Climate change will fuel acts of terrorism and strengthen recruiting efforts by terrorist groups such as Islamic State and Boko Haram, a report commissioned by the German foreign office has found.

Terrorist groups will exploit the natural disasters and water and food shortages expected to result from climate change and allow them to recruit more easily, operate more freely and control civilian populations, argues the report by Berlin thinktank Adelphi.

“Terrorist groups are increasingly using natural resources – such as water – as a weapon of war, controlling access to it, and further compounding, and exacerbating resource scarcities,” Lukas Rüttinger writes in the report, titled Insurgency, Terrorism and Organised Crime in a Warming World.
“The scarcer resources become, the more power is given to those who control them, especially in regions where people are particularly reliant on natural resources for their livelihoods.

“As climate change affects food security and the availability of water and land, affected people will become more vulnerable not only to negative climate impacts but also to recruitment by terrorist groups offering alternative livelihoods and economic incentives.”

The Adelphi report cites several examples where the impacts of climate change are already spurring or exacerbating terrorism.

In the drought-ravaged region around Lake Chad in central Africa, food and water shortages, near-economic collapse, and weak governments are providing a ripe recruiting ground for Islamist fundamentalist group Boko Haram.

“In north-eastern Nigeria, the region closest to Lake Chad and where Boko Haram is strongest, 71.5% of the population live in poverty and more than 50% are malnourished. This kind of economic deprivation provides an ideal breeding ground for recruitment by Boko Haram.”

In Syria, the now six-year civil war and rise of Isis was, not caused, but exacerbated by one of the worst and widest droughts in the country’s history, which drove hundreds of thousands from the land, and sent millions into extreme poverty and food insecurity.

IIsis is using water as a weapon of war, the report argues, controlling dams to harm enemies and expand its own territory.

“In 2015, Islamic State closed the gates of the Ramadi dam to more easily attack regime forces further downstream. Weaponisation of water can also take the form of using it as a source of funding by taxing it, as Isis did in Raqqa. In other instances, Isis did not cut the supply, but rather used water to flood land in order to expel people from their homes.”

And in Afghanistan, a country riven by internecine conflicts and acutely vulnerable to climate change, more than half of local conflicts are over land and water. Diminishing rainfall and advancing desertification are likely to spark further violent clashes between nomads and pastoralists over access to pastures and water and food.

Rüttinger told the Guardian climate change alone did not cause terrorism, but “creates an environment where terrorism can thrive” and exacerbates existing tensions and conflicts.

Former US deputy undersecretary of defence Sherri Goodman told the Guardian this month that climate change was a “threat multiplier” for unstable regions around the world, but that its impacts would be felt globally, and by countries distant from the source conflict.
“Climate is a threat multiplier because it aggravates others tensions and conflicts that already exist.”

Militaries around the world, across the Americas, UK, Europe, and the Asia Pacific, have highlighted the “threat multiplier” impact of climate change and extreme weather events.

The Global Military Advisory Council on Climate Change has warned the impact of global warming will drive massive refugee movements of an “unimaginable scale”, and that climate represents “the greatest security threat of the 21st century”.

The US secretary of defence, James Matthis, told his confirmation hearing in January climate change posed a real and current security threat to American troops.

“Climate change is impacting stability in areas of the world where our troops are operating today. It is appropriate for the combatant commands to incorporate drivers of instability that impact the security environment in their areas into their planning.”

In March, the United Nations, in passing a resolution on the Lake Chad crisis, emphasised the “interconnectedness” of the climate and security challenges in the region, emphasising “the adverse effects of climate change and ecological changes among other factors on the stability of the region”.