



Middle East Institute
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CLIMATE CHALLENGES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

RETHINKING ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION

Gerald Stang

MEI Policy Paper 2016-2

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THE MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE
1761 N STREET NW
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036

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ABBREVIATIONS

AFED	Arab Forum for Environment and Development
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CAMRE	Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment
CEDARE	Center for Environment and Development for the Arab Region and Europe
E.P.I.	Environmental Performance Index
ESCWA	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
E.U.	European Union
G.C.C.	Gulf Cooperation Council
I.U.C.N.	International Union for Conservation of Nature
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NGO	nongovernmental organization
SDG	United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
U.N.D.P.	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
W.W.F.	World Wildlife Fund

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SUMMARY

Analyst Gerald Stang assesses the environmental challenges facing the Middle East and North Africa, and the potential for regional cooperation to address them. While environmental issues have not been central to conflict in the region, they have served as threat multipliers, adding stress to existing social and political tensions. With the MENA region predicted to be affected by significant heating and drying trends over the coming decades due to climate change, the risk of further fragility and instability is heightened. As the entire region shares similar climate-induced challenges, the environment need not be an added source of friction, but rather an opportunity for cooperation.

KEY POINTS

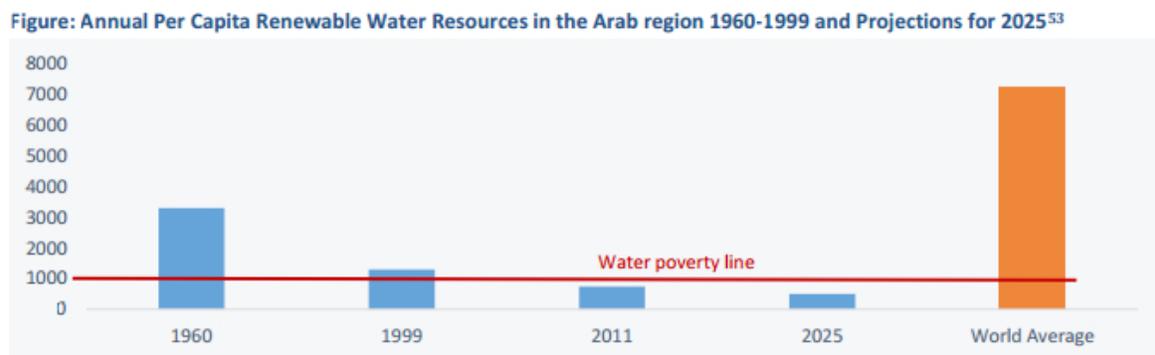
- ◆ The common environmental challenges faced by regional states present opportunities for improved policy-making and closer cooperation at regional and, especially, subregional levels
- ◆ The MENA region is pressing against the limits of available water, air, land, and biodiversity resources
- ◆ Climate impacts in the coming decades are likely to add stress to existing resource challenges, with serious potential consequences for the economy, and for social and political stability
- ◆ Regional cooperation on environmental issues is mostly limited to “talk fests” at summits with little follow-up
- ◆ Increased connectivity and evolving rules of public discourse have resulted in greater public awareness of shared environmental concerns
- ◆ Continued global momentum on climate action will likely encourage regional states to better incorporate environmental concerns within their economic and development plans
- ◆ While targeted pollution programs can most quickly be institutionalized and affect lives, cooperation on broader issues such as sustainable development could have the most potential for helping build wider cooperative relationships across the region

INTRODUCTION

Pathways toward improved regional cooperation in the Middle East are rarely smooth, and the environmental arena is no exception. Rarely benefiting from high-level political attention or a surfeit of resources, environmental issues have been too easily pushed to the sidelines by other priorities. However, a series of demographic and climactic factors may be reversing this trend, with new threats emerging to economic progress and regional stability. The common environmental challenges faced by regional states present opportunities for improved policy-making and closer cooperation at regional and subregional levels.

After 50 years of rapid population growth, industrialization, and irrigated farming expansion, the MENA region is pressing against the limits of available water, air, land, and biodiversity resources. Water scarcity is at the top of the worry list, as an arid climate, overdrawn aquifers, and poor water management threaten water shortages across the region. Continuing increases in demand and the worsening impacts of climate change will sharpen this threat. Air pollution has become the number one health threat in a region with increasingly dense and polluted cities. Land degradation, desertification, urban sprawl, and worries about dependency on food imports have reshaped land use as more marginal lands are brought under irrigation, further exacerbating the water challenge.¹ The biodiversity problem plays out most notably in marine areas where overfishing and pollution from land are ruining fish stocks and threatening ecosystems.

