Algeria and Morocco to Europe, Nigeria's emerging role as one of Africa's most strategically important states, and Niger's ongoing struggles with governance and poverty all demand attention. Northwest Africa's porous borders and limited resources, which allow Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb to flourish there, suggest that there is no time to waste in developing better and more effective policies for the region.

The climate, migration, and security nexus is a key test case because it is likely to exacerbate all of these existing risk factors. Climate change alone poses a daunting challenge. No matter what steps the global community takes to mitigate carbon emissions, a warmer climate is inevitable. The effects are already being felt today and are projected to intensify as climate change worsens. All of the world's regions and nations will experience some of the effects of this transformational challenge.

Changing environmental conditions are likely to prompt human migration, adding another layer of complexity. In the 21st century the world could see substantial numbers of climate migrants—people displaced by the slow or sudden onset of climate change. While experts continue to debate the details of the

causal relationship between climate change and human migration, climate change is expected to aggravate many existing migratory pressures around the world. Extreme weather events such as droughts and floods are projected to increase the number of sudden humanitarian crises in areas least able to cope, such as those already mired in poverty or prone to conflict.

Conflict and insecurity present the third layer of the nexus. This final layer is the most unpredictable, both within nations and transnationally, and will force the United States and the international community to confront climate and migration challenges within an increasingly unstructured security environment. The post-Cold War decades have seen a diffusion of national security interests and threats. U.S. security is increasingly focused on addressing nonstate actors and nontraditional sources of conflict and instability. The potential for the changing climate and associated migration to induce conflict or exacerbate existing instability is now recognized in national security circles.

This paper tracks how the overlays and intersections of climate change, migration, and security create an *arc of tension* in Northwest Africa comprising Nigeria, Niger, Algeria, and Morocco. These four nations, separated by the Sahara Desert, are rarely analyzed as a contiguous geopolitical region. Yet they are linked by existing international migration routes, which thread up from sub-Saharan Africa to the Mediterranean coast, moving people and cargo into Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and onward to Europe. Within the region, seasonal labor migration is widespread, particularly in areas vulnerable to rainfall fluctuations.

We seek to examine what will happen when the effects of climate change interact with internal and transnational security challenges along these well-traveled routes, and connect those questions to the strategic interests of the United States, Europe, and the transatlantic community. (See map of the region on page 13.)

Why we must engage in this arc of tension

Why should the U.S. and international policymakers be concerned about this nexus linking climate, migration, and security in Northwest Africa? Challenges related to the mitigation of carbon emissions as well as disaster risk management and economic and human security in the region alongside the need for a secure and stable global economy require strong partners and substantial capacities. Relatively minor investments can create significant progress toward improving

security and preparing the region for worsening climate conditions and increased migration. The costs of livelihood security, irrigation, improved migration monitors, and regional water cooperation pale alongside the likely future costs of humanitarian disaster, long-term security gaps, and conflict.

Further, among these particular countries, climate and migration patterns complicate a difficult political terrain. The United States and Europe are already involved in ongoing counterterrorism activities to help stem the growth of Al Qaeda in the Maghreb (found in Algeria, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, and potentially in Nigeria and Morocco as well) and its possible linkage to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula through this corridor.¹ The ongoing conflict in the oil-producing Niger Delta and the increasing violence of the insurgent Boko Haram movement in northern and central Nigeria, punctuated by the August 2011 suicide bombing of the U.N. building in Abuja, further underline the potential for instability, as does the Tuareg insurgency in northern Mali.

