

A Narrative Intelligence Approach to European Climate Change and Migration Policy: a Case Study of the Sahel

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Abstract

The application of narrative intelligence to the climate, migration, and terrorism nexus in the Sahel reveals critical insights that are often obscured by traditional analytical approaches. Narrative intelligence, understood as the systematic analysis of stories, symbols, and meaning-making processes, exposes the emotional and cognitive dimensions that underpin climate-related instability in this fragile region. This study demonstrates that extremist organizations across the Sahel strategically exploit narratives of environmental injustice, displacement, and marginalization to recruit members and legitimize violence. It also shows that competing portrayals of climate migrants, whether as vulnerable populations deserving protection or as potential security threats requiring containment, shape national and regional policy responses that can either mitigate or intensify existing tensions. Moreover, the absence of coherent and empowering narratives surrounding climate adaptation and livelihood resilience creates ideological vacuums that violent extremist movements are quick to fill. By integrating narrative intelligence into security and policy assessments, this study argues that reframing climate migration through inclusive and resilience-oriented narratives offers a powerful form of strategic communication. Such an approach can reduce recruitment potential, promote more coherent governance strategies, and strengthen societal resilience across the Sahel in the face of accelerating climate and security challenges. Using Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) tools, this article pursues three interrelated objectives: to identify the dominant narrative frameworks shaping policy and public discourse on the climate–migration–terrorism nexus as it pertains to the Sahel and Europe; examine how those narratives structure particular policy responses; and assess the implications of competing and convergent narratives for counterterrorism and climate adaptation strategy.

Keywords:

Climate Change; Sahel; Migration; Terrorism; Europe; Narrative Intelligence.

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Introduction

The intersection of climate change, migration, and terrorism represents one of the most complex security challenges of the twenty-first century, yet traditional analytical frameworks often fail to capture the intricate human dimensions that drive these interconnected phenomena (Reyer et al. 2017; Torres and Casey 2017). Quantitative approaches have long dominated policy research in this domain, focusing primarily on statistical correlations between environmental stressors, population movements, and conflict incidents (Buhaug 2015; Schleussner et al. 2016). While such methods offer valuable empirical insights, they frequently overlook the critical role that identity formation and collective narratives play in shaping individual and group responses to environmental displacement (Adger et al. 2014; Mortreux and Barnett 2017).

This article pursues three interrelated objectives. First, it seeks to identify the dominant narrative frameworks shaping policy and public discourse on the climate–migration–terrorism nexus as it pertains to the Sahel and Europe. Second, it examines how those narratives structure problem definition, assign responsibility, and privilege particular policy responses while marginalizing others. Third, it assesses the implications of competing and convergent narratives for counterterrorism and climate adaptation strategy, with particular attention to whether current EU policy approaches engage seriously with the narrative foundations of extremist appeal in contexts of environmental stress. The article employs a qualitative, narrative intelligence framework. This approach draws on two foundational traditions: Goffman’s (1974) frame analysis, which established how individuals and institutions organize experience through interpretive schemas, and Entman’s (1993) framing theory, which demonstrated how the selection and salience of information in texts shape problem definition, causal attribution, and policy prescription.

This paper contends that incorporating narrative intelligence into the analytical toolkit is essential for states seeking to develop more effective and sustainable responses to the security challenges arising from climate-induced migration. By examining the stories that shape how different actors interpret and respond to environmental displacement, we can better understand the conditions under which climate migration becomes a pathway to radicalization and identify intervention points for more targeted prevention strategies (Rüttinger et al. 2015). Rather than treating narratives as secondary or peripheral phenomena to be explained away, this approach positions them as central mechanisms through which environmental change translates into social and political outcomes (O’Brien and Barnett 2013; Pelling and High 2013).

Climate-induced migration unfolds within specific cultural, political, and social contexts in which competing narratives about causation, responsibility, and legitimate response shape how communities interpret their experiences of

displacement ([Hunter et al. 2015](#); [McMichael et al. 2012](#)). These narratives influence not only how displaced populations understand their predicament but also how host communities, governments, and extremist organizations frame and respond to migration flows ([Boas 2015](#); [Farbotko and McMichael 2019](#)). When conventional analytical methods treat these human stories as mere background noise to be controlled statistically, they miss the fundamental mechanisms through which environmental stress transforms into social tension and, in some cases, violent extremism ([Ide 2018](#); [Koubi et al. 2018](#)). This dynamic is visible in climate and violence-induced migration from Africa to Europe, where illicit migratory flows across the Atlantic illustrate how environmental degradation and instability interact with existing social and economic vulnerabilities ([International Organization for Migration 2023](#)).

