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## **Climate Change and Rising Food Prices Heightened Arab Spring**

*Flickr/Nasser Nouri*

If the Arab Spring taught us something, it is that the effects of climate change can serve as stressors, contributing to regional instability and conflict, experts said.

In a report published last week, researchers from the Center for American Progress, the Center for Climate and Security and the Stimson Center examined the role of climate change in the Middle East's upheaval during 2010 and 2011. Looking at long-term trends in rain, crops, food prices and migration, they were able to determine how these factors contributed to social instability in the region.

"The Arab Spring would likely have come one way or another, but the context in which it did is not inconsequential. Global warming may not have caused the Arab Spring, but it may have made it come earlier," the report says.

The Middle East and North Africa region is extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in food supplies and prices. According to the report, with little arable land and scarce water supplies, the region is one of the top food importers in the world.

In 2010, droughts in Russia, Ukraine, China and Argentina and torrential storms in Canada, Australia and Brazil -- all major wheat and grain producers -- considerably diminished global crops, driving commodity prices up. The region was already dealing with internal sociopolitical, economic and climatic tensions, and the 2010 global food crisis helped drive it over the edge.

But the issue here is much bigger. Because of globalization, regional climate events can have a global extent, the report says. What's more, scenarios where weather events unfold economic and political shifts are likely to be repeated as climate volatility, expanding populations and competition for resources disturb national stability, the report says.

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## **National collapse becomes a security threat**

According to Michael Werz, senior fellow at the Center for American Progress and one of the authors of the report, the argument here is that there are a number of symptoms -- such as food scarcity, water rationing, crops failure, migration and rapid urbanization -- squeezing the margins of what a society can deal with before exploding.

"This is pushing many societies, especially those with a weak state, to their limits," Werz said.

At the launch of the Arab Spring and climate change report, Werz and other foreign affairs experts discussed the challenges of climate change in global stability -- particularly in terms of food and water security and migration -- and how the United States needs to rethink its foreign policy to incorporate these borderless challenges.

"We've gone from a connected world to an interconnected world, and from an interconnected world to an interdependent world," said *New York Times* foreign affairs columnist Tom Friedman. "When the world is this interdependent, your rivals failing is much more dangerous than your rivals rising," he said.

According to Friedman, U.S. foreign policy is so caught up in the Cold War model -- of strategic competition between superpowers - - that it's missing the real security issue of the current world.

"We are not worried that Egypt is going to become an ally of the Soviet Union; we are worried that Egypt is going to collapse, which in an interdependent world is a threat," Friedman said.

In a 2011 [article](#) in *The Atlantic*, former Department of State Director of Policy Planning Anne-Marie Slaughter explained how the international environment had changed in the last century.

"The Cold War world was like chess. The 21st century world is more like tennis, where the wind, heat, possible rain delay and your opponent's relative health and form on any given day all affect the speed, trajectory and spin on the ball coming at you," she wrote.

Food shortage, drought, migration and human security are issues in a society that can later unfold to big issues between states,

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Slaughter said at the event. But unlike popular topics like Iran or Afghanistan, food security lacks two important qualities to be taken seriously in Washington, D.C., she added: "It's not immediate, and it's not sexy."

### **Security linkages often are often overlooked**

Creating long-term, sustainable and stable countries in the world is much more beneficial for U.S. and global security than anything else, Werz said.

A new study by British think tank E3G warns that the spread in democracy that followed the Arab Spring could be reversed due to failure to address the threat of food and energy price shocks. According to the report, climate models consistently estimate that warming will occur faster in the Middle East-North Africa region, accentuating the growing scarcity of water. Yet existing government investment is more focused on providing incentives for continued democratic reforms than addressing other vital areas for stability.

"There's definitely been a shift," said Taylor Dimsdale, senior research associate with E3G, about the understanding of linkages between social strife, food prices and climate change. "We're sort of recognizing that there's a lack of a full appreciation and full recognition for that need."

Moreover, as climate change drives extreme weather events in producer countries, food price increases could become another ticking bomb in the region. "We see it as an ongoing risk," Dimsdale said.

Because of globalization and interdependence, the relationship between climate change, migration and security should become the "new normal" in international policy conversations, the panel said. "In climate sciences, the axiom I live by is 'We have to manage what's unavoidable and avoid what's unmanageable,'" Friedman noted.

In that sense, according to Friedman, it all comes down to building resilience. One way to do this would be to stimulate market-based solutions through regulations and prices to drive clean energy,

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clean water and clean power in America or anywhere else in the world, he said.

"We need to come up with long-term, sustainable solutions that current foreign policy doesn't allow us to even think about," Slaughter said.

But first, she said, the United States needs to rethink the way it engages with the world. "The normal way the State Department is organized is by region, and then by issue area," Slaughter said. But with this format, it's hard to figure out how things are interconnected and even harder to address things bottom-up, she added.

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