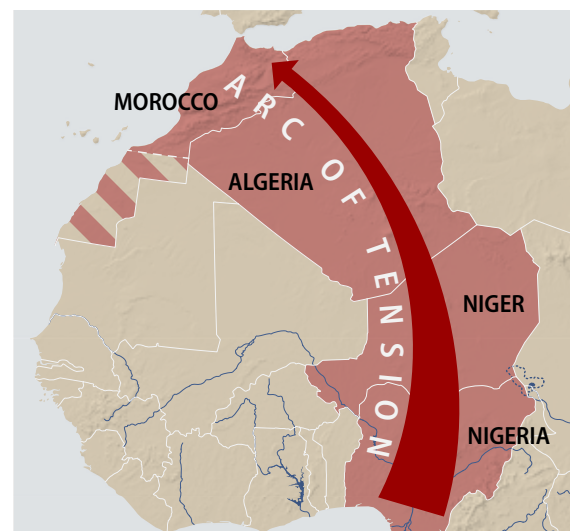
The United States and other countries have a vested interest in helping ensure that areas with weak or absent governance structures—where poverty, environmental degradation, and grievances over central governments and energy production coincide—do not become future recruiting grounds for extremists. The possible impacts of climate-related migration in such fragile situations could be destabilizing.

At the same time increased U.S. involvement in counterterrorism activities holds the potential for a serious backlash. Western involvement in its many forms could serve as a recruitment tool for those who see such efforts as a pretext for American military hegemony and establishing a forward presence in the region to secure future energy supplies and natural resources. Furthermore, geopolitical calculations of Western interest must acknowledge the added dimension of the uprisings in the Middle East and Maghreb. By focusing too narrowly on counterterrorism, U.S. policy risks being at odds with democratization movements. Maghreb states are also wary of how their cooperation with NATO on the Mediterranean Sea appears to domestic groups concerned with independence from the West.

This new pressure for transparency, both within the region's governments and regarding U.S. policy, puts a premium on nontraditional approaches to security—

Climate migration in northwest Africa

Nigeria, Niger, Algeria and Morocco bear the brunt of this growing security challenge



Source: Center for American Progress (2012).

especially with regards to human security as defined by the United Nations to ensure the security of the individual as opposed to the state.² This approach aims to mitigate threats to human conditions—including socioeconomic, political, food, health, environment, community, and personal safety—and maintain social stability.

Major U.S. imperatives in the region, including counterterrorism and reform, would be served by supporting, for example, Morocco's efforts to peacefully settle the Western Sahara dispute or Nigeria's efforts to quell ethno-religious violence. Establishing effective governance in Western Sahara and domestic stability in northern Nigeria will allay economic uncertainty in the region and reassure other states confronting North-South and Christian-Muslim divides. Periodic attacks on oil pipelines and facilities in the Niger Delta have already affected world oil prices, while widespread bank robberies blamed on Boko Haram undermine Nigeria's economic growth.³ Improving human security will lead to economic improvement.

Economic stability will in turn allow industrialized countries to cultivate greater investment in the region, which is sustaining 4 percent to 7 percent growth (with the exception of Niger at 2.5 percent), despite the lingering consequences of the Great Recession of 2007-2009. While U.S. foreign direct investment in these four countries remains predominantly in the oil and mining sectors, the region represents a significant future market for goods and services. Two-way trade between the United States and Nigeria totaled more than \$34 billion in 2010, and American foreign direct investment reached \$5.4 billion in 2009, making the United States the largest foreign investor in Nigeria.⁴

Moreover, Nigeria is already a critical partner in advancing U.S. humanitarian goals. The nation's involvement in six U.N. peace operations in Africa significantly reduces the burden on the United States in responding to regional crises.

As these countries' economies grow and diversify, they will be in a much stronger position to manage slow- and sudden-onset climate disasters, associated migration, and potential conflict. U.S. policy supporting these efforts in the region will have to balance the need for security and reform, such that these aspects are mutually reinforcing; too great a focus on either aspect will risk instability undermining reform or loss of credibility rendering security impossible.