Narrative intelligence, defined as the systematic analysis of how stories, meanings, and interpretive frameworks shape human behavior and collective dynamics, offers a powerful lens for understanding these complex relationships ([Mattern 2005](#); [Bruner 2004](#); [Miskimmon et al. 2013](#)). Unlike approaches that seek to establish direct causal links between climate variables and security outcomes, narrative intelligence examines the intermediary processes through which environmental changes are interpreted, contested, and acted upon by diverse social actors ([Burke et al. 2015](#); [Scheffran et al. 2012](#)). This approach recognizes that the pathway from climate stress to insecurity is mediated by the stories people tell about their experiences, the explanatory frameworks they adopt to make sense of their circumstances, and the collective identities that emerge from shared narratives of displacement and dispossession ([Adger et al. 2014](#); [Brown and Westaway 2011](#)).

This amalgamation of climate, migration, and security narratives is particularly evident in contemporary European politics, where competing storylines about environmental displacement have reshaped both policy discourse and electoral dynamics ([Lazaridis and Campani 2017](#); [Hartmann 2010](#)). European policymakers increasingly encounter climate migration through overlapping narratives of environmental crisis, cultural threat, and security vulnerability that blur traditional distinctions between humanitarian and defense-oriented responses ([Bettini et al. 2017](#); [Methmann and Oels 2015](#)). Right-wing populist parties have proven especially adept at weaving climate migration into broader narratives of civilizational decline and national insecurity, portraying environmental displacement not as a collective problem requiring global cooperation but as evidence of impending social collapse that necessitates border fortification and cultural preservation ([Veron 2010](#)).

Progressive narratives, by contrast, frame climate migrants as victims of environmental injustice who deserve solidarity and protection. Yet these perspectives often struggle to gain traction in political environments dominated by securitized discourse. These competing narrative frameworks do not merely mirror policy preferences; they actively construct the political possibilities for European

responses to climate migration, determining whether environmental displacement is understood as a humanitarian challenge requiring assistance, a security threat demanding containment, or a justice issue calling for systemic transformation ([Wunderlich 2012](#); [Bourbeau 2015](#)).

Case Study: Vulnerabilities in the Sahel

The relationship between climate change and migration in the Sahel has received extensive scholarly attention, with researchers documenting both the mechanisms and the patterns of climate-induced displacement. [Eboeime et al. \(2025\)](#) provide one of the most comprehensive analyses of this relationship in their study *From Drought to Displacement*. Their research demonstrates how prolonged drought conditions trigger multi-stage migration processes, beginning with short-term seasonal movements and escalating to permanent displacement when adaptive capacity is exceeded. The authors' epidemiological approach reveals that climate-induced migration in the Sahel follows predictable patterns related to rainfall variability and agricultural productivity. Their findings indicate that a ten percent decrease in seasonal rainfall correlates with a fifteen to twenty percent increase in migration flows from affected areas ([Eboeime et al. 2025](#)). This quantitative analysis provides critical evidence for understanding the scale and timing of climate-induced displacement across the region.

The Sahel's geographical position makes it uniquely vulnerable to climate change impacts. [Van Ackern and Detges \(2022\)](#) emphasize that its location between the Sahara Desert and the more humid savannas creates inherent climatic instability that is now exacerbated by global warming trends. Temperatures are rising one and a half times faster in the Sahel than in the rest of the world, and, according to the United Nations ([2025](#)), around eighty percent of agricultural land in the region is degraded, leaving approximately fifty million people who depend on livestock farming in competition for dwindling resources. Climate change in the Sahel manifests through increased drought frequency, erratic rainfall, and progressive desertification, producing what [Van Ackern and Detges](#) describe as a "cascade of vulnerabilities" that erodes multiple dimensions of human security. [Sartori and Fattibene \(2019\)](#) expand this framework by showing how environmental degradation operates as a "threat multiplier," amplifying socio-economic fragility and generating new security risks. Their analysis highlights how declining agricultural productivity, water scarcity, and ecosystem degradation interact with governance deficits to create conditions conducive to both migration and violent extremism.

