

# Environmental Migration, Public Perception, and Immigration Policy: Examining the Hidden Environmental Toll of Terror Hysteria

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## ABSTRACT

Recent Federal executive action has placed a temporary travel ban on several predominantly Muslim nations and has been accompanied by heightened concerns regarding assaults on religious freedom and anti-Muslim sentiments. A number of nations affected by the ban have suffered a catastrophic environmental collapse in recent years, including drought, the breakdown of the agricultural sectors, and famine, and have run concurrently with war, mass emigrations, and the breakdown of the state as a provider of basic security protections. While reviewing these conditions and considering U.S. public support and opposition to various types of immigration, we evaluate the travel ban specifically within the context of environmental migration. We conclude that policy, without nuance nor robust rationale, that disproportionately and wantonly targets African and Asian nations that have majority Muslim populations is an extension of what we label *terror hysteria*, and that by cloaking blanket immigration policy under the shroud of containing terror plays into cynicism and runs counter to public sentiments on immigration, and particularly the plight of environmental migrants.

**Keywords:** environmental migrants, climate change, Executive Order 13769, immigration policy, terror hysteria

## INTRODUCTION

ON JANUARY 27, 2017 AFTER ONLY a week in office, newly inaugurated U.S. President Donald Trump signed Executive Order (EO) 13769 “*Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States*,” which placed a temporary travel ban on nationals from seven countries, under the auspices that the U.S. immigration system was ill equipped to vet potential

terrorist from these nations.<sup>1</sup> Considering that each of the restricted nations have majority Muslim population, when coupled with a series of statements by President Trump regarding Islam and the Muslim world (see EO 13769, exposure of vulnerable populations and terror hysteria), the EO was framed by many as an assault on First Amendment religious protections and was followed by scores of legal challenges from around the nation.

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<sup>1</sup>On March 6, 2017, Trump would authorize Executive Order 13780 with a similar reach, banning new visa applications for six of the original seven nations (Iraq was excluded in the updated action) for 90 days along with suspending the U.S.’s refugee program for 120 days and cutting the number of refugee admittances by more than half to a maximum of 50,000 annually. This was followed on September 24, 2017 by Presidential Proclamation 9645, which lifted restrictions on Sudan and added restrictions for Chad, North Korea, and Venezuela. By October 2017 the US Supreme Court would vacate a lower court ruling against EO 13780.

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TABLE 1. REFUGEE ARRIVAL DATA FROM NATIONS AFFECTED BY EXECUTIVE ORDER 13769

<i>Nation</i>							
<i>Year</i>	<i>Iran</i>	<i>Iraq</i>	<i>Libya</i>	<i>Somalia</i>	<i>Sudan</i>	<i>Syria</i>	<i>Yemen</i>
2012	1751	12,124	6	4915	1055	35	0
2013	2578	19,335	1	7579	2137	48	12
2014	2833	19,651	1	9011	1307	132	4
2015	3099	12,608	0	8852	1576	1693	23
Total	10,261	63,718	8	30,357	6075	1908	39

Office of Refugee Resettlement. *Refugee Arrival Data*. (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2017). <[www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/refugee-arrival-data](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/refugee-arrival-data)>. (Last accessed on March 6, 2017).

By February 9, just ten days after the signing of EO 13769, a three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit unanimously backed a District Court ruling that temporarily blocked the EO. Although various racial and religious implications of the policy just cited will be deliberated on for years to come—the nations involved are all located in Africa or Southwest Asia—many are at the forefront of environmental collapse. Drought conditions in Syria and Somalia, leading to environmental and agricultural collapse, are running concurrently to civil wars that both nations are enmeshed in.

Within the context just cited, the authors of this article seek to do several things. First, we review the potential for climate and environmental conditions to increase environmental migrations; next, we briefly explore the exposures of environmental migrants. We then consider the public perception of environmental migration in the United States by contrasting support and opposition for assorted types of immigration. An additional analysis contrasts survey respondents' views based on political self-identification. Finally, we examine how the aforementioned EO, and accompanying political rhetoric surrounding immigration, plays out within the context of justice concerns and the vulnerabilities of marginalized peoples. We conclude that terror hysteria will have implications far beyond the reach of homeland security concerns and will further marginalize among the planet's more environmentally vulnerable human inhabitants.