FIGURE 1. ANNUAL PER CAPITA RENEWABLE WATER RESOURCES IN THE ARAB REGION 1960-1999 AND PROJECTIONS FOR 2025



SOURCE: REEM NEJDAMI, MONIA BRAHAM, JANA EL-BABA, CAMERON ALLEN, AND FADI HAMDAN, ARAB SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT REPORT - TECHNICAL SUMMARY (BEIRUT: UNESCWA, 2015), P.25.

These challenges are not uniformly distributed, of course, and neither are the political and socioeconomic realities in which they play out. The impacts of these environmental challenges on the health of the population, the functioning of the economy, and even social stability vary significantly within countries and across the region. The entire region, however, is predicted to be affected by significant heating and drying trends over the coming decades as climate change takes hold. Taken together with continuing demand increases, these climate impacts are likely to add stress to existing resource challenges, with serious potential consequences for the economy, and for social and political stability, particularly in the most fragile situations where resilience is low.² Much has been made of the idea that the spiral into the Syrian conflict may have been facilitated by the 2006-10 drought that forced as many as 1.5 million farmers to migrate to the cities, contributing to social instability. Similarly, the Darfur conflict was often described, including by U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, as being greatly influenced by ecological crisis. Of course, both these places have exclusionary governments, a history of political violence, major social divisions, uneven economic progress,

FIGURE 2. NORTH AFRICA POPULATION DENSITY



SOURCE: "NORTH AFRICA POPULATION DENSITY," ROEBUCKCLASSES.COM, ACCESSED APRIL 18, 2016, [HTTP://WWW.ROEBUCKCLASSES.COM/MAAPS/PLACEMAP/NAFRICASWASIA/NAFRICAPOPDENSITY.JPG](http://www.roebuckclasses.com/maps/placemap/NAFRICASWASIA/NAFRICAPOPDENSITY.JPG).

and a quintupling of the population in 50 years. Given this complexity, climate change cannot be labeled as the cause of conflict, but is often referred to as a threat multiplier that can add stress to already difficult situations.³

The most worrisome climate change issue is its unpredictability—with sufficient resources and smart policies, hot and dry conditions can be planned for, but sudden shocks can overcome local resilience and contribute to the likelihood of fragility, conflict, and forced migration. Optimists might argue that as the Middle East is a historically dry region, dealing with limited water resources is not a new challenge, and social, architectural, and agricultural practices reflect this. Thus, recent water usage patterns notwithstanding, societies and governments generally retain awareness of, and a history of adaptation to, water constraints, and so should have significant resilience as they go from dry to very dry in the decades ahead. Pessimists, however, might argue that such optimism is misplaced given the relatively low level of public environmental consciousness, a history of poor governance, and silo approaches that limit communication, cooperation, or the sharing of best practices in the region.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN THE REGION

Environmental issues have historically ranked quite low on the list of public priorities for most governments in the region. However, resource demands and environmental conditions are worse than ever, and expectations for the future are far from positive. Thus, some combination of citizen demand, financial inducements, international pressure, or support and socialization from regional cooperation could help push the environment up government priority lists, before environmental crises force their hand.⁴

The most recent Living Planet report from the W.W.F. ranks Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates as having the highest ecological footprint per capita in the world, with the other Gulf states also near the top. Across the rest of the region, and across the globe, developed countries are clustered near the top of the ranking and the poorest countries near the bottom. Comparing these rankings to the E.P.I. ranking, there is a notable lack of connection between wealth and environmental performance, as is found in much of the rest of the world. The E.P.I. has Israel as the highest ranked country in the region (49th), followed by Tunisia, Jordan, and Algeria. The poorest states have little ecological footprint,

“There are doubts about how high environmental concerns are for MENA publics”

but lack adequate resources to dedicate to developing clean drinking water, treating wastewater, addressing threats to human health (including

household air pollution from solid fuels), or protecting species and habitats. While these rankings have value, there are no universally agreed markers of good environmental management. And there are many factors involved in environmental performance beyond the making and implementing of good environmental policy, including population density, natural resource abundance, and level of economic development.

