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Future diplomacy in the Middle East: the challenges of water, energy and climate

EVENT REPORT



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Event report

This report reflects statements and questions made during a one-hour platform debate hosted by Friends of Europe on 29 September 2022. The debate was held in the light of a worsening climate crisis and fears that the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) will be increasingly affected by the limited quantity and unpredictability of water supplies.

Ahead of COP27 in Egypt on 6-18 November, with the annual United Nations Climate Change Conference to be held for the first time in a MENA country, participants looked at longstanding barriers to diplomacy in the Middle East and suggested ways of building on existing best practice to move forward.

Despite hosting around 5% of the world's population, **the Middle East only has about 1.5% of the world's renewable water resources. Water resources are inextricably linked with energy production.** Every stage of energy and electricity generation involves the use of water, with energy required to gather, transport and distribute high-quality water for all kinds of human activities.

“ A rapid transition to alternative means of energy production is therefore both essential and possible

In Northeast Syria, the Euphrates River reached an all-time low in May 2021, adversely affecting agriculture, domestic consumption and electricity production. Libya is one of the most water-stressed countries in the world; four aquifers – Kufra, Sirt, Morzuk and Hamada – provide most of the country's freshwater supplies and three of these are nearly exhausted. In Iraq, most of the population does not have regular access to electricity or even fuel – a fact that seems absurd, given that Iraq is the world's sixth largest oil producer.

The Middle East will be a victim of climate change. The region has already suffered from desertification, water scarcity and harsh heatwaves over recent decades. But **the Middle East is also contributing to these phenomena through its production of fossil fuels**, one of the main causes of climate change and global warming. A rapid transition to alternative means of energy production is therefore both essential and possible. The Policy Insight debate, hosted as part of Friends of Europe's Peace, Security & Defence programme, addressed these challenges in the context of diplomacy and international relations.

Speakers and participants considered questions including:

- Will climate change, as a transboundary phenomenon, create an impetus for greater regional cooperation in the Middle East or will it aggravate political tensions in the region even more?
- What role will diplomacy play in all of this?
- What role is there for regional cooperation organisations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council or Arab League?

Recommendations

Discussions focused on the need to build a long-term, sustainable response to the worst effects of climate change in a diverse and challenging political landscape. Key themes emerged to guide diplomats, regulators and activists through some of the most urgent challenges of the 21st century and produce the following recommendations:

- recognise the importance of **climate change as a key message** in all diplomatic negotiations;
- encourage governments and the EU to train experts and diplomats to look for **cross-border, supra-regional solutions** in the Middle East;
- foster the **sharing of best practice skills and experience** from EU and Middle Eastern projects between countries and regions;
- identify opportunities for the EU to **build on existing climate initiatives and mechanisms**, such as the Berlin Process, to promote water, energy and climate security in the Middle East;
- consider using **‘water diplomacy’ to find connections between technical and political challenges** in the whole MENA region;
- ensure that **civil society actors**, including young people and small communities, **are engaged in negotiations** to find sustainable resources and employment opportunities; and
- remember the importance of **communicating with ordinary people most effected** by high-level diplomatic efforts.

Event summary

CLIMATE DIPLOMACY KNOWS NO BORDERS

Just like changing weather patterns and rising temperatures, diplomatic negotiations cannot be bound by geography or political differences. This can lead to difficulties for diplomats working in politically sensitive countries, but speakers argued that climate change, energy and water shortages were urgent threats calling for a truly cross-border, supra-regional approach. ‘Existential’ was the word used by more than one expert to describe the scale of the challenges facing every aspect of life.

Regional thinking should therefore be used to promote climate action through diplomacy in the Middle East. But climate change and the green transition are “unfortunately not as high a priority as they should be in diplomatic talks,” said Stephanie Williams,

former special advisor on Libya to the United Nations Secretary-General. “Everyone is so immersed in today’s crises.”

A note of optimism was sounded by Cinzia Bianco, Visiting Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations. She said that when it comes to cross-border diplomacy for the Middle Eastern climate, energy and water emergencies, “there is some positive movement. We are at last starting to hear conversations on these topics.” But she warned that this was in part due to a rising number of “protests and general political instability, from people who don’t have access to water or electricity” because of climate change.

Martina Klimes, Advisor for Water and Peace at the Stockholm International Water Institute, agreed: “I think we will see more pressure, more protests. There will be a lot of frustration and pressure on governments to act.” She suggested learning from “water diplomacy” to find connections between technical and political challenges in the whole MENA region.

Speakers felt that the challenge was often finding the political will to make a sustainable change, even where the will to cooperate exists. Here, Klimes asked diplomats to dream of a better world. “We need to look at the situation in 50 years’ time,” she explained. “Imagine these countries with no political borders.”

“ I think we will see more pressure, more protests

agreed **Martina Klimes**, Advisor for Water and Peace at the Stockholm International Water Institute

Egyptian Ambassador to Belgium **Badr Abdel-Aty** said that the link between water scarcity and conflict was “a geopolitical issue”.

Audience members agreed. Recommendations during a Q&A session included a call for “more work on the international side on how to include climate change issues in diplomacy in a more serious way.

A SHARING SOCIETY

A willingness to talk across borders, although an important first step, is not an end in itself. In some cases, even though one country or region in the Middle East shows promise when it comes to tackling the triple climate, energy and water crises, success is not yet widely shared.

