



Working Group 7:

SECURITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

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Times of Climate Change and
Global Environmental Challenges

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WORKING GROUP 7

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There is mounting evidence that climate change has been a key factor in undermining stability and social cohesion throughout the Arabian Peninsula. How will climate change projections and scenarios impact further on a region, which is now in considerable turmoil, and how will it hamper prospects for an ultimate stabilisation and long-term recovery?

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1. CHALLENGES

The Arab region covers 10 million square kilometres (more than 2.5 times the size of Western Europe) and stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Zagros Mountains in southwest Asia.¹⁶ The Arab countries are located in a hyperarid to arid region – less than 0.2 on the Aridity Index (AI) – with pockets of semiarid areas (between 0.2 and 0.5 AI). There are some temperate zones in coastal North Africa, the eastern Mediterranean, and equatorial areas in southern Somalia and the Comoros as well as some snow-classified areas in the mountains of Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Morocco. Environmental challenges in the Arab world include water scarcity, with the lowest freshwater resource endowment in the world; very low and variable precipitation; and excessive exposure to extreme events, including drought and desertification.¹⁷

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For thousands of years, the people of this region have coped with the challenges of climate variability through the adaptation of their survival strategies to changes in rainfall and temperature. However, over the next century their adaptation skills will be put to the test as the climate of the Arab countries will experience unprecedented extremes. As pointed out by the World Bank, “temperatures will reach new highs, and in most places there will be less rainfall. Water availability will be reduced, and with a growing population, the already water-scarce region may not have sufficient supplies to irrigate crops, support industry, or provide drinking water”.¹⁸ Given the region’s demanding environment, its volatility in terms of inter- and intrastate conflict, its instability and its high dependency of many of its states on fossil fuel revenues, the Arab region is considered to be amongst the world’s most vulnerable regions to climate change.¹⁹ For the Arab region, climate change presents regionally and socially unequal threat of severe environmental, economic, political and security impacts.

¹⁶ Elasha BO, *Mapping of Climate Change in threats and human development impacts in the Arab region* (2010) <http://www.arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdrps/papero2-en.pdf>

¹⁷ Verner D, *Adaptation to a Changing Climate in the Arab countries: A Case for Adaptation Governance and Leadership in Building Climate Resilience* (2012)

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Elasha 2010; Luomi M, ‘Gulf of Interest: Why oil still dominates Middle Eastern Climate Politics’ (2011) in *Journal of Arabian Studies* (hereinafter Luomi 2011)

2. RESPONSES

As the Arab region entails such a diverse group of countries with deferring national circumstances and climate vulnerability, there is a marked variation in the states' activeness in climate action to date when measured in terms of plans, initiatives and actions.²⁰

A review of Arab national communications reports to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and current projects and initiatives shows that Arab countries are in fact implementing various climate friendly policies and measures. However, most of these initiatives are fragmented and do not appear to have been implemented as part of a comprehensive policy framework at the national or regional level.²¹

In general, mitigation and adaptation efforts are hindered by regional politics and mutual distrust among the Arab states. Arguably, climate change brings to the fore the major contemporary inter-Arab divisions that prevent the development of meaningful cooperation, namely: major oil exports and the rest; rentier and non- or declining rentier states; rich and poor countries; and stable and internally conflict-prone states. These divisions largely coincide with parallel geographical boundaries, separating the wealthy Gulf oil-exporting monarchies (Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and, to some extent, Oman and Bahrain) from the resource-restricted Arab states of the Mashriq (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the Palestinian territories and, partly outside the geographical division, Egypt and Yemen). The internal stability and prosperity of the former group of states in the coming decades will arguably depend to a large extent on both the international demand for oil and their ability to diversify their economies away from oil revenue dependence. In the Gulf, in addition to sustaining a ruling bargain between the ruling elites and the national populations, export revenues also sustain the states' capacity to adapt to the extreme climatic conditions and structural water scarcity.²²

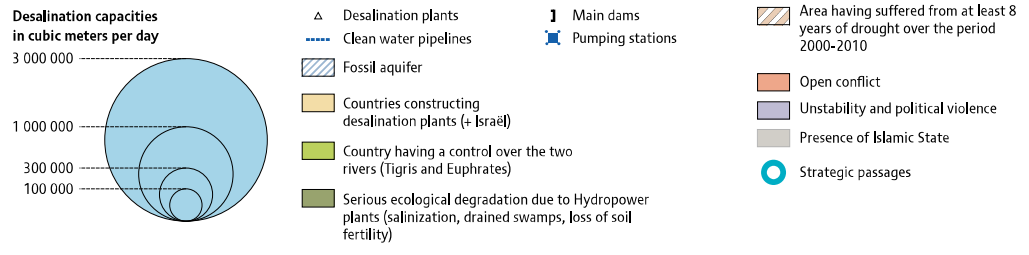
3. FURTHER READING

- Elasha BO, Mapping of Climate Change in threats and human development impacts in the Arab region (2010) <http://www.arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdrps/papero2-en.pdf>
- Luomi M, 'Gulf of Interest: Why oil still dominates Middle Eastern Climate Politics' (2011) in *Journal of Arabian Studies*
- Luomi M, Mainstreaming Climate Policy in the Gulf Cooperation States (2014) <http://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/MEP-7.pdf>
- Tolba MK and Saab NJ, Arab Environment: Climate Change. Impact of Climate Change on Arab Countries (2009) <http://www.afedonline.org/afedreport09/Full%20English%20Report.pdf>
- Verner D, Adaptation to a Changing Climate in the Arab countries: A Case for Adaptation Governance and Leadership in Building Climate Resilience (2012)

²⁰ Luomi M, *Mainstreaming Climate Policy in the Gulf Cooperation States* (2014) <http://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/MEP-7.pdf>

²¹ Tolba MK and Saab NJ, *Arab Environment: Climate Change. Impact of Climate Change on Arab Countries* (2009) <http://www.afedonline.org/afedreport09/Full%20English%20Report.pdf>

²² Luomi 2011



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4. ANALYSIS

The current model in the Arabian Gulf region of over-reliance on revenues from fossil fuels and resource depletion to advance economic growth is clearly unsustainable. It appears to be getting worse with the current practices as resources like food, water and energy are being used at a faster rate given the demographic pressures. Current diversification and investment efforts are making the situation worse by reinforcing dependence on fossil fuels rather than replacing them.

Examples of unsustainable practices include the provision of services such as water desalination, which is resource intensive, as well as subsidies to certain sectors such as the food industry (e.g. milk production). Such policies and practices, although may appear to advance prosperity, are not necessarily contributing to resilience building in Gulf States. A case in point is in the Jeddah floods that caused significant casualties. All of this is coupled with Gulf States being vulnerable to shocks of oil price fluctuations.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Even if reliance on oil and fossil fuels will eventually decrease we need to remain concerned. The Gulf region should not follow the downward spiral of Syria or other conflict-affected regions. There will be indeed a transition, and such transition can be made less bumpy. We can work on lowering the risks and shocks and help the local actors, including budding civil society, to find their appropriate model that can work on three tracks.

Firstly, we must work to support efforts of diversification of the economy. Although this is not novel in the Gulf region, new generations look more ready for a new economic model that can gradually move from over reliance on resource depletion. Secondly, we must work with Gulf countries on building resilience to shocks and setting a better resilience infrastructure. Thirdly, we must work to facilitate regional collaborations and empower regional structures such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). EU and China can possibly work jointly to propagate such ideas in Gulf countries. This can start by getting Gulf states more involved in the forthcoming Paris Meeting and press them on their pledges to meet CO₂ reduction targets post-Paris.



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