As a result of global climate change, extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and severe. Long-term shifts in temperature and rainfall patterns are destabilizing entire communities, disrupting traditional livelihoods, and threatening food security ([Bremberg 2019](#)). [Dieng \(2021\)](#), writing in the International Review of the Red Cross, situates these developments within broader governance and development frameworks. [Dieng](#) argues that while climate change presents grave

challenges, it also offers opportunities for regional cooperation and sustainable development. However, realizing these opportunities requires addressing the structural vulnerabilities that make Sahelian societies so susceptible to climate shocks.

The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) estimates that up to thirteen million people in North Africa may be displaced by 2050, representing six percent of the population. In the Sahel and West Africa, projections suggest that as many as eighty-six million people could be forced to move within national borders by mid-century. Climate-related environmental stressors are already the leading cause of internal displacement worldwide, and climate change is increasingly recognized as a significant driver of human mobility in regions such as North Africa and the Sahel ([Bassou 2019](#)).

Recent data further reveals that more than ninety percent of displaced persons in Africa remain within their region of origin, primarily because of limited financial resources to support international migration. The Atlantic route from West Africa to Europe remains the most important pathway for those who do undertake migration to Europe. It became the most active irregular route from Africa to Europe in 2024, when 36,000 African migrants were intercepted. Overall, irregular African migration to Europe declined from 282,000 in 2023 to 146,000 in 2024, largely because of intensified European Union (EU)-funded interdiction efforts ([Williams 2025](#)). The Canary Islands experienced an eighteen percent increase in arrivals, reaching almost 27,730 in 2023, largely fueled by departures from Mauritania ([Frontex 2023](#)). Mali was the leading country of origin for irregular migration to Europe in 2024, with approximately 16,500 migrants, while Guinea topped the list in 2023 with about 21,700 individuals ([Williams 2025](#)).

Conversely, demographic pressures suggest that neighboring countries will not be able to absorb migration flows indefinitely. The Institute for Economics and Peace, a European think tank, currently estimates that 1.2 billion people are at risk of climate-related displacement worldwide by 2050 ([Institute for Economics and Peace 2020](#)). Migration in this context is often a last resort, pursued only after all other adaptation strategies fail. As conditions deteriorate, an increasing number of people are likely to look toward Europe as a potential lifeline ([Yayboke and Aboneaj 2025](#)). Consequently, any further destabilization in the Sahel has direct repercussions for Europe, affecting not only its relationship with the African continent but also the cohesion among EU member states themselves.

1. Literature Review

The literature on the climate–migration–terrorism nexus employs a wide range of methodological approaches, from quantitative analyses of climate and conflict data to ethnographic studies of migration experiences. This methodological diversity

strengthens the overall evidence base while revealing critical gaps in current understanding. Several scholars emphasize the challenges of establishing clear causal relationships between climate change, migration, and terrorism. The complex and multi-causal nature of these phenomena makes it difficult to isolate the effects of climate variability from other structural factors such as governance, inequality, and socio-political exclusion. Most researchers, therefore, adopt a “contributory cause” framework rather than asserting direct causation. Despite routine claims linking Sahelian terrorism to environmental stress, current scientific evidence remains inconclusive regarding whether and how specific climatic factors influence conflict variability and terrorism ([Sow and Kone 2024](#)).

The literature also exposes substantial geographical and temporal gaps. While certain parts of the Sahel, such as northern Mali and Niger, have been studied extensively, others remain understudied. Moreover, much of the research focuses on developments since the 2010s, with limited historical analysis of longer-term climate–security dynamics. These gaps restrict the ability to identify enduring patterns or to assess how historical adaptation mechanisms might inform current responses.

