

# On the Conflict Shoreline

*Tony Simpson*

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The diverse countries of the Eastern Mediterranean endure many long-standing problems, including recurrent conflict in the Middle East as well as unresolved disputes in Palestine, Israel, Cyprus, Turkey and Greece, to name several. Climate change gives a developing context to all these problems, as well as creating many problems of its own by exacerbating agricultural, economic, social and migratory trends. Some informed commentators suggest we have only a decade or so to begin to reverse the rise in global temperatures. With that note of urgency, let's examine what has been described as 'The Conflict Shoreline'.

Eyal Weizman is an architect who, with Fazal Sheikh, has co-authored an illustrated book, published in Germany in 2015, entitled *The Conflict Shoreline: Colonization as Climate Change in the Negev Desert*. Sheikh has compiled a striking photographic record of the processes at work, and Weizman writes in 'response to Sheikh's images and the result of his subsequent investigations'. Weizman focuses on Israel's mistreatment of the Bedouin inhabitants of the Negev, where they have lived for centuries, but his analysis gives a wider context. Thus, he writes:

'It was in the Sahel, on the southern threshold of the Sahara Desert, that the consequences of desertification were first noticed in the late 1960s, following repeated cycles of drought and famine that aggravated social tensions and Cold War conflicts. The word *sahel* is Arabic for "shoreline" – a shoreline that, however, is only ebbing as the desert expands southwards, gaining millions of hectares of

former arable land and leaving miles of baked plant remains where the sparse green pastures and fragile agriculture of the savannah once survived. In past decades, conflicts have broken out in most countries from East to West Africa, along the shoreline: Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal.’

How do the US military view the Sahel? Weizman tells us:

‘Security experts now refer to the Sahel as a “corridor of terror,” pointing to the loss of agricultural land as the “underlying cause of social, economic and environmental problems that feed recruitment for violent extremist organizations [...such as] Al Qaeda-linked groups”. [Mark Sexton and Shafi Saiduddin, “Desertification and Insurgency: A Global crisis,” Army (Association of the US Army), July 2014: 50] This perspective ... saw local land mismanagement as the principal cause of desertification, but neglected to note the responsibility of the industrial North for desertification and climate change through industrial emissions. The West could therefore conceptualise its help in humanitarian terms as a matter of charity rather than a recognition of responsibility ...’ [*The Conflict Shoreline*, p26]

What happens to people driven out by desertification who seek refuge in Israel? Weizman explains:

‘... Further south, roughly past the 100mm annual precipitation marker, Bedouin settlement points thin out and this part of the Negev serves as the dumping ground for everything Israel’s economy needs but the state wants kept far away out of sight ... In it the military run a number of little-regulated, out-of-sight (and oversight) detention camps for Palestinian prisoners ... It is here that this archipelago of incarceration has recently been expanded into the world’s largest constellation of detention centres for sub-Saharan asylum seekers – mainly Sudanese and Eritrean refugees escaping war and famine.’ [*The Conflict Shoreline*, p43]

To what extent do aridity and conflict interact? Weizman puts it thus:

‘...War and insurgency have occurred across the entire African continent all along the northern and southern threshold of the Sahara desert ... Plotting the location of western drone strikes on meteorological maps demonstrates another amazing coincidence: many of these attacks—from South Waziristan through northern Yemen, Somalia, Mali, Iraq, Gaza, and Libya – are directly on or close to the 200mm aridity line ... To follow this line on its journey east and west is not to claim that conflicts along it have been directly determined by climatic factors, but rather to point to an ongoing historical process by which political developments have violently interacted with changing climatic conditions along this seam. Existing tensions have been aggravated by climate-related

shifts in the aridity line, and, in turn, continued conflict in these areas has caused the destruction of vegetation and agriculture, accelerating the processes of desertification...’ [*The Conflict Shoreline* p12]

Introducing an earlier publication [Eyal Weizman, *Introduction:Forensis*, p26, forensic-architecture.org, 2014], Weizman wrote of the deaths of people trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea:

‘... In April 2011 a boat carrying 72 African migrants en route to Italy ran out of petrol on the high seas. This was the time of NATO’s siege of Libya and the Mediterranean was full of military vessels. The migrant boat drifted for 14 days, without food or water, and without anyone intervening to help them, despite the obligation under international maritime law to provide assistance to those in distress. Everyone on board died, but for nine survivors. Movement on water leaves no trace ... The location of the place where a phone call was made by the migrants (to an Eritrean priest in the Vatican) established the starting point of the drift. Historical patterns of wind and water movements in the Mediterranean established a probable drift path. By demonstrating the proximity of the boat along its course to various military and commercial ships that could have intervened, this research has the potential to reorient the judicial process, which is still ongoing.’

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In May 2016, Naomin Klein explored some of Weizman’s insights when she gave the Edward W Said London Lecture, which was subsequently published in the *London Review of Books* (2 June 2016). Klein emphasised that:

‘... the environmental challenges of the Middle East are impossible to ignore for anyone immersed ... in its geopolitics. This is a region intensely vulnerable to heat and water stress, to sea-level rise and to desertification. A recent paper in *Nature Climate Change* predicts that, unless we radically lower emissions and lower them fast, large parts of the Middle East will likely “experience temperature levels that are intolerable to humans” by the end of this century...’