The arc of tension begins in **Nigeria**, Africa's most populous state. Nigerians are already seeing early signs of climate change in a rising sea level, more frequent flooding, and outbreaks of disease in the southern megacity of Lagos, home to

Nigeria

- Africa's most populous country with 170 million people will remain a crucial strategic partner in tackling trade, security, and environmental concerns in Africa.
- Following independence from Britain in 1960 and the bloody Biafra civil war (1967–70), separatist movements continue to fester. Deep tensions have led to increasing violence in the north, particularly from extremist groups such as Boko Haram. In the south the armed struggle against the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta continues, exacerbated periodically by political disputes, such as that surrounding the election of Goodluck Jonathan as president in 2009.
- Despite the nation's status as the world's eighth-largest oil producer, Nigerians' quality of life, per capita incomes, and average life expectancy at birth have not improved in line with increasing oil profits. Indeed, the apportionment of oil revenues and government benefits underpin much of the social unrest in Nigeria.
- Past military coups, corruption, and natural resource grievances continue to hamper development.
- Lagos, Nigeria's megacity, is at risk from sea-level rise by 2015; an estimated 18 million Nigerians live in Lagos State, according to the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

more than 10 million people. In the northern part of the country, expanding desertification—which refers to the degradation of land productivity in dry land areas—has caused 200 villages to disappear.⁵

These opposing pressures, driven by climate change, are expected to push internal migrants toward the center of Nigeria. At the same time a rapidly growing and increasingly urban population is seeking greater economic opportunities. The combination of these demographic trends and economic aspirations spur many Nigerians to move north. Existing international migration routes link people leaving Nigeria to Niger, where they cross into the Maghreb states and potentially Europe.

Human mobility and climate change in Nigeria occur amid serious threats to national and local governance. The southern Niger Delta has supported an insurgency since the 1990s, driven in part by anger with corruption and the mismanagement of the profits from the region's booming oil industry. In the northern part of the country, religious tensions have turned violent, with more than 800 people having been killed in the central Nigerian city of Jos since January 2011.⁶ Boko Haram has undertaken attacks of increasing violence, including the U.N. bombing, and is behind a string of more than 100 armed bank robberies targeting lenders in north.⁷ A Christmas Day 2011 bombing outside Abuja killed more than 40 Christian worshippers, provoking a brutal police crackdown.⁸



People pass by dead bodies amid burning tires and debris in a street in Onitsha, Nigeria, in 2006.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS/GEORGE OSODI

Although the unrest in the Niger Delta and the violence in the north are geographically distinct, they both have their roots in underlying dissatisfaction with a government that has failed to sustain an inclusive, accountable, and transparent state. As the effects of climate change worsen, even more will be demanded of Nigeria's limited governance capacity.

Migrants from Nigeria and other sub-Saharan states who reach **Niger**, the second link in the arc of tension, enter one of Africa's most desperate states. Niger has the world's second highest fertility rate and a median age of only 15 years. Most of the booming population is dependent on rain-fed agriculture, but acreage of arable land has decreased dramatically over the past 50 years, and frequent droughts have impoverished and indebted many Nigeriens. In 2010 a severe drought left 7.1 million Nigeriens without adequate food. Climate change is expected to make the country hotter and more prone to drought, erosion, and loss of forested land, exacerbating already difficult conditions.

Niger

- Between gaining independence from France in 1960 and 1991, Niger had a one-party system. Multiparty elections established a democratic government in 1993, but institutions remained profoundly weak. The two-term president Mamadou Tandja attempted to amend the constitution to prolong his presidency, resulting in a 2010 military coup and a transitional military junta. Former Prime Minister Mahamadou Issoufou and his social-democratic party won the elections in 2011.
- Niger is deeply impoverished and consistently ranks near the bottom of the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index.
- Longstanding grievances between the Nigerien government and Tuareg rebels in the northern region, related to the underdevelopment of the vast and insecure space along the border of the Sahara, pose serious security risks.
- With a population of about 16 million people, Niger's per capita income is just \$700. The country is heavily reliant upon rain-fed agriculture, which accounted for 39 percent of gross domestic product and 90 percent of the labor force in 2009.
- Niger experiences devastating droughts. The 2005 drought—coupled with a locust infestation—led to food shortages for as many as 2.5 million Nigeriens. Food security continues to put the country at risk.