The “threat multiplier” concept remains one of the most influential analytical frameworks in climate–security studies. It captures how climate change interacts with pre-existing political, social, and economic vulnerabilities to heighten security risks. The concept has been described as “definitional” for having established a baseline vocabulary for analyzing climate-related risks and shaping how security professionals conceptualize environmental threats ([Goodman and Baudu 2023](#)). Its influence within the United States national security institutions is particularly notable, as the framework has permeated defense planning and is widely adopted across the armed services. However, recent scholarship calls for moving beyond the “threat multiplier” framework, arguing that the phrase itself provides limited analytical precision. As one critique notes, “the language of threat multiplier does not tell you much about what combination of factors we should be worried about” ([Busby 2020](#)). If the concept merely implies that “bad things go together,” its policy utility remains constrained. In response, newer frameworks seek to specify the mechanisms linking climate stress to security outcomes and to identify targeted interventions ([Cullum 2024](#)).

Other scholars employ “worldmaking” analysis to understand how the “threat multiplier” narrative shapes institutional practices. This body of work examines how conceptual framings of global risk translate into localized outcomes, showing that abstract security narratives have tangible effects on communities and governance ([Cullum 2024](#)). Such approaches underscore that the power of the “threat multiplier” framework lies not only in what it describes but in how it guides resource allocation, shapes political priorities, and structures international responses ([Hassan and Mamshai 2023](#)).

Meanwhile, empirical evidence linking climate change to terrorism in the Sahel remains contested. The consensus in the literature is that climate change does not directly increase terrorism in the Central Sahel. Instead, climate-induced disruptions to agricultural systems, resource scarcity, and local conflicts create the enabling conditions for violent extremism. These local conflicts provide fertile ground for terrorist groups to expand influence and recruit members (Institute for Security Studies 2024). Violent extremist groups, including factions associated with ISIS and al-Qaeda, increasingly embed themselves within communities already facing economic hardship and environmental decline. These organizations exploit competition over scarce water and arable land to attract those who feel marginalized or dispossessed, thereby deepening governance vacuums and accelerating social fragmentation. Mali and Burkina Faso now rank as the world's first and third most terrorism-affected countries ([Tony Blair Institute for Global Change 2024](#)). Larémont's (2021) research on climate change and conflict in the Western Sahel further supports this connection, demonstrating how extremist groups capitalize on climate-related grievances, using environmental narratives to justify violence and recruit supporters.

Efforts over the past decade to manage irregular migration through the Sahel have altered, but not halted, population movements. Migrants face greater risks as the illicit networks that facilitate their movement become more entrenched. Under European pressure, Niger adopted a 2015 law criminalizing migrant smuggling, leading to a sharp reduction in recorded flows through Agadez—from 330,000 in 2016 to 70,000 in 2017—an outcome celebrated by European policymakers ([Center for Strategic and International Studies 2025](#)). However, these securitization measures have constrained the application of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Freedom of Movement protocols, limiting protection for individuals displaced by climate-related disasters ([Morello and Rizk 2022](#)).

The EU has also expanded counterterrorism and security cooperation across Africa. Yet, as Raineri's study *When (Fighting) Climate Change Fuels Terrorism* argues, top-down, uniform responses to environmental challenges often exacerbate tensions, creating what he terms "fertile ground for terrorist groups." The EU Council's 2024 conclusions similarly emphasize the need to strengthen collaboration with African-led counter-terrorism initiatives ([United Nations 2022](#)). The EU remains Africa's primary security partner, providing over ninety percent of the African Union's peace operations budget through the European Peace Facility, amounting to more than €2.25 billion ([European Parliament 2020](#)). The EU's contributions include three military training missions—Somalia (2010), Mali (2013), and the Central African Republic (2016)—as well as one naval operation (NAVFOR ATALANTA 2009) and three civilian capacity-building missions in Mali, Niger, and Somalia ([European Parliament 2020](#)).

Emerging literature also points to the growing influence of hybrid warfare and information manipulation in the Sahel. Russian "foreign information manipulation

and interference” (FIMI), a form of narrative warfare, has had a significant impact in sub-Saharan Africa (Terren, Van Aelst, and Van Damme 2025). FIMI serves as a key component of Russia’s hybrid strategy, particularly in Burkina Faso and Mali (Duarte 2024; Benkler, Hansen, and Reichert 2022). Faleg (2022) further argues that Russian interference not only destabilizes local governance but also drives migration flows by amplifying insecurity and eroding state legitimacy.