What are the incentives of the policymakers and what policies do they choose to shape the behavior of citizens? It has been argued that the debt restructuring processes of the 1980s showed that authoritarian Arab governments were more responsive to external pressures than to domestic demands.⁵ How true does this remain today in the world of 24-hour transnational cable channels and post-‘Arab Spring’ populations? An environmentally informed and active public could change their own habits, pressure their governments, and be more receptive of government action in this area.⁶ While the transformations of the ‘Arab Spring’ have brought issues of government accountability to the fore across the region, there remain serious doubts about progress on the issue. There are also doubts about how high environmental concerns are for MENA publics, which may prioritize the same serious economic and security challenges as their governments. The most concerning environmental challenges for the public are the same as anywhere else—those that impact health and quality of life: polluted air, dirty water, and poor waste disposal. Climate change is too nebulous and long term, and even seemingly hypothetical, to be a priority for most people around the world. Doing nothing has proven to be the ‘too easy’ option.⁷

The eternal challenge of environmental protection is the distribution of costs imposed by the negative externalities that result from our production and consumption activities. Who pays to clean up the air, treat the water, and pick up the garbage? A key goal of effective environmental action is to incentivize the internalization of these costs by the polluter, so that the government or other actors don’t have to pay to clean up or, as is too often the case, suffer

from what is not cleaned up. Most governments around the world rely on regulatory instruments that involve a command and control approach to monitor and enforce adherence to environmental standards. In some areas, there is increasing use of economic incentives such as taxes, fees, or subsidies to encourage behavioral change, in addition to information-based instruments and voluntary instruments.⁸ In the MENA region, many command and control

TABLE 1. ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL RANKINGS

	GDP PER CAPITA (CURRENT U.S. \$) - WORLD BANK 2014	WWF ECOLOGICAL FOOTPRINT PER CAPITA- GLOBAL RANKINGS 2014	ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE INDEX- GLOBAL RANKINGS 2016
KUWAIT	43,594	1	113
QATAR	96,732	2	87
U.A.E.	43,963	3	92
BAHRAIN	24,855	9	86
SAUDI ARABIA	24,161	33	96
ISRAEL	37,208	34	49
LEBANON	10,058	46	94
LIBYA	6,573	47	119
IRAN	5,443	57	105
TURKEY	10,515	63	99
MAURITANIA	1,275	71	160
JORDAN	5,423	78	74
TUNISIA	4,421	81	53
EGYPT	3,199	84	104
ALGERIA	5,484	90	83
SYRIA	--	97	101
IRAQ	6,420	102	116
MOROCCO	3,190	105	64
SUDAN	1,876	107	170
SOMALIA	543	124	180
YEMEN	1,408	138	150
PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES	2,966	151	--
COMOROS	810	--	152
DJIBOUTI	1,814	--	164

regulatory instruments have been written into law, and implementing agencies have been developed, notably since the 1990s.⁹ However, the continued environmental degradation would seem to indicate the limited effectiveness of these instruments, which require effective governance systems to enforce. MENA countries have been ruled mostly by authoritarian regimes—with limited political accountability—which have too often used the state to distribute economic rents rather than make long-term investments in their economies, societies, and environments.¹⁰

Though inaction is too common, some progress has been made at national and regional levels. In the Gulf region, there has been a proliferation of initiatives on solar power, green cities (notably Abu Dhabi's Masdar Initiative¹¹), and improved building codes, as well as a gradual recognition of the problem of over pumping groundwater for domestic food production. Across the wider region, multiple countries, from Egypt to Somalia to Qatar, have begun to integrate the Sustainable Development Goals into their development plans. Both within and outside of government, there is a large and growing community of experts

“In the Gulf region, there has been a proliferation of initiatives on solar power, green cities, and improved building codes”

who recognize the need to address environmental issues. This ‘epistemic community’ is connected internationally, through U.N. agencies or transnational NGOs considered domestically

non-threatening, and have thus been allowed influence over their policy area, if not always sufficient resources.¹²

The international connections of this community have been very important. International bodies such as UNEP, U.N.D.P., and the World Bank play a significant role in supporting institutional capacity building and the pursuit of concrete environmental projects. While MENA countries have historically been more likely to join multilateral environmental agreements only after their entry into force, international engagement is increasing as political leaderships in many MENA countries see value in engaging in these processes.¹³ The most recent and most powerful example comes from the United Nations Framework

Convention on Climate Change negotiation process, the outcome of which has significant implications for global energy demand, domestic energy use, and the severity of climate impacts. However, despite increased connections with international processes, regional environmental cooperation remains relatively weak.¹⁴

WHERE ARE WE TODAY IN TERMS OF REGIONAL COOPERATION?