## DISCUSSION

### *Methodology*

For the research's statistical analysis, we relied on the Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews of 1001 United States' respondents of the German Marshall Fund of the U.S. sponsored *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration 2011* project, and we tracked participants' opinions on levels of supports for various types of migrants [i.e., those escaping various phenomena: (1) natural disasters, (2) poverty, (3) political, religious, and ethnic persecution, and (4) harm from conflict]]. Respondents were 18+ year-old adults who were randomly selected through landline (80%) and mobile phones

(20%) between August 25 and September 18, 2011 (Table 2). The response rate was 25%.<sup>2</sup>

From here, using IBM SPSS, a bivariate analysis was performed by using respondents' opinions of admitting natural disaster migrants coupled with the respondents' political self-identification (Table 3). Encompassing this analysis are the various legal documents pertaining to immigration and refugees, including: the 1951 Refugee Convention, the most significant international legal document regarding refugees—along with the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees and U.S. EO 13769, *Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States*.

### *Refugee Policy*

The 1951 Refugee Convention defines “refugee” as people with

“well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”<sup>3</sup>

and along with the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (which would, subsequently, remove temporal and geographical restrictions of the 1951 Convention), are the basis for international refugee policy. Most notably missing from this international accord and will be discussed later are protection for those forced to flee their country due to environmental disruptions.

Protocols for the United States to screen refugees via the Refugee Processing and Screening System involves a seven-step screening system: (1) registration and data collection, (2) security checks, (3) Department of Homeland Security

<sup>2</sup>Astrid Ziebarth, Hamutal Bernstein, Zsolt Nyiri, Pierangelo Isernia, Claudia Diehl, and Susan Martin. *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration, 2011 (ICPSR34423-v1)*. (Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2013).

<sup>3</sup>UNHCR. *Syrian Regional Refugee Response*. (UNHCR, 2017). <<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>>. (Last accessed on March 6, 2017).

TABLE 2. PERCENTAGE OF SUPPORT AND OPPOSITION FOR MIGRANTS

	Strongly support, % (n)	Somewhat support, % (n)	Somewhat oppose, % (n)	Strongly oppose, % (n)
People who come here to avoid the aftermath of a natural disaster (n=981)	33.4 (n=328)	37.2 (n=365)	18.8 (n=184)	10.6 (n=104)
People who come here to avoid poverty (n=972)	27.2 (n=264)	37.2 (n=362)	20.2 (n=196)	15.4 (n=150)
People who come here to avoid political, ethnic, or religious persecution (n=977)	41.9 (n=409)	33.3 (n=325)	11.8 (n=115)	13.1 (n=128)
People who come here to avoid physical harm from conflict (n=973)	40.4 (393)	37.5 (n=365)	11.2 (n=109)	10.9 (106)

interview, (4) biometric security checks, (5) cultural orientation and medical check, (6) assignment to domestic resettlement locations and travel, and (7) arrival in the United States.<sup>4</sup> And they are in concert with the Refugee Admissions Program's three-pronged criteria for classifying and prioritizing admissions: (1) persecuted individuals, (2) "special concern" groups—two of the nations included in the temporary ban (Iraq and Iran) are included under the "special concern" provision, and (3) relatives of those who have already been admitted into the United States under the refugee program.<sup>5</sup> See Table 1 for Refugee entry data related to the seven nations. The number of refugees entering the United States from the seven nations covered under the travel ban since 2012 is just more than 112,000 people.

#### *Climate change and degradation as cause of environmental migration*

The term *environmental refugees* has been used to describe people who by necessity must vacate their habitats due to disruptive environmental circumstances, both natural and human induced.<sup>6</sup> However, using the term *refugee* here is contentious due to the conventional ratified definition of *refugee*<sup>7</sup>, which underscores the plight of these migrants for unlike their counterparts receiving religious or political protections, international law does not recognize so-called *environmental refugee* status (i.e., those seeking refuge due to climate, natural disaster, or human-induced threats to ecology). And although those populations are not reflected in the tallies described in Table 1, they are affected by restraints on refuge in the United States all the same.