The implications for Europe, while not yet comprehensively explored in the literature, are substantial. Climate-induced instability in the Sahel contributes to irregular migration pressures and generates ungoverned spaces that can serve as operational hubs for extremist groups. Continued displacement will increase migratory pressure along the Atlantic coast, the Canary Islands, and the Iberian Peninsula. The emerging scholarly consensus suggests that mitigating climate change in the Sahel is not only an environmental necessity but a cornerstone of both regional and international security strategy. As climate disruptions intensify, policymakers in Europe and beyond must address their security implications in vulnerable regions. The creation of international frameworks such as the Global Compact for Migration marks progress in recognizing climate displacement, yet implementation challenges and political resistance underscore the persistent difficulty of crafting effective multilateral responses to climate-driven migration and insecurity.

2. Research Methods and Results

This article uses a qualitative research methodology to draw on narrative intelligence from open-source intelligence (OSINT) geographically referenced to the Sahel. We reviewed news outlets and social media posts throughout the region to identify patterns of reporting related to migration associated with the countries in the Sahel and Europe. This search intends to capture current narratives relative to migration from the Sahel to Europe and combine those narratives with other contemporary literature to reflect the current narrative pertaining to the subject migratory flow.

The following analysis draws on narrative intelligence from open-source intelligence (OSINT) geographically referenced to the Sahel, where people and communities are experiencing significant climate-induced migration, examining how different narrative frameworks have shaped the trajectory from environmental stress to security outcomes (Brzoska and Fröhlich 2016; Abel et al. 2019). Through this lens, we demonstrate that effective counterterrorism and climate adaptation strategies must engage seriously with the power of stories to shape human behavior, moving beyond purely technical or military approaches to address the deeper narrative foundations of extremist appeal in the context of environmental change (Carius 2009; Detges 2016).

For the source categories, we conducted an open-source intelligence (OSINT). The data used in this analysis was collected through Seerist, a commercial geospatial

intelligence platform that aggregates and indexes global news media, social media, and open-source reporting in near real-time. Seerist's integrated search and geospatial referencing capabilities allowed the authors to systematically query content geographically bounded to the Sahel region and thematically filtered to the climate-migration-terrorism nexus. Boolean keyword searches were conducted using "Sahel" combined with "climate," "migration," or "Europe," joined by an AND operator against twelve country names: Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, Nigeria, Sudan, and South Sudan. Results were reviewed, then for relevance, and coded thematically in accordance with the narrative intelligence frameworks previously described. Scholarly journal results identified through Seerist were supplemented with grey literature, policy reports, and multilateral assessments relevant to the subject matter.

The reporting indicates that African migrants have become pawns in European countries' domestic political struggles, as center-right parties attempt to appease growing anti-migrant sentiment by adopting the rhetoric and policies of national-conservative and even far-right parties. Six EU member states currently have far-right leaders at their helm: Italy, Finland, Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, and the Czech Republic ([Zarhloule 2025](#)). National, xenophobic rhetoric is no longer contained to the fringes of the political spectrum across the EU, with anti-immigrant sentiment today featuring dominantly in public debates after years of far-right populists amplifying cultural anxieties and accusing governments of having lost control of their sovereign borders ([Varma and Roehse 2024](#)).

The Narrative Intelligence Lens

Applying the analytical tool of narrative intelligence to the climate-migration-terrorism nexus reveals how deeply embedded story frameworks shape security thinking and policy responses within the EU. Narrative intelligence, understood as the systematic analysis of stories, symbols, and meaning-making processes, exposes the emotional and cognitive underpinnings of institutional behavior and strategic decision-making. For instance, the EU's approach to migration policy demonstrates how competing story frameworks generate divergent and often conflicting policy outcomes. Table 1 below gives the main narratives in the literature regarding the climate-migration-terrorism nexus as it applies to the Sahel and the EU.

Table no. 1 represents the qualitative narrative intelligence analysis to examine how the climate-migration-terrorism nexus in the Sahel is framed in the academic and policy literature. Rather than testing causal claims, the objective is to identify recurring narrative patterns, dominant frames, and associated policy prescriptions. This analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the literature used for this report was organized around three analytically distinct but overlapping domains: (1) climate security, (2) migration, and (3) terrorism/political violence in the Sahel. The sources included peer-reviewed scholarship, policy reports, government documents, news articles, and multilateral assessments.

