

# Exploring the environmental impact of conflict

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A Somali boy stands by a bullet-marked wall in Mogadishu. Credit: Susan Schulman

A multi-disciplinary team of academics, led by the University of Bristol, is investigating the long-term environmental and social impact of conflict in dryland environments.

Contemporary wars are concentrated in dryland regions such as Syria,

Afghanistan, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, and others but little is known about their long-term environmental impacts.

Project lead, Dr Katerina Michaelides from the University of Bristol's School of Geographical Sciences, said: "Drylands are the arid and semi-arid ecosystems of the planet – places with little rainfall or vegetation, and fragile soil systems.

"Every disturbance made by a tank, shell or troops disrupts the delicate balance of soil microbial life in ways that can last for not just decades, but thousands of years."

People living in drylands have developed strategies for building resilience to periods of resource scarcity.

Nomadic, pastoral and agricultural societies have survived and even flourished within dryland environments for thousands of years.

However, [conflict](#) can directly and indirectly push societies and the environment beyond the natural limits of their resilience.

This has been occurring in Somalia, with serious consequences for people and the environment.



A broken wall and pathway reveals AMISOM troop movements through vegetation. A defence line is visible in the distance. Credit: Susan Schulman

The War Impacts on Dryland Environments and Social-Ecological Resilience in Somalia (WIDER-SOMA) project at the University of Bristol (funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund) is exploring these impacts at multiple scales:

- Molecular (soil DNA analysis)
- Regional (mapping land degradation)
- Community (working with the Bristol Somali diaspora to record memories and reflections on the drylands)
- International (engaging with partners at Royal United Services Institute, Somali First and the Peace Research Institute Oslo, to consider how these impacts affect geopolitics).

The project aims to accumulate data and perspectives that can aid the



development of resilience in the face of new challenges and contribute to conversations about the environmental impacts of conflict.

The team are keen to engage members of the public in their work and, as such, a free exhibition featuring photography and narratives from affected people in Somalia is on display at Hamilton House in Bristol until Wednesday, November 22 before moving on to Bush House, King's College London in the New Year.

Dr Marianna Dudley, from the University of Bristol's Department of History, and academic lead for the newly formed Centre for Environmental Humanities, is curating the exhibition.

She said: "We are delighted that award-winning photo-journalist, Susan Schulman, has agreed to exhibit her photography at our exhibition.



The presence of weaponry can affect soil systems long after the fighting has taken place. Credit: Susan Schulman

"Susan has worked in major conflict zones around the world and her work on Somalia, which is featured here, really does bring to life the work of peacekeeping forces and people living in refugee camps as a result of conflict in the region."

The project team has also worked with Bristol's Somali Resource Centre and the Somali community to understand the effects of conflict on inhabitants of drylands, and diaspora communities.

Dr Dudley added: "Excerpts of interviews with community members remind us of traditions of resilience, and the scale of new challenges facing those living in the drylands."

Provided by University of Bristol

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