Similarities in water, land use, urban pollution, and climate change pressures have not translated into effective joint responses. Divided by deserts, and with only a limited number of shared challenges as specific focal points for cooperation, the intergovernmental initiatives in which regional states discuss environmental issues—and there are a surprising number of them—have resulted in unimplemented reports, strategies, and protocols. A major reason for this is that meeting participants, whether environment ministers or technical experts, often lack the authority to move beyond consultations or report writing, turning cooperation initiatives into talk fests.¹⁵

At the broadest level in the region—though still exclusionary of Iran, Israel, and Turkey—is the Arab League, which established CAMRE in 1986. CAMRE has met regularly and has launched multiple intergovernmental initiatives, including the Arab Initiative for Sustainable Development, the Arab Region Environmental Information Network, the Arab Union for Sustainable Development and Environment, and the Joint Committee on Environment and Development in the Arab Region. Each of these have been involved to varying degrees in policy research, information sharing, and bridge building. All roads lead back to CAMRE and, from there, to the national governments which remain the locus of decision-making and policy implementation.

Civil society organizations are also active across the region. In addition to the regional branches of international organizations such as the I.U.C.N. and W.W.F., there are several regional organizations, including AFED, the most well-known regional environmental NGO with academic, business, and media partnerships; the Arab Network for Environment and Development, a network of more than 250 NGOs; the Arab Union for Sustainable Development and Environment;

and the Arab Water Council. They operate with varying degrees of government connection. The Arab Water Council has government ministers on its board, while AFED works independently but invites government representatives to its events and sees them as an essential part of the audience for the work.¹⁶ All of them have observer status at CAMRE meetings, remaining connected to the regional cooperation discussions, even if little happens after the ministers disperse to their capitals.

SUBREGIONS

The Arab League and its bodies include a broad and far from cohesive membership, therefore it has not moved toward becoming an institutionalized center of action. Some subregional efforts, however, have met with success, though even at this level, environmental cooperation has proven difficult to construct in the absence of wider political and economic cooperation processes.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (G.C.C.) has been working on environmental issues since 1986. The political, socioeconomic, and geographic similarities of the six G.C.C. states go a long way to explain its relative cohesiveness and increasing institutionalization. Despite intense competition among its members in many areas, it may hold the most promise of any MENA subregion to move toward integrated environmental governance, though progress remains limited.¹⁷

They have together shifted their agricultural policies away from the focus on

“The Levant region has more geographic opportunities to pursue environmental cooperation than the other subregions”

improving food self-sufficiency, have developed an environmental action plan (mostly on information sharing), and are increasing work on climate issues. They

have also looked at wider strategic dialogue with Turkey, Jordan, and Morocco. The G.C.C. states have developed into global leaders in energy, banking, and airlines, and thus don't suffer from the same governance weaknesses as many other MENA states. They also have a burgeoning environmental leader, the

United Arab Emirates, which has clearly decided to improve its environmental performance. It is expanding its domestic policy capacities, created the Abu Dhabi Global Environmental Data Initiative, and is actively cooperating with a wide range of partners, from the United States to the World Bank to AFED. However, real integrated G.C.C. action remains in the realm of the hypothetical.

Two other organizations in the Gulf region are worth noting. The first is the Regional Organization for the Conservation of the Environment of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, which is an intergovernmental body dedicated to coastal and

marine conservation in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aqaba, Gulf of Suez, and Gulf of Aden. Created in 1995, it involves Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen, and

“The G.C.C. may hold the most promise of any MENA subregion to move toward integrated environmental governance”

not Israel or Eritrea. The second is the Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment, which is comprised all Gulf states, including Iran—which joined in 1978.

The other subregions, the Levant (Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq) and the Maghreb (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia), have had less success at intergovernmental cooperation, environmental or otherwise. The Levant region has more geographic opportunities to pursue environmental cooperation than the other subregions, with the shared waters of the Jordan, Tigris, and Euphrates basins crossing borders. In practice, however, cooperative efforts that have been attempted have required significant involvement of outside actors, and other than the Jordan-Israel partnership, have not had much success. Today’s conflicts preclude any substantive attempts to pursue cross-border environmental cooperation in the Levant.

