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[Mythili Sampathkumar](#)

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The Climate Change-Conflict Nexus

Does climate change cause conflict? The question is more than theoretical, and may have profound consequences at the United Nations and for the effort to reach an internationally binding climate change agreement.

The [Pentagon](#) wrote in 2010: "Climate change will have significant geopolitical impacts around the world, contributing to greater competition for more limited and critical life-sustaining resources like food and water." The fact that the Department of Defense is addressing climate change, even issuing a [Climate Change Adaptation Roadmap](#), is one solid piece of evidence of a connection.

There's some fascinating academic research to back this up, too.

[Solomon Hsiang](#), assistant professor at University of California – Berkeley, tells UN Dispatch that he found strong ties that indicate "more conflicts in hotter, drier years." The increase in heat causes and increase in "interpersonal violence like fistfights, domestic abuse, and rape" as well as "riots, organized political conflicts, and land invasions for farmers," explains Hsiang. Specifically, he and other researchers found a 14 percent increase in conflict [between groups](#), and a 4 percent increase in conflict between individuals. Hsiang notes though, that this relates more to intrastate conflict, rather than interstate, where research will look in the future.

The measuring of these statistics may be new, but incredibly this phenomena has been occurring "around the world in pretty much all societies throughout human history," Hsiang says. Though the link to an increase in [personal violence](#) levels is not of interest to many foreign policy political scientists, the implications of connecting climate and intrastate conflict could still have a profound impact on UN climate negotiations.

One of the crucial and controversial sticking points in the last international climate change conference in Warsaw was financial accountability for climate change already caused by the developed world and the damages owed to developing countries. What if damages were linked to the effects of developing world conflicts? The link also has potential impact on the [UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's](#) 'state of the climate' assessment report coming out next year.

The research is still in it's infancy Hsiang notes to UN Dispatch that it is still difficult to attribute specific events, saying "we don't know exactly why A causes B. There's lots of different stories about why the two might be linked." To give it some context, Hsiang explains that the research in this field is akin to where "epidemiology was in the 1970s." In any case, connecting climate change to conflict just proves once again why it is a multi-dimensional and global problem.