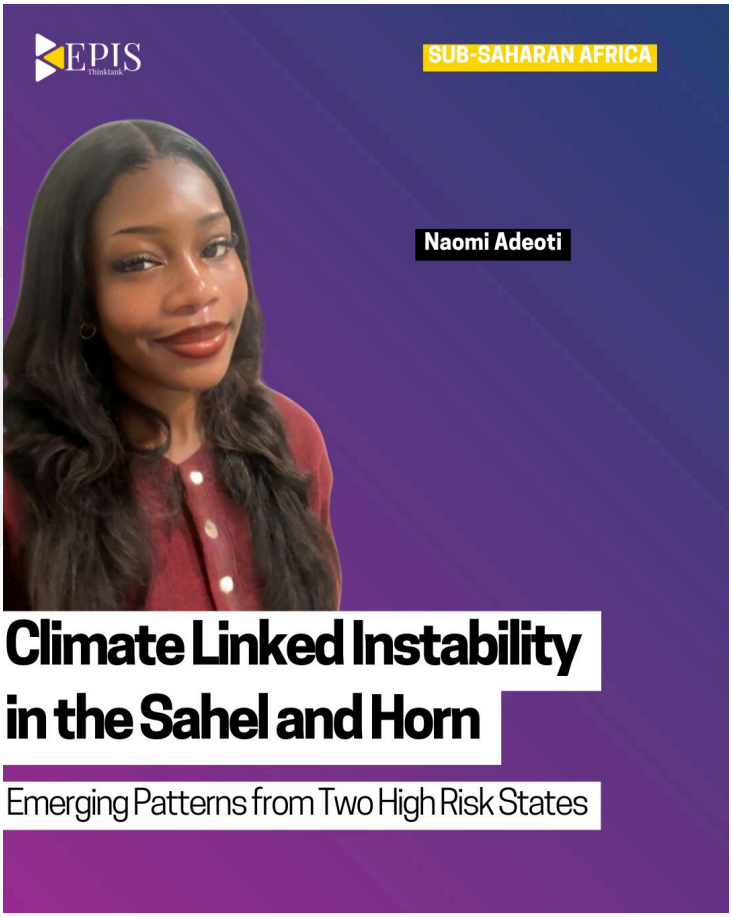
Climate Linked Instability in the Sahel and Horn

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1. Overview

Climate change is increasingly recognised as a significant force shaping Africa's security landscape. The continent's dependence on climate-sensitive livelihoods and limited institutional capacity means climate stress interacts with, rather than replaces, traditional drivers of instability. Recent studies show that climate stress influences instability through three primary mechanisms: the contraction of resource availability, shifts in mobility and population distribution, and the weakening of governance systems.

While Burkina Faso's crisis is rooted in the rapid collapse of rural governance and the expansion of armed-group authority in climate-stressed zones, Somalia's instability emerges from the interaction of severe climatic shocks with a decentralised political system and an insurgency capable of embedding itself within climate-affected governance vacuums.

This brief uses these two cases to examine how climate change interacts with local incentives, shifts patterns of authority, and reconfigures the spatial and political organisation of conflict.

2. Burkina Faso as a Case Study

2.1 Climatic Decline and Livelihood Contraction

Burkina Faso demonstrates how climate stress accelerates the dissolution of state authority in fragile environments. The country sits in a region warming at nearly 1.5 times the global average, with northern provinces recording a 1.8°C increase since 2000. Rainfall has become increasingly irregular, with the National Meteorological Agency and Climate Centre reporting a 30% decline in average precipitation over three decades .Data from the Food and Agriculture Organisation shows a 20-30% reduction in sorghum and millet yields in the north compared with early 2000s baselines, and satellite measurements indicate sustained declines in vegetation cover across key provinces.

These pressures compress the economic space within which rural households operate. Rain-fed agriculture becomes more uncertain, pastoral herds shrink or migrate earlier, and both groups converge on diminishing productive land. As household resilience weakens, minor disputes over water access or degraded pasture escalate more easily.

2.2 Erosion of Customary Mediation and Local Order

The escalation of such disputes is shaped by institutional decline. Customary authorities once regulated planting boundaries, grazing corridors and seasonal mobility, but their legitimacy has eroded under the weight of rapid environmental degradation and shifting social dynamics.

Afrobarometer surveys show trust in traditional leaders to resolve land conflicts falling below 40% in northern regions, a dramatic decline from a decade earlier. This institutional weakening removes the mechanisms that previously contained tensions arising from resource scarcity.