Niger also faces ongoing international and internal migration. Due to pressures from desertification and drought, some Nigerien pastoralists have shifted their migratory routes southwards into Nigeria in search of animal fodder and better grazing. In addition, unusual flooding in 2010 damaged many homes and farmland, creating an internal refugee situation and prompting other Nigeriens to seek shelter and employment in Nigeria, Libya, and the Ivory Coast.

Agadez, the largest city in northern Niger, is a key waypoint for sub-Saharan migrants moving north, and a hotspot on the arc of tension. While estimates of the number transiting the country on this path are scarce, some research indicates that at least 65,000 Sub-Saharan migrants passed through Niger toward Algeria and Libya in 2003 alone.⁹ About half of these migrants are thought to come from the underdeveloped central and southern parts of Nigeria.

Niger also faces a difficult security situation, including conflict over rangeland and water wells in the southeast and the north (especially near the Malian border), mineral-related conflict in the north, and the pervasive threat of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. In northern Agadez, home to the world's second-largest uranium mine, a 2007 drought-driven rebellion by the Tuareg people led the government to dispatch 4,000 troops.¹⁰

Algeria

- Algeria gained independence from France in 1962, after eight years of fighting.
- Since 1982 Algerian Islamists and the government have had a highly adversarial relationship marked by repeated states of emergency and the forcible suppression of demonstrations. Algeria's first serious opposition party, the Islamic Salvation Front, posed a major threat to the governing party and the military. The Front was outlawed, sparking a decade of violence which resulted in 200,000 deaths and an estimated 1 million internally displaced persons²⁴
- During the 1990s and early 2000s, other groups, notably the Armed Islamic Group and the Islamic Salvation Army, joined the Islamic Salvation Front's antigovernment struggle, engaging in political assassinations, targeted killing of foreigners, riots, and attacks on civilians.²⁵
- Financed through ransoms, drug sales, and arms smuggling, Al Qaeda's North Africa wing, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, has claimed responsibility for a range of violent acts in North Africa, including the 2007 bombing of the U.N. headquarters in Algiers and repeated kidnappings of foreigners in Algeria and neighboring countries.

Additionally, Niger is within the range of operations of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which is known to engage in kidnapping and drug trafficking in the broader region. Agricultural and pastoral livelihoods have been made more difficult by the effects of climate change; this has translated to increasing numbers of disenfranchised youth, who security experts believe are more easily recruited to assist Al Qaeda in return for money and food.

Furthermore, some of the effects of climate change, such as desertification and flooding, are thought to benefit Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb by depopulating rural areas in which the group can then operate more freely. The Nigerien government has reorganized its security services in the hope of encouraging Nigerians not to engage in violent acts; however, the government has been accused of being incompetent or even unwilling to take action even when information about Al Qaeda is received.¹¹

Algeria is the third link in the arc of tension. Like much of the Maghreb region, Algeria faces a future made increasingly difficult by the effects of climate change, including increasing temperatures, decreasing rainfall, and a rising sea level. Water is of particular concern—the country already ranks second among African states in terms of water scarcity—as is desertification.