TABLE no. 1. Narrative Themes

Theme/ Nexus	Narrative	Framing/Storyline	Policy Implications
Migration	Fortress Europe	Migration as a threat to social cohesion, sovereignty, and border	Externalization of border control, hotspots, partnerships with origin/transit states, and restrictive policies
	Humanitarian / Solidarity	Migration as a moral and legal obligation, tied to human rights and European values	Emphasis on protection, integration, and international responsibility; tensions within EU institutions
	Adaptation	Migration as a natural response to environmental and social change	Policies favoring accommodation, flexible management strategies
	Contribution	Migrants as social and economic assets	Integration, capacity-building, leveraging migrants' potential
	Protection	Focus on migrants' rights and vulnerabilities	Humanitarian protection, addressing broader regional stability linked to migrant insecurity
Climate Security	Threat Multiplier	Climate change accelerates existing instability (conflict, displacement, state fragility)	Security policies framed in crisis and risk management terms
	Systemic Risk	Climate-induced cascading failures across food, energy, and financial systems	Risk assessment, resilience planning across interconnected systems
	Transformation	Climate change as an opportunity for adaptation, cooperation, and resilience	Emphasis on innovation, resilience-building, and cooperative security strategies
Terrorism/ Extremism	Grievance-Based / Identity	Exploits collective grievances, injustice, and identity crises	Recruitment, radicalization, and legitimization of violence
	Counterterrorism Narrative	State responses shape legitimacy; they can reinforce or undermine trust	Policies may unintentionally fuel narratives of exclusion or injustice
	Digital Contest	Competing narratives on social media shape identity and political agency	Need for narrative-aware communication strategies; monitoring online radicalization

Theme/ Nexus	Narrative	Framing/Storyline	Policy Implications
Intersecting Nexus: Climate – Migration Terrorism	Climate Refugee	Links environmental degradation to displacement and security risk	Securitized migration policies; may oversimplify complex migration dynamics
	Migration–Terrorism	Links migration with radicalization, foreign fighters, porous borders	Justifies preventive, exclusionary policies; can misrepresent empirical realities
	Convergent Narratives (Fortress + Climate Refugee)	Amplifies crisis logic	Promotes containment, exclusion, potentially increasing instability
	Integrative Narratives (Adaptation + Transformation + Contribution)	Emphasizes resilience, cooperation, and human security	Supports holistic, sustainable, human-centric policy responses

Second, an inductive thematic coding process was applied. Texts were read systematically to identify recurring claims, metaphors, causal linkages, and descriptive patterns. These narratives were coded based on repetition and salience across sources, allowing dominant storylines to emerge (e.g., climate as a “threat multiplier,” migration as a security risk, environmental scarcity as a driver of radicalization).

Third, a framing analysis was conducted to assess how these narratives structured problem definition, attribution of responsibility, and proposed policy responses. Particular attention was paid to whether climate variability was framed as a direct driver of terrorism, an indirect stressor mediated by governance failures, or part of broader socio-political fragility. Policy implications embedded within each narrative were catalogued and compared.

This approach does not attempt statistical generalization, nor should it be used to determine causal inference. Rather, it provides a structured baseline mapping of dominant interpretive frameworks shaping discourse on the Sahelian nexus. By clarifying how problems are constructed in the literature, the analysis contributes to understanding how certain policy pathways become privileged while others are marginalized. Since the 2015 migration crisis, the dominant European narrative has oscillated between humanitarian obligation and existential threat ([Geddes and Scholten 2016](#)). The “fortress Europe” narrative, which frames migration as a danger to social cohesion, sovereignty, and border integrity, has legitimized the externalization of border controls, the establishment of hotspots, and partnerships with origin and transit states designed to halt migration before it reaches European territory ([Lazaridis and Wadia 2015](#); [Carrera et al. 2019](#)).

Alternative narratives rooted in European values of solidarity, human rights, and international responsibility have created persistent tensions within EU institutions and among member states. This contestation helps explain the repeated failure of comprehensive migration reform, as different actors operate from incompatible story frameworks regarding what migration means for European identity and security ([Triandafyllidou 2018](#)). Understanding these competing narratives reveals why technical and administrative solutions repeatedly founder on political disagreements grounded in deeper symbolic interpretations of Europe's borders and moral responsibilities ([Hampshire 2013](#)).

