The Unique Promise of Environmental Cooperation in the Gulf

By Will Todman, Lubna Yousef, and Mennah Abdelwahab

THE ISSUE

■ Environmental dialogue in the Gulf holds unique promise to test the potential for greater regional cooperation amidst widespread distrust.*

» Environmental issues have not been as politicized as other regional issues; they are a growing priority, and cooperation on them would not be zero sum.

» Recent steps toward diplomatic normalization provide a ripe arena for exploration.

» A dialogue on environmental issues would build trust and normalize diplomatic contact.

■ The United States should support regional environmental diplomacy indirectly.

» It should signal its support for environmental collaboration to its Arab Gulf partners, leverage its climate know-how, and ensure that sanctions on Iran do not undermine opportunities to bolster regional stability.

*In this paper, “Gulf” refers to the eight states that border the Persian or Arabian Gulf (i.e., the six states that comprise the Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC] plus Iraq and Iran). This paper is based on the authors’ remote interviews with 21 environmental experts from these eight countries, including academics, analysts, civil society activists, and former officials. Of all interviewees, 10 were women and 11 were men. The interviews were conducted in English and Arabic between May 7 and June 7, 2023. Some have been anonymized at the interviewees’ request.

INTRODUCTION

Iran believes that microscopic particles of dust could be the key to ending its economic isolation. Iran will host a conference on sand and dust storms in collaboration with the United Nations in September 2023, and it is expecting representatives from over 50 countries. Dust storms are an issue that all Middle Eastern states have an interest in tackling. The storms that travel across the region ground planes, hospitalize thousands, and cost an estimated $13 billion in GDP each year. After a series of diplomatic normalization agreements with Arab Gulf states, Iran is hoping its neighbors will attend the conference. Iranian vice president, Ali Salajegeh, recently said before the Friday prayer, “Environmental diplomacy is the precursor to political diplomacy.”

Yet, a Tehran-based political scientist observed, “Middle Eastern political elites have historically achieved their interests in the region by fighting, not negotiating or cooperating.” Deeply entrenched zero-sum thinking has undermined efforts to address most hard security issues through regional dialogue or collaboration.
Environmental issues hold unique promise for fostering negotiation and cooperation in the Gulf. Many forms of action on climate change and the environment would provide broad benefits, from efforts to combat sand and dust storms to marine conservation. In addition, international collaboration is necessary to respond to these challenges, as unilateral action by any single state is inadequate to address them. Climate change and environmental issues have also gained increased public attention in the Gulf in recent years. They have not been as politicized as other issues, meaning environmental diplomacy is both a growing priority and a relatively soft issue.

Until now, policymakers have underestimated the utility of environmental diplomacy. Dialogue on shared environmental concerns is low cost, would normalize contact between former rivals and build trust, and could serve as the foundation for cooperation on other shared issues. And if environmental diplomacy fails, it will demonstrate the limits of regional collaboration in the current geopolitical environment, providing greater clarity on diplomacy’s ability to de-escalate harder security issues.

The United States has a key but indirect role to play in fostering such a dialogue and an interest in its success. Greater U.S. engagement on environmental issues would help the United States remake its image, demonstrate that it can play a productive regional role, and support its strategies of advancing regional integration and promoting de-escalation of tensions in the Middle East. The United States should encourage its Arab Gulf partners to engage in regional environmental dialogue and help connect experts and civil society members around the Gulf to deepen the understanding of shared environmental concerns and solutions.

THE NECESSITY OF REGIONAL ACTION

Gulf states share many environmental concerns and most of them are supranational. As such, they require multilateral responses. “The Gulf is a single system, and what happens in one place impacts the rest of us,” an Iranian environmental scientist said. Failing to act benefits no one.

Water is a priority for all Gulf states. All eight states surrounding the Gulf suffer from high or extremely high water stress. Bahrain is the most affected, with 3,878 percent water stress, meaning it withdraws 38 times as much water as is supplied from renewable resources each year. Iran has greater natural water resources—which it relies on for its large agricultural sector and electricity generation—but the situation is rapidly deteriorating. In June 2023, more than 200 Iranian parliamentarians wrote an open letter warning that water reserves in two provinces would run out within three months, causing a “humanitarian disaster.” Shortages of water have prompted political instability, sparking widespread protest movements in both Iran and Iraq. Most of the region’s water resources are shared. All identified aquifer systems in the Arabian Peninsula are shared between Saudi Arabia and at least one of its neighbors. Meanwhile, Iran is an upper riparian country of the Tigris basin and the Shatt al-Arab, which are critical sources of water for Iraq. Therefore, states have an interest in collaborating on water resources.