2.3 Armed Group Governance in Climate-Stressed Regions

Militant actors including Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have filled the governance vacuum created by these climatic and institutional shifts.

Their influence extends beyond violence: they adjudicate grazing disputes, regulate access to markets and mediate conflicts in areas where neither the state nor customary authorities can exercise consistent author-

ity. In many northern and eastern provinces, these actors now set rules for seasonal movements, collect informal taxes and control key transit routes, effectively embedding themselves in the everyday governance.

International Crisis Group records more than 70 instances of armed-group dispute resolution between 2021 and 2023, with up to 40% of national territory now being beyond state control.

As rainfall becomes more erratic and productive land contracts, competition over pasture, wells and cultivation sites intensifies. Where formal institutions lack presence or credibility, communities often turn to whichever actor can guarantee access or enforce agreements. This gives armed groups further leverage, allowing them to strengthen their embeddedness in local economies.

Climate pressure thereby reinforces the political conditions under which non-state governance becomes not only possible, but in many areas an unavoidable alternative for rural communities seeking predictability and protection.

2.4 Displacement and the Spatial Reconfiguration of Power

Climate pressure also shapes displacement patterns. Burkina Faso now hosts more than 2.1 million internally displaced persons, a tenfold increase since 2019. Although conflict violence remains the primary driver, climate conditions often determine whether return is possible. International Organisation for Migration (IOM) surveys find nearly one-third of displaced households unable to return due to crop failure and water scarcity in their communities of origin. These population shifts transform local political economies: towns such as Kaya and Dori have grown by more than half in four years, straining municipal services and generating new governance challenges. Informal settlements proliferate where state oversight is minimal, increasing the scope for armed actors to influence local order.

2.5 Climate Change and the Cumulative Weakening of State Authority

The cumulative effect is a reinforcing cycle. Climate stress undermines livelihoods, institutional authority weakens, armed groups expand their regulatory functions and displacement reshapes territorial control. Each successive shock further depletes state capacity, as emergency response absorbs fiscal resources, personnel and political attention that would otherwise support long-term governance or service provision. Over time, this leaves ministries understaffed, local administrations hollowed out and security forces stretched thin.

Climate pressures also erode the state's ability to project authority in rural areas. Recurrent droughts reduce tax yields in agricultural zones, undermine local revenue collection and weaken the financial base of municipal governments. Displacement then compounds these dynamics with large population inflows into specific towns straining municipal services, deepening competition over land and housing and generating further demand for informal governance in areas where the state cannot expand rapidly enough.

As climate variability increases, these reinforcing pressures drive a gradual but persistent fragmentation of authority across the territory.

3. Somalia as a Case Study

3.1 Climate Shocks and Livelihood Collapse

Somalia's climate-security environment is shaped by an extreme sequence of climatic shocks. The country experienced five consecutive failed rainy seasons between 2020 and 2023, the first time such a prolonged failure has been recorded in national climate data. Previous drought cycles typically involved one or two failed seasons, allowing agro-pastoral households some scope to rebuild food stocks or re-establish cultivation. The 2020-2023 sequence was different with the uninterrupted nature eliminating recovery periods altogether and creating a cumulative shock that exhausted household coping strategies. As a result, more than three million livestock died and over six million people were pushed into crisis-level food insecurity.

Flooding in 2023/24 displaced an additional 750,000 people and destroyed extensive farmland along the Shabelle and Jubba rivers. These events disrupted pastoral systems, eroding the resource base social order depended on.

3.2 Climate Stress and the Restructuring of Rural Authority

Climate-driven livelihood collapse alters the political economy of authority. In many areas, families lose herds or crops that once served as buffers against shocks. As these assets disappear, the actors who control access to water, grazing land or market routes gain power. Al Shabaab has adapted effectively to this shift. During droughts, it controls boreholes and regulates movement; during floods, it manages river crossings and transport nodes. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) reports the group controlling more than 60% of functional rural boreholes during the 2022-2023 drought, indicating how climate stress enhances insurgent authority relative to the state.

3.3 Displacement, Urbanisation and Shifting Clan Dynamics

Displacement is central to Somalia's climate-conflict dynamics. In 2023 alone, disaster-related displacement exceeded 1.2 million people, surpassing conflict-related movements for the first time in years. These flows alter clan demographics in both rural and urban areas, reshaping political bargaining and representation. When flood-affected riverine communities move into peri-urban settlements, they enter contested spaces where land rights are ambiguous, and municipal capacity is limited. As a result, local disputes often escalate, and the boundaries of clan influence shift in ways that influence electoral and administrative politics.