Given the international legal classification not recognizing environmental refugees, this article alternates be-

tween the terms *natural disaster* and *environmental migrants*, while wholly accepting the legitimacy that unsustainable and threatening environmental conditions are as much a systemic threat to livelihoods as any 1951 Convention recognized status. Further, we recognize the multiple dimensions of vulnerability that can contribute to the ensemble of forces and are endemic in refugee populations. For example, religious persecution and violent conflicts (areas protected under the Convention) are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can be overlapping contributors to refugee-hood. Similarly, we propose that environmental vulnerability does not exist in isolation and can be connected to recognized protected classifications.

Although the range of people that can be classified as environmental migrants/refugees varies widely, a recent study projects that in 2015 alone more than 19 million humans were displaced due to natural disasters.<sup>8</sup> Considering the potential for anthropogenic climate change to fundamentally alter the habitats of some of the Earth's most vulnerable populations—including inhabitants of small island developing states and intense desertification in drought-stricken regions—the human tolls can be catastrophic on planetary levels for environmental migrants and those classified as internally displaced people (i.e., parties that do not cross national borders but are relocated internally).<sup>9</sup>

#### *Public perception*

Responses to the Transatlantic Trends project indicates varying degrees of support for refugees and migrants based on the four surveyed causes of migrant status (economic, socio-political persecution, conflict, and natural disasters; Table 2). It should be noted that the survey uses the natural disaster terminology, and does not

<sup>4</sup>U.S. Department of State. *U.S. Refugee Admissions Program*. (U.S. Department of State. n.d.). <www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/admissions/index.htm>. (Last accessed on March 6, 2017).

<sup>5</sup>American Immigration Council. *An Overview of U.S. Refugee Law and Policy*. (American Immigration Council, 2015). <www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/overview-us-refugee-law-and-policy>. (Last accessed on March 6, 2017).

<sup>6</sup>Essam El-Hinnawi. *Environmental Refugees*. (UNEP, 1985).

<sup>7</sup>New Zealand High Court. *Teitiota v The Chief Executive of the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, No. 175* (New Zealand High Court, 2014).

<sup>8</sup>Alexandra Bilak, Gabriel Cardona-Fox, Justin Ginnetti, Elizabeth J. Rushing, Isabelle Scherer, Marita Swain, Nadine Walicki, and Michelle Yonetani. *GRID 2016: Global Report on Internal Displacement*. (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2016).

<sup>9</sup>The 1.5 million Gulf Coast inhabitants uprooted by Hurricane Katrina are a prominent example of this phenomenon. Even more prominent, yet perhaps unsung, is the Isle de Jean Charles, Louisiana, which has historically been inhabited by the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw band and has been made largely uninhabitable by humans due to sea level rise and salt water intrusion.

TABLE 3. PROBABILITY OF SUPPORT OR OPPOSITION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL MIGRANTS AND POLITICAL SELF-IDENTIFICATION

	<i>People who come here to avoid the aftermath of a natural disaster</i>			
	<i>Strongly support</i>	<i>Somewhat support</i>	<i>Somewhat oppose</i>	<i>Strongly oppose</i>
Political self-identification				
Slightly liberal, liberal, or very liberal	<i>n</i> = 92 (0.311)*	<i>n</i> = 76 (0.269)*	<i>n</i> = 29 (0.174)*	<i>n</i> = 17 (0.183)*
Moderate/middle/center	<i>n</i> = 76 (0.257)*	<i>n</i> = 116 (0.359)*	<i>n</i> = 60 (0.359)*	<i>n</i> = 20 (0.215)*
Slightly conservative, conservative, or very conservative	<i>n</i> = 128 (0.432)*	<i>n</i> = 120 (0.372)*	<i>n</i> = 78 (0.467)*	<i>n</i> = 56 (0.602)*

\**p* < .01.

distinguish between a wide degree of environmental conditions, as noted by Bates<sup>10</sup>; the four categories overall are in alignment with broader considerations of migration and qualification for refugee status<sup>11,12</sup> and are helpful for purposes of comparison.

