



The Three Heads of the Cerberus Heatwave: Risk Society, ISIS, Wildfires

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During the heatwave that ravaged the Mediterranean in mid-July 2023, named Cerberus, the beast of the underworld in Dante's *Inferno*, temperatures reached [40 Celsius \(104 Fahrenheit\)](#), hitting Turkiye, Greece, Croatia, Spain, and France. After Cerberus, another heatwave followed, named [Charon](#) after the ferryman who delivers souls into the underworld, Hades. These mythological names of the heatwaves invoke another Greek myth of "Europa." Ironically the European continent is named after a Phoenician woman abducted by Zeus. If she was Phoenician, Europa would have actually been an ancient Middle Eastern woman, given that the territory corresponds to today's Lebanon.

Western [news agencies](#) might be expected to focus on the heatwaves' effects on Europe given that is where their audiences are based. Nevertheless, this Eurocentric bias neglects how weather systems in the Sahara and the Middle East influence Europe's climate. The heatwaves from 2019 to 2023 that struck the European continent were determined by weather systems in the Sahara. Furthermore, this bias neglects how the Middle East and



North Africa (MENA) in general, and sub-Saharan Africa are also affected by this erratic pattern and the international security implications of these weather patterns.

The divide between Europe and the Middle East is a geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geocentric construct which set the two regions as binary opposites. This article advocates for another category, the “geo-environmental” that focuses on the Mediterranean to overcome this divide. The heat waves demonstrate that erratic weather patterns are natural phenomena that do not respect national borders, a reminder that this cultural and political division needs to be reimagined to address climate change.

The three-headed Cerberus heatwave is a threat to Mediterranean in particular, creating “risk societies” in all the above, threatened by desertification, drought, wildfires, and contributing to political insecurity.

The Anthropocene and Risk Society

According to the geologist [Paul Crutzen](#) the Anthropocene represents a temporal juncture when humankind achieved the agency to modify and influence Earth’s bio-geophysical systems in fundamental and detrimental ways. The Anthropocene is when the trajectory of modernity threatened nature, creating risks that undermine modern society, which the sociologist [Ulrich Beck](#) describes as a “risk society.”

Prior to Cerberus, in April 2023 a [heat wave](#), with weather usually typical of summer, swept Morocco and Algeria and Spain and Portugal, exacerbating a drought that [left crops dry](#) and drained aquifers and reservoirs, with the heat reaching 40.6 C (105.8 F) in parts of Morocco. Anthropogenic, or human-induced global heating made this heat wave [at least 100 times more likely](#) in the western Mediterranean. These heatwaves create a risk society that undermine water and food security.



Mediterranean Wildfires

Based on past precedent, I predicted when Cerberus emerged that these heatwaves will increase the risk of wildfires, which unfortunately ravaged Sicily in the summer of 2023. This prediction was based on past precedents. During the summer of [2021 wildfires](#) ravaged geographic areas ranging from [Siberia](#) to the Pacific Northwest to the Mediterranean, hitting the islands of [Sardinia](#) and Cyprus, [northern Greece](#), and [northern Lebanon](#), spreading to Syria and devastating southern Turkiye. Wildfires in 2023 have already broken out in [Greece](#).

Lebanon had been a victim to wildfires before. On the tail end of the 2019 heatwave, demonstrations erupted across Lebanon in October that year, protesting the failure of the state to provide reliable governance and services for decades, including its failure to adequately respond to wildfires that month.

The October 2019 wildfires were an [anomalous climactic event](#), aided by gusty dry winds and unseasonably high temperatures, scorching the Mount Lebanon mountain range. Lebanon's three aircraft specialized in fire-fighting remained grounded due to a lack of maintenance, an example the Lebanese invoked of the state's failing governance, demonstrated tragically less than a year later in August 2020 during the port of Beirut explosion.

Cagatay Tavsanoglu, a professor specializing in fire ecology at Hacettepe University in Ankara, [said](#) the conflagrations in the Mediterranean basin in 2021 served as a warning: "It is just the first indications of what climate change would do to the Mediterranean region in the future."

Terrorism and Climate Change

This Centre previously released [an extensive work](#) on the Sahel and terrorism. From the Middle East to Africa, climate change has



enabled violent non-state actors. Just in Africa, The Islamic State (IS) has [seven affiliates](#) threatening 11 countries. Besides its branches in North Africa, from Tunisia, Egypt, to Libya, IS operates four affiliates in sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahel.

The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara operates in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, a zone particularly affected by desertification caused by climate change. The Islamic State West African Province operates in Nigeria, while another affiliate is in Somalia. Further south, the Islamic State Central African Province recently emerged in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique. In sub-Saharan Africa, IS factions clash with al-Qaeda networks. Both have garnered support from clans, nomads, and farmers over issues such as [grazing rights](#), arable land and water wells, a harbinger of what future instability will look like due to climate change.

Security cultures and institutions, both national and collective, such as NATO needs to develop anthropogenic security strategies for the Mediterranean, reimagining floods and droughts due to climate change as transnational environmental risks. This requires nations and collective security institutions to adapt to risks that do not emanate from either state or non-state actors, yet anticipate when either can exacerbate environmental risks, either intentionally or inadvertently. Aircraft from NATO countries for example, need to be prepared during the summer months to put out wildfires.

During the 2019 heatwave, I argued that NATO needs to evolve into a Climate Alliance Treaty Organization or CATO in the Mediterranean Middle East. NATO has been present in the Middle East ever since Türkiye joined the Alliance in the early 1950s. In the mid-1990s, NATO initiated the [Mediterranean Dialogue](#) as a platform for cooperation with Jordan, Egypt, Israel, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Mauritania. The 2004 Istanbul Cooperation Initiative expanded this relationship with Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates.



This climate crisis, a Hot War if you will, demonstrated that security organizations need to acknowledge climate-related domains, not in the form of environmental neocolonialism, but through authentic collaboration to manage these shared risks.