Beyond the "invasion" or "crisis" narrative that justifies defensive measures and exclusionary practices ([Bigo 2002](#)), alternative storylines open space for more constructive policy approaches. The "adaptation" narrative views migration as a natural human response to environmental and social change, promoting management strategies focused on accommodation rather than prevention ([Tacoli 2009](#)). The "contribution" narrative highlights migrants as social and economic assets, pointing toward integration and capacity-building approaches ([Castles 2004](#)). The "protection" narrative centers on the rights and vulnerabilities of migrants themselves, emphasizing that insecurity among mobile populations can translate into broader regional instability ([Lyons 2025](#)).

Meanwhile, the climate-related security discourse also operates through multiple and competing narrative frameworks. The "threat multiplier" narrative positions climate change as an accelerant of existing instability, where drought intensifies resource conflicts, sea-level rise displaces populations, and extreme weather events overwhelm state capacity ([CNA Corporation 2007](#)). This framing allows security institutions to conceptualize climate change through familiar paradigms of risk, conflict, and crisis. Other narratives, however, reveal alternative pathways of understanding. The "systemic risk" narrative emphasizes cascading failures across interconnected systems such as food production, energy infrastructure, and financial markets ([O'Brien et al. 2018](#)). The "transformation" narrative reframes climate change as an opportunity for resilience-building and cooperative security, focusing on adaptation and innovation as sources of stability ([Nelson, Adger, and Brown 2007](#)). Each framework highlights certain dynamics while obscuring others, illustrating that climate security is not an objective condition but a narrative construct that reflects underlying assumptions about agency, causality, and responsibility.

Narrative intelligence further clarifies how extremist organizations construct and weaponize stories to mobilize support. Terrorist narratives draw upon collective grievances, identity crises, and perceptions of injustice to legitimize violence and provide adherents with a sense of moral purpose ([Hoffman 2006](#)). Counterterrorism policies, in turn, generate their own narratives that can either reinforce or undermine state legitimacy. In the digital age, social media has intensified this narrative contest, creating dynamic spaces where terrorist organizations, states, civil society actors,

and ordinary citizens compete to define identity, belonging, and political agency (Conway 2017).

At the intersection of climate, migration, and terrorism, overlapping storylines produce a self-reinforcing logic of crisis. The narrative of the “climate refugee” links environmental degradation to mass displacement and security risk (Myers 2002). While this story has helped raise awareness of the connections between environmental stress and human mobility, it often simplifies complex migration decisions and promotes securitized policy responses (Bettini, Nash, and Whitfield 2013). Similarly, narratives that link migration and terrorism, whether through tropes of radicalized diasporas, foreign fighters, or porous borders, create causal associations that lack empirical grounding but shape policy discourse and public opinion (Ibrahim 2005).

The narrative reporting further reveals that European governments acknowledge climate change and terrorism as drivers of African migration, yet respond primarily with containment, externalization, and anti-immigrant politics rather than addressing root causes. The EU’s strategy of outsourcing border control to often-authoritarian African governments has been widely criticized for human rights abuses, lack of accountability, and failure to provide sustainable solutions, while failing to address the fundamental drivers of migration, including climate change, conflict, and economic inequality. This is particularly acute along the Atlantic route, which is a longer voyage to Europe, fraught with danger. These intersecting narratives matter because they reinforce one another across institutional and societal domains, shaping the policy imagination of what constitutes a security problem and what responses appear legitimate. For example, when the “fortress Europe” and “climate refugee” narratives converge, they justify preventive and exclusionary approaches that may inadvertently increase regional instability and human insecurity. Conversely, integrating “adaptation,” “transformation,” and “contribution” narratives could enable more holistic responses grounded in resilience, cooperation, and human security.