It is clear based on the survey results that respondents' support of migration varies with the cause of displacement, with economic factors on immigration receiving the least sublevels of combined support (strong and somewhat) registering just less than 65% cumulatively, compared with ~70% of respondents supporting natural disaster migrants, more than 75% supporting persecution migrants, and more than 78% of respondents supporting those fleeing physical harm from conflict. It is worth considering the potential for changing public opinion in the five years since the survey and the election of Trump to the presidency and his prominent anti-immigration stances during his campaign.<sup>13</sup> Within the context of the environmental sensitivities of this work, it is worth reconciling the aforementioned with Trump's antipathy toward the COP21 Paris Agreement and his beliefs regarding anthropogenic climate change, which he has labeled a *hoax*, along with conspicuous appointments to prominent energy and environmental cabinet and prominent administrative positions to a range of individual that have been hostile to climate and environmental concerns, including appointments to the Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency.

Given the current conservative-leaning U.S. Congress, Executive Branch, and GOP control over a majority of state legislatures and governors' offices along with the prevalent anti-immigration sentiments among party leadership, Table 3 is instructive as it looks at respondent political identification in the context of the respondent's level of support of environmental migrants. The data assert that the probability of those that strongly oppose the admittance of

an environmental migrant and also self-identifying on the conservative spectrum is 0.602; by contrast, those strongly opposing the admittance of an environmental migrant and self-identifying on the liberal strata is only 0.183 and 0.215 by those self-proclaimed as moderates (Table 3).

## CONCLUSION

### *EO 13769, exposure of vulnerable populations and terror hysteria*

At various stages of his political life, Trump alternately called for: an outright ban of Muslim travelers<sup>14</sup> during his presidential candidacy phase, a formal registry of all Muslim immigrants<sup>15</sup> while he was the president elect, and barring refugees and immigrants from seven predominantly Muslim nations for 120 days and 90 days, respectively, after becoming president. In quickly striking down the EO, a three-judge panel in a federal appeals court, though not explicitly stating whether the EO violated first amendment religious protections, did question the dubiousness of claims noting the lack of terrorist activities in the United States committed by nationals from the barred nations.

Perhaps the most accessible entry point for the joint environmental and human considerations here is to examine the travel ban through the lens of refugees and environmental migrants fleeing the Syrian Civil War. Since the inception of the war in March 2011, nearly 5 million refugees have fled their homeland.<sup>16</sup> Within the earlier context, the environmental links may at first appear superficial or arbitrary. We recognize the contested nature of claims regarding environmental conditions and the corresponding role in the military conflict.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of the

<sup>14</sup>Jeremy Diamond. *Donald Trump: Ban All Muslim Travel to U.S.* (Dec 2015). ([www.cnn.com/2015/12/07/politics/donald-trump-muslim-ban-immigration](http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/07/politics/donald-trump-muslim-ban-immigration)). (Last accessed on March 6, 2017).

<sup>15</sup>Aaron Blake. Trump says we've known his Muslim ban and database plans "all along." But we still don't—not really. *Washington Post*, 21 December 2016.

<sup>16</sup>UNHCR. *Syrian Regional Refugee Response*.

<sup>17</sup>Jan Selby and Mike Hulme. *Is Climate Change Really to Blame for Syria's Civil War?* (Nov 2015). ([www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/29/climate-change-syria-civil-war-prince-charles](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/29/climate-change-syria-civil-war-prince-charles)). (Last accessed on March 6, 2017).

<sup>10</sup>Diane C. Bates. Environmental refugees? Classifying human migrations caused by environmental change. *Population and Environment* 23 (2002): 465–477.

<sup>11</sup>Jane McAdam. *Climate Change, Forced Migration, and International Law*. (Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>12</sup>Guy S. Goodwin-Gill and Jane McAdam. *The Refugee in International Law*. (Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup>This includes advocating for both a wall-limiting U.S.-Mexican border crossing and a Muslim immigration ban.

conflict's impetus, harsh environmental conditions have exceeded acting solely as an ecological backdrop. The decade-plus long drought and consequent collapse of the agriculture sector conditions that had not been paralleled in what is present-day Syria for centuries<sup>18</sup> is a principal conspirator in mobilizing human flight, along with the civil war.