This is often the case, for instance, with innovative technologies. The Gulf monarchy markets include “some of the countries with the highest temperatures in the region, but also with some of the most promising ways of adapting to these,” explained Bianco-. This includes investments in weather mitigation technologies, such as cloud seeding and cloud-busting drones, to generate rain from clouds.

However, these ‘futuristic’ technologies in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are not always shared with neighbouring regions that could benefit from them, the event

heard. There is also a risk of trying to address problems without considering costs or even looking at the root cause: in this case, climate change.

A 2021 exchange deal signed by the UAE, Israel and Jordan was highlighted as a good example of cooperation going beyond talks to address both climate and water crises. Under this deal, a solar plant constructed in Jordan will send power to Israel, while in return a desalination plant in Israel will send water to Jordan.

In most cities in Jordan, citizens have access to water just once a week, said **Abdel Rahman**, Jordanian Deputy Director and Regional Program Manager at ECOPeace Middle East. “We have many reasons to speak about how difficult and complex the situation is.”

EUROPE STEPS UP

Cooperation, solidarity and action are needed to address climate change, energy and water shortages, and other cross-border crises. Several speakers at the conference called on the EU to use its experience in these areas to help the Middle East through diplomacy.

Williams said her work in Libya had shown there was a need for more “positive power sharing”. She added: “Here the EU can do more. They can tie this with building climate awareness in the communities likely to be worst affected by climate change.”

The Berlin Process, already used to promote EU values in the Western Balkans, “could be used as an entry point for more robust conversations here, for instance, on the need for water security,” she said.

“The climate crisis should be a multiplier of opportunity rather than a risk

Rahman said.

Bianco said the European Council on Foreign Relations was about to publish “a policy brief that talks about how Europeans can encourage Gulf regions to regionalise these challenges.” This means “nudging” regional cooperation, she added. “At present, the reality is that instances of regional cooperation remain scarce.”

Rahman warned that “thinking strategically in this region [the Middle East] is not common.” Instead, there is “an endless blame game that undermines any effort to move forward.”

But he asked Europe and other diplomats to remain optimistic. “The climate crisis should be a multiplier of opportunity rather than a risk,” Rahman said. Bringing together core themes of the debate, he agreed that promoting discussion at a regional level, with the help of EU diplomacy, would be vital to advancing diplomatic climate talks in the Middle East. “We need to cooperate at a regional and super-regional level.

CIVIL SOCIETY LEAVES NO ONE BEHIND

Calls for a European style of regional climate diplomacy in the Middle East also focused on the need for an inclusive approach to addressing climate, water and energy crises, with more involvement of civil society groups.

Abdel-Aty assured the debate that Egypt had “designated a green zone for civil society to participate” at COP27. “We are quite open to meet with representatives of civil society,” he said.

“ We need to ensure a diversity of views, including through work with NGOs and the youth

Abdel-Aty said.

A key message for participants was the need for good communication across all of society, from the rulers and politicians to grassroots youth movements and local citizens. This means “the communities most affected [by climate change, water and energy shortages]. In small villages outside Tripoli,” as Williams put it. “We need to ensure a diversity of views, including through work with NGOs and the youth of Libya – the ones who will be most affected by the climate emergency.”

Klimes agreed that “it is very important to invest in communications across different groups in the Middle East.” She added that youth groups and young people were most likely to be the ones who drive change. Climate-driven extreme weather means “agricultural jobs will not be available to youths,” she said. “There will be a lot of frustration. I believe this will push different actors to take the situation more seriously.”

AN EVERYDAY REALITY

“We have all just come out of what was a long hot summer for the entire world, particularly the Middle Eastern region, in which seven countries had temperatures above 50 degrees,” said event moderator **Mary Fitzgerald**, a researcher and analyst specialising in the Mediterranean region with a particular focus on Libya, Trustee of Friends of Europe and 2013 European Young Leader (EYL40).

“ The Middle East is not really responsible for environmental degradation or climate change. This is a global, collective issue. So it should be solved together.

Her message fed into a recurring reminder throughout the day: that the event’s grand-sounding title ‘Future diplomacy in the Middle East: the challenges of water, energy and climate’ is in fact about helping ordinary people to get through their daily lives. Above all, it is about trying to help some of the world’s most deprived communities from seeing conditions worsen even further.

In much of the Middle East, the event heard, water shortages and soaring temperatures have come on top of years or even decades of political violence, collapsing infrastructure and deteriorating living conditions. Years of conflict-driven migration, both internal and external, have now been exacerbated by waves of climate migrants.

As Williams put it, looking particularly at Libya and Iraq where she had most on the ground experience: “The picture is rather bleak.” Or, as Rahman reflected, “The situation in the Middle East is very difficult and leads to a lot of human misery.”

Against this background, the need for good diplomatic efforts to drive change was clearly developed. In countries where people are suffering from fossil fuel-driven climate change, even as their leaders benefit from fossil fuel sales, Europe has a role to play promoting an inclusive, sustainable response to the challenges of water, energy and climate, in the Middle East as elsewhere.

As one audience participant commented: “The Middle East is not really responsible for environmental degradation or climate change. This is a global, collective issue. So it should be solved together.”