Air pollution is also a key regional concern. As well as costing states’ economies billions of dollars each year in GDP losses, increasingly frequent dust storms have grounded planes in Iraq, stopped maritime traffic in Kuwait, and downgraded soil fertility in Iran. In May 2022, a large dust storm engulfed Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), hospitalizing thousands across the region. Meanwhile, dozens of dust storms forming in Iraq have crossed into Kuwait and Iran. The transboundary nature of dust storms exacerbates tensions between states. A Kuwaiti professor said some of her students consider dust storms to be the result of their neighbors’ political decisions rather than naturally occurring environmental phenomena. Successfully tackling sand and dust storms requires multilateral efforts.

The Gulf itself is a key economic, strategic, and cultural resource, and maritime pollution is a growing concern. Oil, chemical, and biological pollution come from both land and sea-based sources. From the land, domestic sewage, thermal water from desalination plants, and industrial waste infiltrate the water. From the sea, more than 800 offshore oil and gas platforms are prone to spillage, as are the oil tankers that traverse the Gulf. This pollution has increased fish kill events and harmful algal blooms, leading to a loss of marine biodiversity,
undermining the fishing industry, and disrupting oil production. An Iraqi activist said that “we know that states in the region have solutions” to pollution from the oil sector, suggesting it is a promising area for cooperation. Counterclockwise currents in the Gulf render Kuwait and Saudi Arabia vulnerable to any radiation leak from Iran’s Bushehr nuclear facility, which is prone to earthquakes since it lies at the junction of three tectonic plates. Serious contamination of the Gulf would risk a water crisis in Saudi Arabia, which relies on desalination for freshwater. Multilateral efforts to combat marine pollution are therefore imperative to ensure regional states’ economic and security interests.

Climate change is placing additional pressure on the region. The Middle East is warming twice as quickly as the global average, which exacerbates water scarcity and the risk of dust storms. Extreme heat events are becoming more common and bring health and economic challenges. “Extreme heat and dust storms will undermine oil production in the region as workers will not be able to be outside in these conditions,” an Iraqi academic said. None of these issues can be adequately addressed unilaterally, and the consequences of environmental degradation will ripple across the region. “A breakdown in Iraq’s ecosystem would impact Saudi Arabia, too,” said an Iraqi academic. But despite the imperative of action, some Gulf governments are only just appreciating that climate change could become an existential threat.

GULF STATES’ ENVIRONMENTAL STRATEGIES

Environmental cooperation appears to be the obvious solution to these shared concerns, but it remains difficult in practice. Although environmental issues are gaining unprecedented attention among the public, governments tend to drive policy that has limited engagement with civil society experts or scientists, and there is little cooperation at the regional level. Most environmental action in the Gulf is top-down and unilateral.

Competition for regional climate leadership between Gulf Cooperation Council states undermines the prospect of regional collaboration. Saudi Arabia and the UAE seek to engage on climate as middle powers and pursue a leadership role on climate in the Middle East and beyond. At times, this competition has threatened to derail action. In 2021, Saudi Arabia reportedly pressured the UAE not to sign a major solar energy deal with Israel and Jordan because the Saudi crown prince felt it undermined his plans for regional climate leadership.

The UAE was the first state in the region to devote serious attention to climate issues. The UAE has hosted the International Renewable Energy Agency since 2009, when it became the first developing state to host a major international organization. The UAE is also a regional leader on nuclear energy and is building the region’s first multiunit nuclear energy plant. When Dubai hosts the 2023 UN Climate Change Conference (COP28) in late 2023, the UAE’s environmental ambitions will receive unprecedented international attention.

The Saudi government knows oil producers will come under increasing international scrutiny as the energy transition advances, so it has begun to highlight its efforts toward environmental sustainability. The government is also keen to “flex its regional leadership muscle” and has found environmental action to be a promising line of effort. At the domestic level, it launched the “Saudi Green Initiative,” which it describes as a “whole-of-society” approach to address climate change. The initiative includes targets to cut emissions, grow the green economy, and protect the land and sea. The government also committed to environmental sustainability in its megaprojects, such as Neom and The Line, but much of this rhetoric
is yet to materialize. Saudi Arabia’s “Middle East Green Initiative” is the embodiment of its regional ambitions. However, the government has released little information about what the initiative will involve or when its activities will begin.