The Maghreb does not suffer the open conflict that is underway in the Levant, but major political differences have prevented effective action—the Arab Maghreb Union’s charter for environmental protection and sustainable development (1992) has had limited follow-up. Work with the World Bank on separate desertification projects has gone well, but efforts to scale up a regional initiative remain at the planning stage. The Maghreb states have

also been those most open to cooperating with, and receiving support from, the European Union and the E.U.-led Union for the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean Action Plans (1975 and 1995) have formed the centerpieces of efforts to assist Mediterranean countries in assessing and controlling marine pollution, formulating environmental policies, and addressing natural resource management. Currently, there are six regional activity centers, five of which are in Europe, one in Tunisia. The European Union and some of its member states also support the Egyptian-led CEDARE, an intergovernmental organization dedicated to water management, land management, and sustainability issues, with Saudi Arabia and Egypt as the lead Arab partners.

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

There are doubts about the capacity and political will of many countries to pursue environmental cooperation, which has led to international organizations playing key roles.¹⁸ The U.N.D.P. focuses on environment and sustainable development as one of its four main fields of action in the region. It runs two major environmental programs: the Water Governance Program for Arab States and the Arab Climate Resilience Initiative, with an active focus on regionality, but the bulk of work is still done individually with national partners.¹⁹ The U.N. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) is playing a role in sustainable development issues. The World Bank is partnering with the G.C.C.

“the bulk of the international support has been necessarily focused at the national level”

on marine issues, and with individual G.C.C. countries on capacity building. Importantly, however, the pre-existing weakness of environmental cooperation efforts has meant that the bulk of the

international support has been necessarily focused at the national level, where capacity and interest in these partnerships exist. As with other themes in the development world, there has been worthwhile focus on developing programs that are nationally owned, but this focus may mean that an integrative regional focus cannot be prioritized. UNEP is the leading international organization for environmental cooperation in the region, supporting CAMRE and CEDARE,

partnering with the other U.N. agencies active in the field (notably U.N.D.P. and ESCWA), and supporting capacity building and policy formulation with national governments across the region.

SHARED WATERS

Since transboundary waters constitute a necessary resource in specific locations, they can be a more concrete issue to cooperate or fight over than other seemingly more nebulous issues such as climate change. Transboundary freshwater resources have contributed to regional conflicts—including between Israel and Syria in the 1950s and 1960s—and have caused ongoing tensions between many states in the region. They have also led to a number of intergovernmental initiatives to promote resource cooperation. Unfortunately, the complexity of transboundary water projects, which tend to encompass political, geographical, and economic aspects requiring long-term cooperation, shared infrastructure, and significant financial investment, often hinders the realization of large-scale cooperative projects.

“Transboundary freshwater resources have contributed to regional conflicts”

The Israel-Jordan peace agreement of 1994 addressed freshwater via the formation of a Joint Water Committee to regulate water sharing, infrastructure, and joint project development. Cooperation has continued for 20 years despite wide distrust between the governments. While other initiatives involving Israel and its neighbors have survived, such as the Middle East Desalination Research Center in Oman, they are rare birds. More common are the failures, including the attempt to copy the Israel-Jordan success between Israel and the Palestinian Authority following the Oslo Accords. Unfortunately, the shared water committee has been politicized and decisions dictated by Israel.

In the Tigris-Euphrates basin, decades of tension have followed Turkish and Syrian dam building in the 1960s, punctuated by periodic efforts at cooperation. Syria and Iraq agreed on water sharing in 1974, only to have a military standoff the next year in which water was a key factor. Turkey and Iraq formed a Joint Technical Committee in 1980, and were joined by Syria in 1983, but bilateral

and trilateral meetings during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s (during which time Turkey has built more than a dozen dams in the basin) have not resulted in meaningful agreements.

One significant regional project, the Red Sea-Dead Sea Canal, will desalinate Red Sea water and transfer the remaining brine to the Dead Sea, producing electricity along the way. A version of the project was agreed in 2005 among Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority, but political distrust and lack of funds prevented it from materializing. World Bank involvement helped facilitate a deal between Israel and Jordan in 2013, without the Palestinians, and construction of the first phase is now underway.

A large number of other bilateral and trilateral water cooperation efforts exist in the region, of varying levels of effectiveness. These include the Nile Basin Initiative involving Egypt and its upstream partners; Lebanon-Syria cooperation over the Orontes and Nahr al-Kabir al Janoubi rivers; an aquifer agreement involving Egypt, Libya, Chad, and the Sudan; and an aquifer coordination mechanism between Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya.

REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION— MODELS FROM ELSEWHERE

MODEL 1—THE PATH TO INTEGRATION

The European Union represents the world's most comprehensively integrated regional body, with member states pooling portions of their sovereignty and ceding policy-making power in many areas. Created in the post-World War II era, it was intended as an economic partnership to reduce the likelihood of future conflict. As economic cooperation deepened, other areas also began to be addressed, including environmental policy starting in the early 1970s. The European Union has become the leading center for environmental policy-making in Europe, and perhaps the world, with environmental cooperation evolving as a component of a larger effort to form an ever-closer union.

No other region of the world has a comparable political arrangement or set of goals, preferring to limit cooperation to information sharing/discussion efforts or, in a few cases, to the creation of sites of shared managerial authority for specific shared problems. Rather than operating at a continental scale like the European Union, environmental cooperation has been most effectively pursued elsewhere within geographic sub-regions that share similar challenges, and often political sensibilities.

MODEL 2—INTERGOVERNMENTAL COOPERATION

In Northeast Asia, cooperation has taken place through fragmented initiatives, rather than shared institutions.²⁰ The annual Tripartite Environment Ministers Meeting between China, Japan, and South Korea is a limited success, with the density of exchanges at different levels continuing to increase despite the ups and downs of the wider geopolitical situation. While originally focusing on policy information exchange, they have expanded their efforts to create working groups, joint projects, and dedicated policy dialogues for specific challenges such as air pollution, biodiversity, and chemicals management.²¹ Japan's role as a major investor and aid provider has allowed it to assume some regional leadership in environmental cooperation, but it has not pursued deeper integration beyond particular projects.²²

MODEL 3—WEAK INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Three decades of intermittent—but genuine—progress in environmental cooperation have occurred in Southeast Asia, centered on ASEAN.²³ Long derided as ineffective, the 'ASEAN way' of working, focused on consensus and noninterference, has often meant that progress on any issue occurs at the speed of the slowest member of the group. Yet economic and political progress has transformed many ASEAN members, and this has affected the club itself. While effective outcomes of environmental cooperation through ASEAN have been limited, notably poor implementation of the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution, the role of ASEAN as a robust discussion forum and the locus for collective action is increasingly secure. As in the Middle East, international organizations, notably UNEP, have played a key role in providing financial and technical support for this evolution.

MODEL 4—HOLLOW PRESIDENTIAL SUMMITS

In South America, cooperation efforts have primarily involved decades of periodic summits filled with impressive rhetoric, primarily on economic and security issues, which lead to limited follow-up. Environmental issues, when raised, are generally derivatives of more important economic initiatives and environmental challenges; while common within each region, they are primarily addressed within national discussions. With limited trade and infrastructure links within each region, there are also few transboundary environmental issues affecting major populations. Their major centers, and their biggest environmental challenges, are separated by vast forests and mountain areas.

A MODEL FOR THE MIDDLE EAST?

The model that most closely fits the Middle East and North Africa today is the hollow presidential summit model. Like South America, Middle Eastern countries have shown a preference for periodic summits with limited follow-up. Rather than being divided by forests as in South America, population centers in the Middle East are often separated by sparsely populated dryland and desert regions, though transboundary water issues are more common—notably in the

“Middle Eastern countries have shown a preference for periodic summits with limited follow-up”

Levant. Both regions also have a surfeit of subregional integration initiatives. Looking forward, the weak institutionalization

model may be held up as a positive example worth moving toward, particularly at subregional levels. While continuing to ensure noninterference and respect for the sovereignty of each member, this model involves the increased regularization of meetings and agendas, the institutionalization of working groups, and the gradual buildup of collective trust in an intergovernmental forum as an entity in itself.

WHERE WILL THE REGION BE IN 2030 UNDER A MUDDLING THROUGH SCENARIO?

Should the current connected trends in the low prioritization of environmental issues and the hollow pursuit of regional cooperation continue toward 2030, the MENA states will each be forced to face, separately, the problems that arise from the continued overuse and maltreatment of limited natural resources. Each country will have forged its own path in handling the increasingly serious impacts of a dirty, dry environment on human health, economic growth, and social and economic stability.

“MENA states will each be forced to face, separately, the problems that arise from the continued overuse and maltreatment of limited natural resources”

In such a scenario, efforts to sell sustainable development and green growth are dismissed as disconnected from the economic priorities of populations and political priorities of governments. National governments will not integrate environmental and climate issues into their plans for economic growth, infrastructure expansion, or agricultural development, forgoing opportunities to improve their social and economic resilience to climate impacts. Enforced pollution control measures and improved water management systems will be slow to arrive, except in response to crises. The increasing impacts of climate change are expected to precipitate water stress and heat wave crises, and attendant threats to livelihoods and food security, with increasing frequency.