Climate refugees aren’t currently recognised under international law, but they surely form a proportion of the hundreds of thousands of people who, in recent years, have sought to reach Europe from the south. Of course, Greece and Italy accommodate many of these refugees without anything like sufficient help from outside. Naomi Klein remarks:

‘We have dangerously warmed our world already, and our governments still refuse to take the actions necessary to halt the trend ... Fossil fuels aren’t the

sole driver of climate change – there is industrial agriculture, and deforestation – but they are the biggest ... Fossil fuels, unlike renewable forms of energy such as wind and solar, are not widely distributed but highly concentrated in very specific locations ... In 1953 it was the British-US collaboration to overthrow the democratically elected government of Muhammad Mossadegh after he nationalised the Anglo-Iranian oil company (now BP). In 2003, exactly fifty years later, it was ... the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq. The reverberations from each intervention continue to jolt our world, as do the reverberations from the burning of all that oil. The Middle East is now squeezed in the pincer of violence caused by fossil fuels, on the one hand, and the impact of burning those fossil fuels on the other.’

Klein also scrutinises the approach of the US military:

‘... All this was foreshadowed a decade ago in a US military report. “The Middle East has always been associated with two natural resources, oil (because of its abundance) and water (because of its scarcity)”. ... Certain patterns have become quite clear: first, Western fighter jets followed that abundance of oil; now, Western drones are closely shadowing the lack of water, as drought exacerbates conflict. Just as bombs follow oil, and drones follow drought, so boats follow both: boats filled with refugees fleeing homes on the aridity line ravaged by war and drought. And the same capacity for dehumanising the other that justified the bombs and drones is now being trained on these migrants, casting their need for security as a threat to ours, their desperate flight as some kind of invading army ...’

The *London Review of Books* gave Klein’s article the title ‘Let Them Drown’. Anyone who follows Twitter feeds from the search and rescue ships operating in the Mediterranean Sea in 2016 will be familiar with this sentiment, all too frequently expressed by people who themselves seem not at risk of death by drowning or starvation. Klein explains:

‘...Although climate change will ultimately be an existential threat to all of humanity, in the short term we know that it does discriminate, hitting the poor first and worst, whether they are abandoned on the rooftops of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina or whether they are among the 36 million who according to the UN are facing hunger due to drought in Southern and East Africa.’

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Klein draws some of the lessons of our current predicament:

‘There is an emergency, a present emergency, not a future one, but we aren’t acting like it. The Paris Agreement commits to keeping warming below 2 degrees centigrade. It’s a target that is beyond reckless. When it was unveiled

in Copenhagen in 2009, the African delegates called it a ‘death sentence’. The slogan of several low-lying island nations is “1.5 to stay alive”.’

She points out that:

‘At the last minute, a clause was added to the Paris Agreement that says countries will pursue “efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees centigrade”. Not only is this non-binding but it is a lie: we are making no such efforts. The governments that made this promise are now pushing for more fracking and more tar sands development – which are utterly incompatible with 2 degrees C, let alone 1.5 degrees C. This is happening because the wealthiest people in the wealthiest countries in the world think they are going to be OK, that someone else is going to eat the biggest risks ...’

Then Klein makes a vital connection:

‘ ... The anti-austerity people rarely talk about climate change, the climate change people rarely talk about war or occupation ... Overcoming these disconnections ... is the most pressing task of anyone concerned with social and economic justice. It is the only way to build counterpower sufficiently robust to win against the forces protecting the highly profitable but increasingly untenable status quo.’

She draws some positive conclusions:

‘Climate change acts as an accelerant of many of our social ills – inequality, wars, racism – but it can also be an accelerant for the opposite, for the forces working for economic and social justice and against militarism. Indeed the climate crisis – by presenting our species with an existential threat and putting us on a firm and unyielding science-based deadline – might just be the catalyst we need to knit together a great many powerful movements, bound together by a belief in the inherent worth and value of all people and united by a rejection of the sacrifice zone mentality, whether it applies to people or places. We face so many overlapping and intersecting crises that we cannot afford to fix them one at a time. We need integrated solutions, solutions that radically bring down emissions, while creating huge numbers of good, unionised jobs and delivering meaningful justice to those who have been most abused and excluded under the current extractive economy.’

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In Britain, Jeremy Corbyn makes the connection between addressing climate change and rejecting austerity. His new Environment & Energy policy (reprinted in this issue) emphasises that we face a

‘climate crisis. 2016 is set to be the hottest year on record and greenhouse gas emissions globally are still not falling. We are seeing the impacts of climate change much earlier than anyone predicted – around the world and at home.’

Yet fuel poverty continues to blight the lives of many people in Britain, as the policy states:

‘... A nation of draughty homes has left seven million households seriously struggling to pay their energy bills and yet we have the skills, technology and people needing quality jobs to fix them. 29,000 people die early every year from air pollution primarily caused by burning dirty fossil fuels. We will deliver clean energy, affordable heating and electricity – energy for the 60 million, not for the big 6 energy companies.’

The policy goes into some detail about how to achieve these outcomes, including through 200 ‘local energy companies’ on the model of Robin Hood Energy, established by Nottingham City Council, and 1,000 community energy co-operatives with a ‘right to supply’.

‘Think globally, act locally!’ was a slogan I learnt in Berlin during the European Nuclear Disarmament campaigns of the 1980s. Never was it more pertinent.

*The Conflict Shoreline: Colonization as Climate Change in the Negev Desert, Eyal Weizman/Fazal Sheikh, Steidl in association with Cabinet Books, Brooklyn, 2015, ISBN 9783869308050*

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