Iran has officially recognized climate change as an existential threat, but it prioritizes action on other areas. A former Iraqi minister said, “Iran may not feel it has the luxury to respond to environmental issues, because it has more pressing priorities, like security challenges stemming from U.S. threats to its regime.” Some Iranian officials blame the United States for its environmental woes, arguing that climate change is “propagated by imperialism” and that U.S. sanctions undermine its climate efforts. Although sanctions do not directly cause Iran’s climate issues, the regime resorted to ill-conceived coping mechanisms to sustain its economy and pursue self-sufficiency, which have placed additional strain on its natural resources. Recently, the Iranian regime has sought to bolster its diplomatic role by convening various regional conferences on environmental issues.

Iraq witnesses the effects of climate change and environmental degradation most directly of all Gulf states, from water shortages to debilitating dust storms. However, the government does not yet see climate change as an existential threat. A former minister said, “The Iraqi government’s strategic plan does not mention dust storms in particular and its budget will not allocate funds to tackle them in a serious way.” Iraq only ratified its nationally determined contribution to the Paris Agreement in December 2021, a full five years after the agreement went into effect, and has lost out on opportunities to access climate financing as a result.

Smaller Gulf states demonstrate differing levels of environmental focus. States like Bahrain and Kuwait are largely late to the game and wait for their neighbors to lead on climate action. These states are not just waiting for investment in environmental initiatives, but also for the spillover effect that comes when influential states in the region push other governments to tackle environmental issues.

Although some Gulf states’ unilateral environmental initiatives are ambitious, an analyst warned that “other Gulf states are unlikely to sign up for something that they did not help shape.” Regional collaboration on a new initiative is therefore necessary.

**A NEW CLIMATE FOR DIPLOMACY**

Conditions are currently ripe to push for environmental diplomacy. Regional environmental action is a growing priority for states in the Gulf, the tools to tackle some environmental issues are readily available, and recent normalization agreements create a new impetus for regional diplomacy. Environmental dialogue has proven productive in other contexts.

Environmental issues are gaining unprecedented attention among both the different populaces and governments in the Gulf. Record temperatures, water shortages, and increasingly frequent dust storms are clear evidence for the public of the changing climate. Across the region, states have emphasized environmental issues, including by forming new ministries, renaming national oil companies, setting national climate targets, and hosting environmental dialogues. COP28 in Dubai will bring unprecedented attention to environmental issues in the region, and this increased attention will prompt greater government prioritization of climate action.

Governments are also articulating the necessity of regional action. Saudi Arabia’s “Middle East Green Initiative” shows its ambitions to engage on climate issues outside...
of its own borders. COP28 in Dubai will feature a series of side discussions on regional climate issues. And Iran has a clear interest in regional collaboration on sand and dust storms because it is largely downstream of storms that form in neighboring states.41

Gulf states are also able to lead their own environmental initiatives. The necessary technology and tools to tackle climate and environmental issues are increasingly available, reducing regional states’ reliance on external actors to facilitate environmental action.42 For example, many technologies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and advance environmental sustainability, such as renewable energy systems and smart agricultural technologies, are readily available off-the-shelf and do not require technological partnerships with Great Powers.43 The region also has a wealth of homegrown climate expertise. Iranian scientists are global leaders, and graduates of a sustainable water management program at Oman’s state university are well-placed to use their expertise across the region.

It is the opportune moment to use environmental cooperation as a confidence-building measure. Because there has been relatively little environmental action to date, a Saudi climate expert said, “There are lots of low-hanging fruit.”44 Conservation efforts, greening initiatives, and efforts to reduce pollution are just a few of several promising areas for coordination and cooperation that exist right now. It will become harder to tackle environmental issues a decade from now, as the energy transition will have advanced considerably and the remaining environmental issues will require more fundamental shifts in behavior for Gulf states.45 Those two trends will make confidence building harder in the future. The recent normalization agreements also provide a new window of opportunity to test the potential for environmental diplomacy. These agreements demonstrate Gulf states’ desire to de-escalate and reveal that both Saudi Arabia and Iran have determined the cost of continued hostilities outweighs the benefit. These states have expressed their desire to find areas of cooperation. In a June 2023 tour of Arab Gulf capitals, the Iranian foreign minister expressed his interest in a regional dialogue.46

Environmental dialogue in other contexts has helped normalize contact between adversaries and has prepared the ground for negotiations on more challenging areas. In the 1990s, the Madrid process included multilateral tracks on the environment and water, which facilitated contact between Israelis, Palestinians, Jordanians, Syrians, and Egyptians for the first time and built the foundation for talks on more difficult issues. More consequentially, the Trifinio Plan promoted local economic development and sought to control environmental change in the border area between rival states in Central America. It was the foundation of increased coordination and cooperation between El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua and was “instrumental in developing the idea of a more closely integrated Central America,” which endures to this day.47 More recently, in the context of heightened tension levels between the United States and China, efforts to tackle climate change have been a key area of cooperation. Environmental dialogue is often successful because the issues are seen as less contentious and because talks are dominated by technical experts rather than politicians.