Additionally, climate variability in sub-Saharan Africa has the potential to indirectly affect Algeria by contributing to migration along the arc of tension and

Morocco

- Gained independence from France in 1956. Spain maintains the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla (unrecognized by Morocco) in the north, attracting illegal migrants attempting to enter the European Union.
- In 1999 King Mohammed VI came to power, immediately freeing some 8,000 political prisoners and reducing the sentences of another 30,000.
- The 2002 and 2007 parliamentary elections were regarded as the first free and fair elections in the country's history.
- Despite strong economic growth, poverty remains a serious challenge, exceeding 25 percent in rural areas. Like Algeria, Morocco also struggles with high unemployment, particularly among young urban dwellers.
- The country has confronted several domestic Islamic terrorist organizations, such as the (largely defeated) Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group, involved in the terrorist attacks in Madrid in 2004, Salafiya Jihadiya, and Al Qaeda cells allegedly connected to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Regional cooperation has been limited by poor relations between Morocco and Algeria.

other migratory paths. The southern spread of the Sahara Desert is already thought to contribute to seasonal migration from sub-Saharan Africa toward Algeria and the Maghreb.

Algeria experienced a decade of internal violence in the 1990s. This conflict gave rise to the terrorist organization that eventually became Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Although violence has declined significantly since the early 2000s, Algeria has still experienced close to 1,000 incidents of political violence since the September 11, 2001 Al Qaeda attacks on New York City and Washington, including kidnappings and high-profile bombings.¹² Large ungoverned spaces and poor border controls allow migrants to move north from Niger, but also create space in which groups such as Al Qaeda can operate. Tamanrasset, a major way station for migrants in southern Algeria, is the new home of a joint military command center between Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, and Niger, which is meant to confront the threat from Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

The arc of tension ends in **Morocco**, historically one of Africa's most stable states. Like Algeria, water shortage due to climate change is a serious concern in Morocco. Rainfall is projected to decrease by roughly 20 percent by the end of the century, according to a range of projections.¹³ The country faces a rising sea level along the coast, including in agricultural areas in the north, which may lead to increasing salinity in freshwater aquifers. With 44 percent of the country's work-

force engaged in agriculture, this development poses a fundamental challenge to the current Moroccan economy. Ultimately, the shifting climate may result in internal migration, forcing rural populations to move in search of more fertile land and eroding the geographic separation of ethnic groups.

Morocco is also under pressure from existing flows of international migrants, many of whom enter the country in an attempt to continue on to Europe. Two Spanish enclaves on the Mediterranean coast, Ceuta and Melilla, are key destinations for Africans seeking to enter the European Union. In 2005 efforts by hundreds of migrants to break through the fences surrounding the enclaves led to several deaths and resulted in the erection of more sophisticated border fences. While the impetus for migration into Morocco is difficult to determine with precision, researchers focused on the country point to decreasing rain and lower crop yields in sub-Saharan Africa as a factor in the decision to migrate.

The same enclaves that have attracted migrants seeking a chance to enter Europe have also drawn the attention of Al Qaeda. In 2006 Ayman al-Zawahiri, then Al Qaeda's second in command, called for the liberation of Ceuta and Melilla. Thus far the terrorist network has reportedly not been successful in carrying out an attack in Morocco. An April 2011 café bombing, however, bore the hallmarks of an Al Qaeda operation.¹⁴ In January 2011 the Moroccan government arrested 27 alleged Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb members along the border with the Western Sahara.¹⁵

What policymakers can do about this arc of tension

The overlapping challenges of climate change, migration, and security in these four nations pose a critical and complex problem for policymakers. While it is difficult to draw a direct line of causality from specific climate change hazards to the decision to migrate or to a particular conflict, the interrelationships between these factors mean that viewing and addressing them in isolation is no longer sufficient.

Indeed, this particular nexus demands policy solutions that cut across levels of governance and drive the U.S. government to synthesize traditionally distinct fields such as defense, diplomacy, and development. These new, complex challenges will force the United States and the international community to finally break from a Cold War-era understanding of security and move toward a more individual-based concept of human security.



At a policy level, the Obama administration's first National Security Strategy document in 2010 prioritized conflict prevention, peacekeeping, counterterrorism, access to markets, and the protection of "carbon sinks" (places in nature that absorb carbon out of the atmosphere) in Africa, while the 2011 National Military Strategy emphasized security partnerships in the Trans-Saharan region.¹⁶ These current efforts are limited and not yet institutionalized, and still do not fully incorporate the environmental realities underlying the challenges to the region.