Despite a trend of growing awareness among publics and decision makers about the similar environmental challenges across the region, atomized national responses—or lack thereof—will predominate. Efforts by the international community will help address some governance capacity issues, and those environmental issues most connected with poverty, such as water treatment and indoor air pollution, but the whole is less than the sum of the parts. Instead of being a shared opportunity for green growth, the world of international climate

finance will develop into a new area for sharper competition among MENA states. In such a scenario, environmental cooperation efforts will continue to lag rather than lead to any wider political rapprochements or economic integration.

WHERE COULD THE REGION BE IN 2030 UNDER A SCENARIO INVOLVING SIGNIFICANT COOPERATION?

Forging a more optimistic scenario for regional environmental cooperation would not require revolutionary transformations in politics or policy-making. To start with, there is no shortage of draft plans for environmental cooperation in the region. Much of what is lacking today is follow through and implementation of ideas already under development. As long-established limits on the media and public discourse have been disrupted by new technologies, new media models, and the Arab Spring, there has been a genuine increase in awareness across the region of how neighboring states face similar challenges. Gradually, this consciousness can help facilitate openness to regional and international

cooperation, particularly where economic impacts and advantages are clear.

In such a context, improved environmental cooperation would likely involve two complementary processes: first, increased ownership and

prioritization of environmental problems by different states, buttressed by civil society actors who help strengthen sustainable development voices in separate national discussions; and second, increased openness to regional cooperation as a tool for addressing environmental problems. This cooperation would play out first with learning and applying the best practices learned from each other's national initiatives, before eventually moving toward the development of integrated initiatives. Such a scenario could be facilitated by the choice of external actors (international organizations, bilateral partners) to prioritize

“there has been a genuine increase in awareness across the region of how neighboring states face similar challenges”

support via regional initiatives that are regionally led, rather than through bilateral processes.

The content of this improved cooperation may be most likely to be developed along three thematic lines: sustainable development, climate change, and managing shared waters.

The sustainable development agenda holds great promise because it allows environmental issues to be integrated into economic planning. With the SDGs and Agenda 2030, developed through a remarkably inclusive U.N. process, sustainable development has become more than an environmental catchphrase. The term is becoming central to many discussions on economic growth

and job creation for both developed and developing regions. While not without skeptics, the concept includes a green focus, but is targeted at

“Further regional cooperation will be facilitated by continued momentum of global processes.”

improving human well-being, an approach that fits well with the priorities of much of the broader MENA public. Importantly, the SDGs have been designed with quite clear, measurable targets, ensuring that they remain high on the agendas of aid agencies and international organizations. While the nature of many of the goals makes them well suited for being addressed through regional initiatives, many of the individual targets are defined at national levels, perhaps providing a counter pressure to expanding efforts beyond the national level.

Climate change is the second likely theme for environmental cooperation. It has long been presented primarily as an adaptation challenge for a dry region that may get drier, with adaptation efforts largely managed at national levels. However, the vast majority of climate finance available—a pie that is expected to expand rapidly—has been dedicated to mitigation, which partly explains why mitigation is increasingly moving up agendas in the region. Mitigation discussions have been the focus of climate change talks at a regional level, rather than adaptation, as Arab states have forged joint approaches to international climate negotiations. Further regional cooperation will be facilitated by continued momentum of global processes, in which MENA governments have become increasingly invested; the ongoing dedication of additional government capacity to climate issues; and the fact that energy is central to

climate discussions. Energy issues are always on the agenda for decision makers; if the world's biggest economies are prioritizing climate issues, everybody else will have to take notice, due to the repercussions on their energy systems. Even the region's oil exporters supported the Paris climate deal, and are now trying to figure out how to avoid the worst disruption, that of lower future demand for oil due to climate impact. In this scenario, awareness of the world's limited carbon budget, and subsequent constraints on the wealth of oil exporters, can begin to mitigate the historic 'go it alone' mentality of the oil exporters. This may begin to open them up to cooperation on energy and climate issues with

“if the world's biggest economies are prioritizing climate issues, everybody else will have to take notice”

less endowed neighbors. High levels of political and financial support from external actors would also play an important role in driving the process.

Shared waters constitute the third likely theme for regional environmental cooperation. As

discussed above, a number of transboundary rivers and aquifers remain sites of contention. A trend toward improved cooperation could lead to real benefits in terms of reduced tensions and more predictable water management.