ENDURING OBSTACLES

Despite its promise, environmental collaboration must overcome several challenges. An ongoing lack of trust, diverging interests, and an institutional lacuna are the greatest obstacles to environmental collaboration in the region. The normalization agreements are still new, and Gulf states are distrustful of others’ motives. A Tehran-based political scientist said that since President Trump withdrew from the Iran deal in 2018, the Iranian regime fears that even negotiations on something as benign as air pollution could open them up to security risks.48 For these reasons, states in the region are hesitant to share any environmental data. The uncertain trajectory of relations with Iran also deters Arab Gulf states from making major investments. Saudi investors say they have little incentive to support projects in Iran or Iraq amidst political uncertainty out of a fear of investing in soon-to-be stranded assets.49
The lack of trust even frustrates collaboration between civil society members. An Iranian oceanographer said authorities refused to allow scientists to share seismic data with Omani counterparts due to national security concerns.\(^\text{50}\) Cultural tensions also undermine his ability to collaborate with his Arab neighbors. When banners at a Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment (ROPME) meeting in Tehran referred to the “Persian Gulf” (as opposed to the “Arabian Gulf”), some Arab participants became angry.\(^\text{51}\) They then refused to organize future workshops with his institute.

Some environmental issues are still seen in zero-sum terms, and diverging interests work against collaboration. For these reasons, water diplomacy remains a distant prospect. If a regional state agreed to share some of its water resources with its neighbors, it would bolster the neighbors’ standing at its own expense. Some interviewees also doubted that Saudi Arabia would engage in any environmental action that would strengthen the Iranian regime in the process, and they suggested that the costs of engaging with Iran may outweigh the benefits. The parties to the Abraham Accords need to balance their relationship with Israel when they consider collaborating with Iran, and the prospect of Saudi Arabia normalizing with Israel may also constrain its freedom of movement in environmental diplomacy with Iran.\(^\text{52}\)

Finally, an institutional lacuna means there is no obvious venue to host environmental diplomacy in the Gulf.\(^\text{53}\) ROPME is the only organization that includes all Arab Gulf states and Iran, but interviewees stated that it has been largely inactive in recent years and that Iranian participation is minimal.\(^\text{54}\) “It seems like more of an Arab organization than a regional one,” an Iranian scientist said.\(^\text{55}\) Beyond ROPME, it is not clear which areas of the countries’ different governments or even which UN agency has ownership of these issues.\(^\text{56}\) This institutional gap also undermines the establishment of common understanding on environmental issues. “The impact of climate change in the region has not been clearly established with data,” a Qatar-based climate activist said.\(^\text{57}\)

**MAKING ENVIRONMENTAL DIPLOMACY WORK**

Despite the challenges, environmental diplomacy holds unique promise in the region. Environmental dialogue would build routine contact between governments in the region and serve as a confidence-building mechanism. It could also lead to the establishment of economic ties further down the line. Even if dialogue does not yield significant environmental collaboration, it would serve other goals.

Minor or symbolic forms of collaboration could demonstrate the benefits of cooperation to populaces and governments alike. Therefore, Gulf states should pursue a step-by-step approach, beginning with small interventions and then expanding.\(^\text{58}\) An agreement for regional states to increase their efforts toward protecting biodiversity would be a promising first step. Biodiversity is a unifying issue that does not require significant intergovernmental activity and has clear storytelling value.\(^\text{59}\) For example, each Gulf state could nominate an endangered species and encourage its neighbors to support its efforts in protecting it. If successful, these efforts could then widen to maritime conservation, including efforts to curb the pollution of the Gulf and combat illegal fishing.\(^\text{60}\) Expanding Saudi Arabia’s tree planting initiative to Iraq as part of an effort to combat dust storms would also serve as a helpful early step, which would benefit Iran as well. Although its results would not manifest in the short term, it would be clearly visible to the public in the affected areas.\(^\text{61}\)