Similarly, in Somalia, drought conditions have led to mass famine and is reported to have caused more than 100 deaths in a recent 2-day span, with more than 6 million residents, vulnerable to the drought zone.<sup>19</sup> The United Nations projects that inadequate rainfall has caused environmental disaster, which has engulfed southern Somalia and has been responsible for fracturing the agriculture sector, including widespread livestock deaths and extensive crop collapse, leading to massive asset selloffs for survival.<sup>20</sup>

Projections indicate that the Syrian droughts will intensify and become more frequent<sup>21</sup> with the potential for similar conditions to spread throughout the region, and reports directly link Syria's current drought conditions to anthropogenic climate change,<sup>22,23</sup> given the potential effects on regional food production further escalating conflict in the contentious region, the potential for refugees to increase in the coming years is intuitive if not obvious.

Brutal climate conditions in Syria, Somalia, and elsewhere are already creating significant impacts on the agriculture sector and, consequently, affecting the livelihoods of those who have difficulty procuring food. When coupled with the millions of refugees who have left the war zone and upward of 13 million people in need of humanitarian assistance,<sup>24</sup> we contend that when the travel ban is viewed within the context of these dire environmental circumstances, given the demographics of these nations, along with anti-immigrant sentiments related to the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, the environmental justice contextualization is worthy of exploration.

Although the earlier evidence points to the United States having increased willingness toward environmental migrants, other contextual matters must be taken into account, including anti-Muslim policy and xenophobic sentiments by the incumbent U.S. political administration along with

our finding that those who strongly oppose the entrance of environmental migrants are more likely to be politically conservative leaning Americans. EO 13769 contributes to this narrative and compromises the mobility of refugees as it is aimed at barring millions, including environmental migrants.

We classify these actions as a clear evolution of *terror hysteria*, or the disproportionate and illogical reactions to the fear of terrorism on the U.S. home front. This post-9/11 milieu goes beyond inconveniences for travelers at U.S. airports and the more sobering heightened suspicions of men and women of color along with people wearing garb indigenous to South and Southwest Asia. It extends to unprecedented actions in contemporary policy settings, including, in this case, the further marginalization of environmental migrants by denying sanctuary to some of the planet's most vulnerable inhabitants.

In the absence of substantial international legal protections for environmental migrants and within the context of U.S. foreign policy that bars African and Southwest Asian populations—propagated by dubious assertions—the authors of this article contend that on both international and domestic levels, further clarity on the protection for environmental migrants and other refugee groups needs to be codified. This will aid in the combat against unconstitutional policies that explicitly discriminates and creates de facto ethnic and religious litmus tests for travel and entry to, and movement within, the United States.

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<sup>18</sup>Colin P. Kelley, Shahrzad Mohtadi, Mark A. Cane, Richard Seager, and Yochanan Kushnir. Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 112 (2015): 3241–3246.

<sup>19</sup>Colin Dwyer. *Drought Threatens to Drive Famine in Somalia as Hunger Kills More Than 100*. (Mar 2017). <[www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/03/05/518624610/drought-threatens-to-drive-famine-in-somalia-as-hunger-kills-more-than-100](http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/03/05/518624610/drought-threatens-to-drive-famine-in-somalia-as-hunger-kills-more-than-100)>. (Last accessed on March 6, 2017).

<sup>20</sup>United Nations. Somalia: Humanitarian Coordinator Warns of Possible Famine. *Mogadishu*, 2 February 2017. <[http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20170202\\_press\\_release\\_-\\_humanitarian\\_coordinator\\_warns\\_of\\_possible\\_famine.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20170202_press_release_-_humanitarian_coordinator_warns_of_possible_famine.pdf)>. (Last accessed on March 6, 2017).

<sup>21</sup>John Wendle. *The Ominous Story of Syria's Climate Refugees*. (Dec 2015). <[www.scientificamerican.com/article/ominous-story-of-syria-climate-refugees](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/ominous-story-of-syria-climate-refugees)>. (Last accessed on March 6, 2017).

<sup>22</sup>Colin P. Kelley, Shahrzad Mohtadi, Mark A. Cane, Richard Seager, and Yochanan Kushnir. Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought.

<sup>23</sup>Peter H. Gleick. Water, drought, climate change, and conflict in Syria. *Weather, Climate, and Society* 6 (2014): 331–340.

<sup>24</sup>UNOCHA. *Syrian Arab Republic*. (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2017). <[www.unocha.org/syria](http://www.unocha.org/syria)>. (Last accessed on March 6, 2017).