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Recommended Citation

Ohri, Nivea A. (2018) "How Syria's Failure to Uphold the Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement Exacerbated the Effects of Climate Change in the Levant," *Sustainable Development Law & Policy*. Vol. 19 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/sdlp/vol19/iss2/8>

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HOW SYRIA'S FAILURE TO UPHOLD THE KYOTO PROTOCOL AND PARIS AGREEMENT EXACERBATED THE EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE LEVANT

*Nivea A. Ohri**

The drought in the Levant Region of the Arab Republic of Syria has caused massive destruction by disrupting agriculture and forcing migration to cities.¹ The drought, induced by climate change, has destroyed livelihoods, structures, and health of scores of people.² Environmental tensions fed a political discontent that had long been simmering in rural areas, and was a trigger for the Syrian Revolution.³ Syrians even turned to USAID for help in 2008 when the Syrian minister of agriculture stated publicly, “the economic and social fallout from the drought was ‘beyond [Syria’s] capacity as a country to deal with.’”⁴ However, the impacts of climate change and the drought in the Levant are still felt today in both Syria and its surrounding countries.⁵ Syria’s failure to uphold commitments under international environmental declarations such as the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement exacerbated the drought in the Levant Region of Syria.⁶

On June 26, 1997, Syria signed the Kyoto Protocol⁷ and thus expressed its interest in mitigating climate change.⁸ Under the Kyoto Protocol, Syria is a non-Annex country, which means that it is “a mostly developing country, vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change like desertification and drought.”⁹ Due to its non-Annex status, Syria is not bound to fulfill any goals or standards, or to make environmental changes to mitigate the effects of the drought.¹⁰ Despite international environmental law lacking major repercussions for violations, countries voluntarily expressed their interests in making environmental improvements.¹¹

Article 2 of the Kyoto Protocol encourages Syria to implement policies such as energy efficiency, sustainable forms of agriculture, updated research, and innovative technology in accordance to national circumstances.¹² Syria also signed the Paris Agreement on November 17, 2017, which similarly encourages environmental protection.¹³ Article 6.1 of the Paris Agreement states that parties should voluntarily promote sustainable development and environmental integrity.¹⁴ Article 7 of the Paris Agreement suggests that Syria should mitigate and adapt to climate change by improving effectiveness, durability, and scientific knowledge on climate change and research.¹⁵

Although Syria made an aspirational declaration to mitigate climate change by signing each of these treaties, Syria has failed to uphold its own stated goals. Syria has failed to honor Article 2 of the Kyoto Protocol, which states that countries “should not . . . mismanage and fail to govern their water resources, and use old and inefficient technology in farming and agriculture.”¹⁶

The violations have led to national distress as resources such as water, food, housing, and goods became scarce.¹⁷ Article 2(1)(a)(i) of the Kyoto Protocol suggests that signatory countries should prioritize the “enhancement of the national economy,” however, this is an obligation that Syria has failed to fulfill due to its mismanagement of water resources and continued use of old, inefficient technology in agriculture.¹⁸ As of April 2017, an estimated sixteen billion dollars in potential agriculture revenue has been lost through inefficient production, as well as in damaged and destroyed assets and infrastructure within the agriculture sector.¹⁹

Likewise, Article 2(1)(a)(iv) suggests that countries should implement policies to further enhance “research on, and promotion, development and increased use of, new and renewable forms of energy.”²⁰ Syria has neither devoted resources nor funds to environmental research and preservation, though it seems as if Syria is making some effort and consideration to the matter.²¹

Both the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement encourage the signatories to use resources as efficiently and sustainably as possible.²² A state violates a treaty when it uses more than its allotted resources, and Syria used more than its allotted resources without redeeming itself after the initial violation.²³ Although there are few enforcement mechanisms that could incentivize Syria to submit update reports on its environmental progress, Syria has not voluntarily submitted an updated report on its progress and standing since 2010.²⁴ By using its resources inefficiently and outdatedly, and then failing to report its efforts to adhere to the treaties, Syria has failed to meet the goals that it adopted when signing the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement.²⁵

The Paris Agreement is a treaty that Syria signed after the 2011 revolution, yet few improvements in water preservation or distribution of resources have been made.²⁶ The progress is in similar standing to the Kyoto Protocol.²⁷ The hot and humid region of the Levant is suffering from climate change and water scarcity.²⁸ It is essential that Syria abide by the rules of the treaties it has signed in order to further mitigate environmental degradation and national distress. Because the environment is directly linked to economic and political stability and growth, with a better environment and basic needs of its inhabitants fulfilled, Syria along with the Earth, will be more prosperous.²⁹ 

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