

How climate change contributes to global violence

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Alvarez studies collective and interpersonal violence. From 2001 until 2003 he was the founding director of the Martin-Springer Institute for Teaching the Holocaust, Tolerance, and Humanitarian Values. His latest

book, "Unstable Ground: Climate Change, Conflict, and Genocide," looks at the human impact of climate change and its potential to provoke ethnic conflict, war and genocide.

On Nov. 1, the much-anticipated United Nations summit on Climate Change, known as COP26, is set to take place in Glasgow, Scotland. Its goal is to devise a global strategy on cutting emissions to keep alive the possibility of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, a Paris Accord threshold beyond which the consequences become far more severe and even catastrophic. Some, such as U.S. Climate Envoy John Kerry, have suggested this conference is one of our last chances to prevent some of the worst outcomes of [climate change](#). To add to this sense of urgency, the 2021 [Lancet](#) report on Health and Climate Change, released in early October, lays out in stark and grim detail the myriad ways in which the direct and indirect consequences of climate change pose significant threats to the health and well-being of humans around the world on a scale we have not experienced in the modern world. Whether through drought, extreme heat waves, food insecurity, lack of potable water, changing disease vectors or any number of other impacts, large swaths of the globe will increasingly suffer from unhealthy and dangerous conditions brought about by climate change that threaten to overwhelm the ability of communities and governments to cope and adapt to these emerging challenges.

To add to this grim forecast, not long after *The Lancet* report was released, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence distributed the first-ever [National Intelligence Estimate on Climate Change](#), which warns of global instability and heightened tensions and conflict between nations as the consequences of a warming world. Representing the collective assessment of all 18 U.S. intelligence agencies about the risks these changes hold for national security, the report not only identifies regions and nations that are particularly vulnerable to instability and conflict, but also points out that such situations tend to produce large

number of refugees that are vulnerable to exploitation and persecution, can destabilize surrounding regions and create massive humanitarian disasters.

These reports come on the heels of earlier publications that only serve to highlight the crisis we find ourselves facing. One U.S. government report released in 2020 detailed the financial and human costs of climate change for the United States and concluded that climate change will cost hundreds of billions of dollars annually and will result in thousands of additional deaths every year from the direct and indirect consequences of a warmer world. Of key importance are the often interconnected ways in which climate change will negatively impact infrastructure and transportation, energy demand and production, domestic and international trade, agriculture, fishing, tourism, water availability, health care and many other economic sectors of society. These kinds of consequences are not limited to the United States but are truly global in their impact. There is no nation or region of the world not affected by climate change, although as these reports make clear, the negative impacts tend to be concentrated among nations and populations that are the poorest, most vulnerable and least equipped to handle such challenges.

As someone who studies collective violence, genocide and mass atrocity, I have long been concerned with the ways in which climate change can amplify intolerance and persecution and facilitate violent conflict, including war and genocide. Collective violence doesn't just erupt spontaneously but is brought about by specific triggers and situations, and many of these relate to the consequences of climate change. Many past and contemporary conflicts and wars, for example, have revolved around protecting or acquiring scarce or diminishing resources, especially fresh potable water. Given that around one quarter of the world's population is currently dealing with extreme water stress and critical shortages, a situation expected to worsen dramatically in the

coming years, we can easily understand how access to fresh water can become a flash point for conflict. In fact, this precise issue has already strained relations and heightened tensions between many nations, including India and Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, and Yemen and Saudi Arabia, to name just a few examples.

Population displacement is another potential source of conflict since all estimates point to a significant increase in the number of people dislocated in the coming years and decades. Sometimes it will happen because of catastrophic weather events such as flooding and hurricanes, while other times it will occur because of slower climate change processes, such as drought, that will progressively drive people from their homes, communities and livelihoods. It appears that the human climate niche is shrinking dramatically, and a lot more people will be on the move in the coming years and decades as they search for security, safety and opportunity.

All these challenges will strain the ability of governments to meet the needs of their citizens, heighten tensions among and between communities, populations and nations, and encourage othering, scapegoating and persecution of those defined as different, dangerous or simply superfluous. In short, as nations struggle to cope with catastrophic weather events, diminishing resources, environmental degradation, population dislocation and various other climate-induced problems, violence becomes not only possible, but also more likely. It is a situation tailor-made for the violent persecution of vulnerable population groups such as refugees and racial, religious and ethnic minorities.

These are dire scenarios and truly force us to confront the central crisis of our era. To prevent the worst outcomes of climate change, it is clear that we need to collectively implement far more aggressive steps than we have yet undertaken. This recognition seems to be gaining momentum as individuals, communities and political and social leaders around the

world appear increasingly willing to confront hard choices. There is also hope to be found in the resilience displayed by many communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. While social media and news reports have often focused on those individuals, leaders and communities that have fallen prey to misinformation, hostility and resistance to public health measures, we should also remember that the vast majority of people have not reacted in such negative and hostile ways. Across the globe, we have seen individuals and communities work together to care for and support each other in often dire circumstances. Countless people from all walks of life have sacrificed and risked their own personal safety and comfort to provide aid and assistance for the sick and to preserve the basic functioning of society. Persecution, violence and anarchy are not inevitable consequences of [climate](#) change, but instead reflect the choices we make individually and collectively. How we choose to respond at this inflection point in the history of humanity will be critical for determining the kind of environment, planet and civilization that we leave for our children and their descendants.

Provided by Northern Arizona University

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