The formats for pursuing regional cooperation on any of these thematic lines could be developed according to three priorities: building on existing frameworks and agreements, targeting action at the subregional level, and strategic thinking in pursuing narrow projects or broad processes.

1. Rather than reinventing the wheel, the opportunity presented by a shift in political will, priorities, or resources, which open the door to improved cooperation, should be seized by building on existing agreements. This would turn rhetoric into signatures, and signatures into action. There is already a proliferation of initiatives at multiple levels, from low-level intergovernmental technical cooperation, to urban partnerships, to issue-specific civil society initiatives.
2. The different MENA subregions provide the most fertile ground for environmental cooperation, particularly in the G.C.C. The ASEAN model of weak but persistent moves toward institutionalization might be

considered the most plausible scenario for G.C.C. optimists. Additionally, if governance could be decentralized within the region—a big ‘if’—it would create more centers of effective decision-making. Evidence from other world regions suggests that local and subnational governments can sometimes cooperate quite widely beyond the national arena as they do not have the same political and pride constraints as national governments.

3. Strategic thinking about the balance of cooperation mechanisms, narrow technical projects, or wider global processes will be required. Narrow and targeted environmental initiatives have often made the most progress in being institutionalized and affecting lives on the ground, such as Israeli-Jordanian water cooperation. It is, however, the broader issues—sustainable development or climate change—for which the sharing of policy experiences and the pursuit of deeper cooperation would be less likely to be trapped in technical bubbles. These broader issues could have the most potential knock on impact in affecting the wider political relationship between countries.

“At the governmental level, the environment can form a solid plank for continued dialogue”

In the end, a scenario involving better environmental cooperation can be expected to result in improved environmental performance over time. This could include bending long-term trajectories on climate and energy in the right direction, reducing the likelihood that climate impacts will lead to fragility or instability, and improving water management across the region. This will occur as lessons are learned, new technologies are more widely applied, and joint investments are pursued. Successful implementation of sustainable development principles in the region could also result in progress in the fight against poverty if efforts to reform inefficient water use in the agricultural sector take into account the unique challenge of the millions of rural poor.

WHAT CAN IMPROVED COOPERATION YIELD IN TERMS OF TRACTION ON ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL FRONTS?

Improved environmental cooperation may have value in facilitating wider cooperation, depending on two factors. The first is how important environmental issues become on national agendas. Will local environmental crises be required to instigate change—not unlike the severe local pollution issues that instigated environmental movements in the West? The more that climate change is recognized as a potential security challenge, the more likely it is that efforts to address it will be integrated with other foreign policy priorities. Second, how successfully can environmental issues be integrated into economic development thinking? Significant growth in international climate finance over the next 15 years could create major incentives to move environmental issues to the center of national and regional policy-making.

At the governmental level, the environment can form a solid plank for continued dialogue, notably in the technical sphere, along with related dialogues on trade, agriculture, and energy, to foster a culture and mechanisms for organizing regional cooperation. External support to facilitate such dialogues can be a good investment. For civil society, the environment can be a relatively apolitical issue, unlikely to trigger pressures and crackdowns that local organizations face on other issues. Thus, environmental discussion can be seen as opening space for civil society in general.

Taking advantage of these opportunities will be a challenge without deeper and more widespread understanding of the problems being faced. No region on Earth is expected to be harder hit by climate change. No other region has already displayed quite so clearly the potential threats to stability and peace that rapid environmental change may bring. Responses at the national level will be necessary, but perhaps not sufficient, for mitigating these threats and forging a sustainable path to development. Improved information sharing, technical cooperation, and political negotiation at regional and subregional levels can play an important role. While it is easy to identify obstacles to improved regional cooperation in the Middle East, these obstacles should not be used as excuses for despair and inaction. Times change and challenges that once seemed impossible can suddenly appear resolvable. Step-by-step and theme-by-theme, it will be important to find pathways to get there.

ENDNOTES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gerald Stang is a Senior Associate Analyst with the European Union Institute for Security Studies where he primarily works on energy, climate change and other emerging security challenges. He was recently a lead author for “A New Climate for Peace,” an independent report commissioned by members of the G7, which investigates the compound fragility risks posed by a changing climate. He has also researched and published on strategic foresight in international relations, the changing global environment facing the European Union, and the challenges of working with fragile states, from Haiti to Pakistan. Gerald has BSc and MSc degrees in Chemical Engineering from the University of Saskatchewan and a Master in International Affairs from Columbia University, where he served as editor-in-chief of the Journal of International Affairs.

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