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For these first efforts, diplomats should focus on the process rather than the outcome.\(^\text{62}\) If these efforts can normalize diplomatic contact and discussions on less sensitive issues, they could buy some calm. It is critical that these efforts have local design and do not rely on external experts that impose their preconceived ideas on the process. Conveners should also stress terms that resonate with all actors in the region. For example, references to Islamic values of stewardship of the environment will be more effective than rhetoric about greenhouse gases and man-made climate change.
Although environmental diplomacy can only succeed at the government level, nongovernmental actors can support it in helpful ways. Collaborations between academics from different states working on environmental issues could create a common body of evidence on climate change’s effects in the region. Experts can also help influence their governments’ approach to environmental diplomacy by providing ideas at both the technical and political levels. In addition, they can sell the wide-reaching benefits of environmental action to government officials, including its ability to bolster food security, improve health, and bring economic benefits. For example, the credit rating agency Moody’s integrates environment, social, and governance (ESG) risks into its credit analysis for all sectors globally.

**THE U.S. ROLE**

The United States would benefit from regional environmental diplomacy in the Gulf. President Biden’s national security strategy focuses on supporting de-escalation and integration in the Middle East, but after years of failed nuclear negotiations, there appear few good opportunities for the United States to support efforts toward stabilizing the Gulf. That said, environmental cooperation is one of those opportunities. It is economical and low risk, so it is an effective way to test Gulf states’ desire to build trust. The results of efforts to build environmental cooperation would be instructive to U.S. policymakers, as it would either reinforce or undermine their understanding of Gulf states’ regional strategies in the new environment.

President Biden has also made climate action a priority. Supporting environmental initiatives in the Gulf would help one of the regions that will suffer the effects of climate change most acutely, but it would also support the United States’ political aims. As the United States is reconfiguring its role in the Middle East, a greater push for environmental cooperation would help remake its image in the region. Further, failing to engage more substantially on the environment would open up more space for China, which would undermine the ability of U.S. companies and analysts to help shape the transition to sustainability.

The United States can only play an indirect role in regional environmental diplomacy because of its lack of relations with Iran. However, it can signal its support for these efforts to its Arab Gulf allies and partners and ensure it does not become a spoiler. The United States should communicate with Arab Gulf states about types of environmental initiatives that could fall under humanitarian or agricultural sanctions waivers, and it should also explore a wider general license for environmental work. Involving Iran in regional environmental cooperation could be a way to incentivize good behavior by demonstrating there are rewards for cooperative behavior that bolsters regional stability. The United States can also support Gulf states by offering technical know-how, facilitating scientific exchanges, and sharing best practices. Such interventions could help turn competition for regional climate leadership into cooperation. U.S. experts could help develop Gulf-specific ESG metrics and standards. An Omani activist said that Gulf states currently use environmental standards from Europe or the United States, which do not make sense for the region due to the different impact of adaptation and mitigation. These efforts must be collaborative, as a Bahraini analyst warned that Gulf states are sensitive about initiatives that are imposed on them externally. These metrics could help enhance flows of foreign direct investment into the region from the United States and beyond.

The United States should also invest in civil society groups with an environmental focus in the region and bolster their ability to push for climate action. These groups include academics, journalists, nonprofit organizations, and entrepreneurs that work to advance environmental solutions. Independent civil society in the Gulf often struggles for funding, and many individuals and organizations would benefit from U.S. financial support. Some governments in the region disregard the expertise of local scientists and so collaborations with U.S. scientists could help elevate their status and bring greater awareness to their work. The United States should embed local experts in its laboratory capacity-building efforts. Iranian-American scientists in the United States can also serve as a helpful link with Iranian civil society, facilitating the exchange of environmental data. The U.S. government should also facilitate private-sector cooperation between U.S. and Gulf businesses on climate action, which is currently lacking.
Environmental diplomacy is not necessarily a precursor to political diplomacy, but its potential has not been tested. The combination of recent diplomatic normalization agreements between Gulf states and the run-up to the COP28 conference in Dubai in late 2023 provides ideal conditions to push for environmental collaboration now. If successful, such collaboration will build trust between Gulf states, which will bolster regional states’ ability to tackle more sensitive issues collaboratively, such as Iran’s support for proxies in the region and even its nuclear program. Such success is not guaranteed, but failing to attempt it is a wasted opportunity that serves the interests of neither Gulf states nor the United States.

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