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Does Climate Change Actually Fuel Terrorism?

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It is customary for politicians to say that we are beset by dangers, and that they alone are what stands between voters and certain doom, but Bernie Sanders' November 14 claim that "climate change is directly related to the growth of terrorism" is certainly a twofer -- hitting two things that people seem most worried about. But is it correct?

No. On its face, it's absurd. Global surface temperature has risen about 0.8°C in the last 125 years. The surface temperature you experience will rise, on average, that much if you drive 150 miles south. Raleigh, North Carolina, does not typically send terrorists to Washington.

But wait. Sanders could point to a paper published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) last year that connected global warming to the mess in Syria.

Here's how it supposedly works. Subtropical regions around the planet are dominated by warm and dry high pressure systems, which is why there is so much desert about twenty degrees north of the equator. Computer models say that these systems should become even stronger with planetary warming, so that should increase drought. And, indeed, there's been a tendency for below normal rainfall in Syria in recent years.

Never mind that Syria has a history of horrifically bad water management policies, or that the number of people there has tripled in the past 35 years. Which creates more water scarcity problems -- 10 percent less rain, or 300 percent more people consuming it?

The climate models found no statistically significant rise in surface barometric pressure in the region. Further, the climate models actually predict rainfall changes as well as surface pressure. The precipitation changes in the Middle East are highly correlated with various patterns of temperature over the world's oceans. The computer models couldn't properly reproduce those, and only simulated rainfall declines when the right oceanic temperatures were fed into the computer beforehand. In college, putting down the known-to-be-correct answer in a laboratory experiment is called fudging. The Syrian rainfall was fudged.

We can't expect Sanders, or any of the myriad politicians trying to tie global warming to the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria to know these details.

In reality, the rise of ISIS can largely be traced to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. ISIS's predecessor was Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), a group of Sunni extremists that rose up to fight U.S. forces and that eventually broke from core al-Qaeda because their tactics, especially towards other Muslims, were too brutal. After taking advantage of the power vacuum provided by the civil war just over the border in Syria, AQI morphed into ISIS.

Faced with a political and pundit class that exaggerates the ramifications of climate change and inflates the threat of terrorism, Americans should be aware of H.L. Mencken's famous epigram that "the whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins, most of them imaginary."

We are not living in the most dangerous time in human history, or even in our lifetimes. There are dangers in the world; there always have been, and there always will be. Politicians are quite adept at identifying a dizzying array of possible threats. But they are lousy at putting those threats in perspective.

Your likelihood of being killed by terrorists if you live in United States is about one in 4 million. You're more likely to drown in your bathtub, or be killed by falling furniture, than you are to be killed by a terrorist, even the new and scary ISIS ones.

But it's actually worse than just exaggerating threats. Politicians also repeatedly misdiagnose the problem, proposing remedies that are often worse than the problems they purport to solve.

Our specific responses to terrorism since 9/11, for example, have proved many times more costly than the attacks themselves. The litany of costly and counterproductive measures that politicians have visited on the American people, and the world, ostensibly on the grounds of preventing future terrorism attacks, include the Iraq war, and the prolonging of the mission in Afghanistan, long after al Qaeda had been driven from its safe havens there. None of the advocates for these policies can actually prove that any of them have reduced the risk of terrorism.

Similarly, the proposals being floated for next month's UN climate conference will certainly cost a lot of money, but the advocates cannot prove that any one of them will have a meaningful effect on climate.

Spending money like that impedes our ability to address things that actually threaten us today, or might in the future. They reduce our ability to adapt, by diverting resources away from economically viable energy sources to uneconomical ones. Whereas wars kill and maim people today, measures to slow or halt the use of fossil fuels threaten to trap the poorest people in the world in their present desperate state for many years to come. Sensible policies would allow the poorest of the poor to use all the tools and technology that humanity has perfected over the years,

and to allow them to achieve a level of income security and well-being that the rest of the world has enjoyed for decades.

You'd think Bernie Sanders would know this. We can't expect him to be conversant with the gory details in climate models -- but common decency requires that he not exploit public fears in order to further his political agenda.

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