

Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

[Water, Terrorism, and Public Diplomacy](#) [1]

Perhaps the greatest deterrent to extremism is prosperity. If people have a decent place to live, can put food on the table for their families, and see their children healthy and being educated, they are likely to tune out recruitment efforts by terrorists and other proponents of violence.

Governments can do much to foster prosperity (sometimes by just getting out of the way), but natural forces can offset even the most successful governmental efforts. Climate change can produce conditions that destroy prosperity, produce desperation, and leave people susceptible to the rhetoric of those who promise that unleashing angry frustration will make things better.

Recent articles by Abraham Riesman on [Slate.com](#) and Saleem H. Ali for [Foreign Policy](#) explain how natural calamity can contribute to political havoc. To highlight just one critical location, the Sahel – the swath of territory running across northern Africa that divides desert from savanna – has recently seen increasingly severe droughts, which means that for people living in that region prosperity is a vanishing dream and the allure of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and similar groups becomes more difficult to resist. Events in Mali and pessimistic prognoses for Nigeria and other nations in this region, plus similar ecological and political instability in southwest Asia and elsewhere, illustrate the magnitude of this problem.

Non-environmental issues are certainly involved; brutal and inefficient governments make ecological crises worse. But regardless of exacerbating factors, unhappiness about basic quality of life remains at the heart of most political upheaval, and nature – as well as armed conflict – can undermine quality of life anywhere in the world.

Public diplomacy must be responsive to this reality. Although not even the most skilled diplomat can alter the weather, new environment-related technologies are becoming more useful and affordable. This is especially true concerning water. Desalination is being more widely relied upon, as are smaller-scale water purification projects that give communities an adequate supply of the substance they cannot do without. Education programs about water usage and sanitary practices have become more comprehensive and more widely accepted.

Public diplomats representing nations such as the United States have long recognized the importance of water diplomacy. For years, the Peace Corps has worked with local communities around the world to ensure safe water supplies. During her tenure as secretary of state, Hillary Rodham Clinton initiated the U.S. Water Partnership, which shares knowledge and provides other aid related to water supplies and sanitation. The machinery of foreign policy is in motion, but more must be done to make certain the people most in need receive assistance.

Americans, accustomed to leaving their faucets running and overwatering their lawns, have been slow to recognize the fragility of the water supply. But as drought has affected larger and larger areas of the United States, appreciation of the importance of water management is taking hold. Water's rise on the public issues agenda should carry over to foreign policy.

Public diplomacy, which puts a government directly in touch with people of other nations, should more thoroughly incorporate water diplomacy as part of its repertoire of programs. This is more than a matter of doing the right thing; it will affect global security. People will fight to protect water. They will throw aside government and the rule of law if need be to ensure that they can get water. They will listen more attentively to terrorists' promises if they believe their lives are being ruined by lack of water.

These are reasons, in addition to basic decency, that mandate greater attention to water issues as essential elements of public diplomacy. Doing the right thing would assuredly serve American strategic interests.
