

Interview – Christiane Fröhlich

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, JUN 29 2023

Christiane Fröhlich is a senior research fellow at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) in Hamburg, Germany. She is particularly interested in the intersection between forced migration, global environmental change, and socio-political upheaval, and in related questions of mobility and climate justice. Her regional focus is mainly on the Middle East (Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, Turkey), where she has conducted extensive field research. She is also engaged in cross-regional comparative projects, including the EU-funded consortium “Migration Governance and Asylum Crises (MAGYC)”, in which she led a work package on “Comparing Crises. Lessons from «migration crises» in North Africa, the Middle East and the Greater Horn of Africa.” Fröhlich holds a PhD from the Center for Conflict Studies at Marburg University.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I am a peace and conflict researcher by training with a focus on environmental conflicts and have been working on the intersections between climate change, conflict, and displacement for about 20 years. What excites me most is the now (more or less) mainstream understanding that the most pressing questions of our time cannot be answered within disciplinary boundaries but need inter- and/or transdisciplinary research designs (and teams!). Also, it is exciting to see the growing movement to de-colonise my research fields, from which I have learned and am learning a lot.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I started my path as a peace and conflict researcher twenty years ago with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where I looked at the role of water for and in a protracted conflict. I then moved to environmental (resource) conflicts more generally, to questions of climate and security, and to human mobility and its intersections with climate change and conflict. My regional focus is on the Southern Mediterranean, especially Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and (partly) Turkey. Throughout this work, my main driving force has been the people living in these different and more or less conflictive, repressive, and authoritarian settings. What has taught me most is talking to people who were born into protracted conflict, who had their lives upended by war, who had to flee their homes to survive, and who had to adapt to environmental changes caused by climate change, human behaviour, or both. I am deeply grateful to my respondents and everything they have taught me over the years, and in awe of their resourcefulness, hope in the face of disaster, and candour.

How do you define climate and disaster displacement/migration? What regions are most at risk?

Terms like climate migration or climate displacement imply that there’s a causality, and in the human mind, that causality often tends to be singular. Migration decisions, however, are complex and defy easy and simple explanations. For instance, decision-making will be different depending on whether people are experiencing a fast-onset or a slow-onset event. Also, the duration of migration differs a lot – not all migration is long-term; most migration happens within states and does not cross international borders; many people do not have access to migration at all and remain immobile; and migration is rarely a straightforward movement from A to B.

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I also think we need to be careful with labelling people, while labels can afford rights (like the label of ‘refugee’), labels can also impact the lives of migrating people negatively. What is more, people who I would consider climate migrants (i.e., people migrating because climate change has rendered their livelihoods unfeasible) will often not identify as such, but instead see themselves as economic migrants, for instance when a farmer has to diversify his income because his land is not fertile anymore. Another example: Many Pacific Islanders defy the term ‘climate refugee’ even though the impact of climate-related sea level rise on their lives is undeniable. They reject the stigma connected to the term, and consider mobility a crucial aspect of their way of life. As a consequence, I try to work with the self-definitions of the people I study.

Regarding regions at risk, I think we need to consider the whole world at risk. We are talking about a planetary emergency. There are of course different temporal scales, so some regions are already suffering while others are still relatively untouched. But regions like Europe, which have only begun to feel the effects of climate change, are nonetheless already impacted by the effects of climate change in other parts of the world.

Your research focuses on patterns of human migration and mobility in political and environmental crises. What are the links between political and environmental movement?

The question is, is it possible to uncouple global environmental change from political decision-making? I consider it a political decision to stick to fossil fuels, to adapt to climate change in different ways, or to mitigate it (or not). For example, pre-revolutionary Syria suffered a “century drought” in the first decade of the new century which especially affected the country’s North-East, a region which used to be the “breadbasket” of the region. Many people had to leave their homes during the drought years, because they couldn’t farm their lands anymore. During the drought, the government under Bashar al-Assad also decided to cut fuel and fertilizer subsidies, contributing to and exacerbating an on-going agricultural crisis in the region. Both the (most likely climate change related) drought and the political decision-making leading to the subsidy cuts have contributed to people deciding to leave their homes. So, I do not look at environmental change as something that is happening to us as an external force, but as something that is moderated and potentially mitigated or exacerbated by political decision-making.

You led a research project titled “Comparing Crises,” which is part of the EU-funded consortium “Migration Governance and Asylum Crises.” Can you describe this work and how migration impacts Europe as a whole?

The work package “Comparing Crises – Lessons from Migration Crises in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Greater Horn of Africa” was part of the EU Horizon2020 project “Migration Governance and Asylum Crises” which ended in April 2023 after four and a half years of research. The project explored how European migration policies are influenced by political crises triggered by migration. At a time when such policies are heavily contested across EU member states, and when the right to asylum seems more threatened than ever, this project aimed to improve our understanding of how migration policies are formulated and shaped in the context of crisis.

In my work package “Comparing Crises”, my team and I wanted to understand a) what is seen as a ‘migration crisis’ in our study regions to depart from Eurocentric ideas about ‘critical’ migration movements, and b), which role the governance of forced migration plays in negotiations between local, national, and international state and non-state actors in our study regions. For instance, what role does mobility control play for state actors and rebels in civil war settings? We argue that forced migration governance can function as a regime strategy of states at different levels of political stability and different institutional capacities. Forced migration governance is driven by the size and perceived proximity of forced migrant groups in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, class, religious belonging, and that the policies towards new migrant groups are strongly influenced by past migration governance through strong path dependency.

What is the relationship between climate change, human mobility, and conflict?

It seems somewhat intuitive to many people that should large numbers of people be displaced by climate change, this will lead to violent conflict in parts of the world. However, academic research into the links between climate

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change, migration and conflict has shown that the theoretical foundation and empirical support for this assumed causality is thin. This does not mean that climate change will be irrelevant for future patterns of migration, including migration that may be linked to violent conflict. But research has shown that the links between climate change, migration and conflict are complex and defy simple and alarmist conclusions.

What role can and do governments and policymakers play in climate-migration? What are the similarities and differences across the Global South and Europe?

Other than what I have said before, I think it is important to reflect on the respective audiences of governments and policymakers when they are governing climate (or any) migration. What is similar all over the world is that the audiences for policies governing migration usually are not migrants themselves. When Germany makes a decision about how to govern immigrants, the audience for that decision is German society, and to an extent European politics. In Jordan, the audience is Jordanian society, to an extent regional partners/neighbouring states, and international funders. Migrants are governed by these policies, but they usually have no part in their development, potentially making them pawns in negotiations about migration governance.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Read the classics, then criticize them. Make it a practice to read and cite outside your curriculum and look for diversity in authors and topics. Disciplinary boundaries are there to be crossed. To survive academia, find your people and talk to them about the crappy system, the pressure, the injustices. Gang up, it will help you change things, however small. Make time for things that have nothing to do with academia, especially when you feel you do not have time for that.