3. Implications for Practitioners

The traditional security paradigm, focused on military threats and state-to-state conflicts, struggles to adequately address the complex, interconnected challenges of the 21st century. Climate change, migration, and terrorism represent security threats that transcend borders, evolve rapidly, and resist conventional analytical frameworks. Narrative intelligence encompasses the ability to recognize, analyze, and strategically employ the stories that drive human behavior and institutional responses. Unlike traditional intelligence that focuses primarily on facts and data, narrative intelligence examines how information is packaged, transmitted, and interpreted through story structures that give meaning to events and shape responses to them (Mattern 2005). This approach recognizes that security challenges are not merely

objective phenomena but are fundamentally shaped by how they are understood, communicated, and acted upon by various stakeholders. The stories we tell about climate change, migration, and terrorism directly influence policy responses, public support, and the effectiveness of security measures ([Jackson 2005](#)).

Implementing narrative intelligence in security analysis requires systematic attention to story structures, narrative actors, and the strategic dimensions of storytelling. Security analysts can develop narrative mapping techniques that identify dominant stories about challenges, trace their sources and transmission pathways, and assess their influence on different audiences ([Antoniades, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2010](#)). This approach involves analyzing not just what stories are being told, but who is telling them, through what channels, to which audiences, and with what effects. It requires understanding how narratives compete, combine, and evolve over time, and how they interact with events, policies, and other narratives ([Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2013](#)).

Narrative intelligence also suggests the importance of reflexivity in security analysis, recognizing how analysts' own narrative frameworks shape their understanding of security challenges. The stories that security institutions tell about themselves, their missions, and their methods influence their capacity to understand and respond to complex challenges ([Weldes et al. 1999](#)). Beyond analysis, narrative intelligence offers tools for strategic engagement with security challenges. This involves developing communication strategies that work with rather than against dominant narrative currents, finding ways to connect security objectives with stories that resonate with key audiences. For climate security, this might mean connecting climate action with narratives of resilience, innovation, and economic opportunity rather than relying solely on threat-based framings ([O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009](#)). For migration, it could involve developing stories that acknowledge legitimate concerns about change while highlighting successful integration and mutual benefit ([Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017](#)). For counterterrorism, it might mean crafting counter-narratives that address underlying grievances while delegitimizing violent methods ([Braddock and Horgan 2016](#)).

Conclusion

The EU remains committed to supporting refugees, displaced populations, and host communities, while continuing to collaborate with international partners to address the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement. It also seeks to strengthen governance and management capacities in partner countries to ensure more sustainable and humane migration outcomes ([European External Action Service 2025](#)). The interconnected dynamics of climate change, migration, and terrorism in the Sahel present one of the most pressing and complex security challenges of the 21st century. Though the causal relationships among these variables remain deeply context-dependent, the evidence consistently indicates that climate

change functions as a “threat multiplier,” intensifying existing vulnerabilities and creating new layers of insecurity across environmental, social, and political domains.

Traditional security frameworks, focused narrowly on capabilities, intentions, and material conditions, are insufficient to capture the full complexity of these challenges. The interrelationship between climate change, migration, and terrorism is deeply embedded in the stories that societies tell about causation, responsibility, and response. Understanding these phenomena, therefore, requires engaging with the narratives that shape perception and drive action.

Narrative intelligence also provides a vital analytical framework for this task. It illuminates how meaning-making processes construct security challenges and influence policy responses. By examining how narratives circulate, evolve, and compete, this approach enables policymakers to identify both opportunities for cooperation and potential sources of conflict. Applying narrative intelligence to the climate–migration–terrorism nexus thus requires new analytical competencies, institutional adaptation, and strategic foresight. It calls for sensitivity to temporal dynamics, awareness of competing narrative frames, and reflexivity in how security itself is conceptualized. Most importantly, narrative intelligence reminds us that stories are not peripheral to policy, they are central to how human societies interpret and manage crises. Recognizing this opens the possibility of crafting more resonant, legitimate, and effective responses to global security challenges. In an era defined by accelerating environmental change and transnational instability, the strategic use of narrative intelligence may become indispensable to effective security governance.

Future research should deepen understanding of the causal mechanisms linking climate change to migration and terrorism while expanding comparative and longitudinal analyses across regions. Policy responses must integrate environmental, social, and security dimensions, emphasizing coordination between European, African, and multilateral institutions. Addressing the security implications of climate change in the Sahel is therefore not only an environmental necessity but a strategic imperative for global stability and shared human security.

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