3.4 Governance Fragmentation and Uneven Adaptation Capacity

Somalia's federal system magnifies the political effects of climate pressure. Federal member states vary in administrative capacity and political

cohesion. Some, such as Puntland, have functional early-warning systems, while others rely heavily on humanitarian actors. These disparities produce uneven adaptation outcomes across the country. Climate shocks expose governance gaps, disrupt coordination between federal and state authorities, and encourage reliance on armed or clan-based structures where state reach is thin. In these moments, Al Shabaab's ability to provide regulatory functions increases its governance weight.

3.5 Climate Change as a Force Reshaping Patterns of Authority

Climate stress continually reshapes the distribution of authority across rural and urban areas. Environmental shocks weaken the economic foundations of clan and state structures, forcing households and communities to adjust their movements and allegiances. These shifts, in turn, alter political representation and recalibrate local power balances. Fragmented governance creates openings that non-state actors are quick to exploit, embedding themselves in spaces where federal institutions are unable to respond effectively.

Climate variability therefore operates as a structural force that reorders access to resources, patterns of movement and the balance of authority among federal, local and insurgent systems.

4. Comparative Analysis: Divergent Pathways in the Sahel and the Horn

The Burkina Faso and Somalia cases show that climate-linked instability does not follow a uniform pattern across Sub-Saharan Africa. Instead the effects depend heavily on the structure of livelihoods, the distribution of political authority, and the capacity of institutions to absorb shocks.

Figure 1 highlights that climate shocks and conflict developments frequently overlap temporally, but the pathways through which these pressures translate into security outcomes diverge significantly.

Comparative analysis reveals three points of divergence that help explain why similar climatic pressures produce these differences.

The first relates to the organisation of authority in rural spaces. In Burkina Faso, the collapse of customary mediation and the erosion of state presence have given armed groups significant opportunities to assume regulatory functions. Climate stress accelerates this process by increasing the frequency and intensity of disputes over farmland, water and mobility. Authority shifts away from both state and customary institutions toward non-state actors that provide forms of order in the absence of alternatives. Somalia presents a different configuration. Authority is fragmented not only between state and non-state actors but also across the federal system and clan structures. Climate shocks expose the unevenness of this system where some regions manage environmental stress more effectively, while others rely on clan-based governance.

The second divergence involves the political significance of mobility. In Burkina Faso, displacement is largely unidirectional from rural to peri-urban areas, creating demographic concentrations that exceed the capacity of municipal governments. Climate pressure makes return less viable and contributes to the long-term depopulation of rural territories, which in turn facilitates armed-group entrenchment. In Somalia, mobility is more complex and politically consequential. Climate-induced movements intersect with clan boundaries and creates new tensions over land and service access in rapidly expanding peri-urban settlements. The political system itself is reshaped as population movements alter the composition of constituencies and shift patterns of allegiance.

The third point lies in the strategic behaviour of non-state actors. In Burkina Faso, insurgent groups adopt quasi-administrative functions primarily as state withdrawal leaves vacuums in which the provision of dispute resolution and taxation becomes possible. In Somalia, Al Shabaab's governance role is more dynamic, where the group actively anticipates climate shocks and adjusts its strategies accordingly. This gives Al Shabaab a competitive advantage over state institutions whose responses are often slow, fragmented or mismatched to local needs.

5. Conclusion

The trajectories of Burkina Faso and Somalia show that the climate-security nexus in Sub-Saharan Africa cannot be reduced to simple claims that climate change "causes" conflict. Instead, it modifies the structural conditions where disputes arise, governance falters and armed actors operate. Livelihood erosion increases dependence on actors capable of regulating access to land, water or markets, while displacement and governmental decline rearranges social and political relations in ways that increase volatility.

In Burkina Faso, climate pressures intensify the breakdown of rural order and enable armed groups to embed themselves as providers of security and dispute resolution. In Somalia, climate shocks interact with federal fragmentation and the adaptive strategies of an entrenched insurgency to reshape patterns of mobility and political competition. These cases highlight different manifestations of a shared dynamic where climate change acts as a multiplier of pre-existing vulnerabilities and a catalyst for shifts in authority.

Looking ahead, the key issue is not the scale of climate stress alone, but the way it interacts with existing institutional and economic pressures. What matters is how environmental shocks meet the realities of weak governance, livelihood fragility and contested authority. The experiences of Burkina Faso and Somalia show that it is this alignment, and not climate pressure on its own that determines whether environmental shocks fuel insecurity or are absorbed through governance and adaptation.