Spanish soldiers patrol the border between Morocco and Spain's enclave of Melilla, in north Africa, Saturday, Oct. 8, 2005. Human rights group Amnesty International said it was illegal to expel African immigrants from the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla to Morocco.

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Overall, U.S. foreign assistance to the region is approximately \$668 million. Nigeria receives \$614 million, primarily for health and police training; Algeria \$2.5 million, for counterterrorism and military training; Niger \$17 million, mostly for food aid; and Morocco \$35 million, for military and development assistance.¹⁷

Internationally, the International Monetary Fund currently has no loans to the four countries. Algeria has accepted equity investments and loans totaling \$82

million from the International Finance Corporation, the equity investment arm of the World Bank, but no loans from the World Bank itself.¹⁸ Nigeria has \$4 billion in outstanding loans to the World Bank, including its cheapest lending arm, the International Development Association, with 2011 loans close to half a billion dollars aimed at stoking economic growth and employment in non-oil sectors.¹⁹

The World Bank maintains a total commitment of \$1.5 billion in Morocco and plans to disburse \$200 million more in 2012 in investment lending.²⁰ In addition, the bank has disbursed nearly \$1.6 billion to Niger, including \$70 million in 2010 and \$41 million in 2011.²¹ And the World Bank's Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency is currently mobilizing \$1 billion in insurance capacity for the Middle East and North Africa, including Morocco, to ensure that foreign direct investment in the region does not suffer because of the nearby Arab Spring revolutions.²²

Lastly, the U.S. military's counterterrorism commitment to the region was bolstered by the creation of African Command, or AFRICOM, in 2008, tasked with developing the region's professional military capabilities.²³ In 2006 the United States allocated \$500 million for the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Partnership to train and equip African armed forces, including the four states in this report.

These are the traditional instruments of development and security, but the conversation about national security and military strategy in the United States is changing. With the U.S. government facing at least several years of austerity budgets, defense and foreign affairs spending will not escape the cuts unscathed. If properly executed, budget cuts could pare down unnecessary spending in the United States' massive defense budget (now larger than at the height of President Ronald Reagan's Cold War buildup), while protecting the core defense, diplomacy, and development capabilities needed to confront complex crises.

If mishandled, though, the cuts could have a dramatic impact on nonmilitary international affairs funding. Rebalancing and reorienting these capabilities will help the United States create more effective and efficient programs in countries like Nigeria, Niger, Algeria, and Morocco. The United States cannot hope to encourage stable, fair, and effective governance if we continue to understaff and underfund our civilian aid and foreign-affairs capabilities. Thus, a thorough review of the relationship between defense, diplomacy, and development is required. The division of labor between these three branches of our foreign and security policy establishment must be adapted to a new and rapidly changing post-Cold War environment.

Overlay of climate, security, migration challenges across the arc of tension



This report examines the arc of tension to understand how prepared we are to achieve this new balance. Through analysis of the climate, migration, and security factors outlined above, it lays out a series of recommendations to reorient U.S. and international policy. These recommendations are also intended to inform the transatlantic and multilateral conversation on the climate, migration, and security nexus. Briefly, we recommend a new approach.

Niger and Nigeria are rarely discussed in conjunction with Algeria and Morocco. The first two countries are usually considered separately, as part of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb, respectively. The United States pursues very different forms of engagement, development assistance, and diplomacy with each of these countries, despite existing migratory flows that link all four nations. We argue that this practice is outdated.

Secondly, the nexus of climate change, migration, and conflict produces pressure points that need comprehensive regional approaches. From a regional perspective, and based upon four case studies, we highlight priority issues facing the United States, the international community, and regional policy actors in addressing this unprecedented challenge and provide recommendations to shape the future of U.S. and international foreign assistance.

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