

UAE Minister of Climate Change and Environment Mariam Al Mheiri: Middle East at the heart of new climate reality

By Madeline Hart

DAY 1

On September 28, the Atlantic Council's [Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative](#) and [TRENDS Research and Advisory](#) held a two-day conference on "[Sustainable Security of the Middle East: Climate Change, Challenges, and Prospects.](#)" The event was held from Wednesday, September 28, through Thursday, September 29, 2022. The conference reflected on the climate change challenges in the MENA region, examining the drivers behind emerging climate–security risks, including threats to food security, water security, health systems, national security, and resilience to climate-driven migration. Moreover, the conference assessed the opportunities and challenges for a clean energy transition and the role of COP 27 and COP 28 in the Middle East in facilitating a transition to a lower-carbon economy and highlighting the importance of geopolitical factors related to climate diplomacy.

[Ahead of COP27](#), this year's convening offered unique perspectives on resilience against climate risks, the transition to low-emission economies, and collaboration to solve pressing regional and national challenges. The conference also brought together leading experts from climate-related disciplines and representatives of governments and world institutions—including the United Nations, World Bank, and the World Health Organization—to develop new and cross-sectoral perspectives to drive meaningful policy recommendations for policymakers in the Middle East and West.

*Highlights From Opening Remarks — **Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, Minister of Tolerance and Coexistence, United Arab Emirates***

- Sheikh Nahyan mentioned that as a region that has had to deal with water challenges and extreme temperatures for centuries, global warming has the potential to produce very serious consequences relatively quickly in the Middle East. Adding the need to support a growing population makes the urgency to address these challenges even greater.
- Sheikh Nahyan also mentioned how [climate] problems are exacerbated in the Middle East by the lack of awareness among the public about the magnitude of the problem and the absence of original scientific research relevant to our region.
- Sheikh Nahyan discussed that when it comes to the natural environment, each one of us must individually act responsibly. Likewise, governments must commit to sustainability at every turn.

- Sheikh Nahyan also pointed out that large private sector stakeholders must be persuaded to commit to sustainability.
- Sheikh Nahyan suggested that a coordinated effort in all countries of the region is required and that goals must be to promote and coordinate regional planning and programs for protecting and restoring the Middle East Ecosystem.

*Highlights From the First Keynote Speech – **David Livingston, Senior Advisor to US Presidential Envoy for Climate Change John Kerry, US Department of State***

- Livingston discussed the MENA region’s vulnerability to drought, flood, and food security and his concerns about the earth’s warming in the region twice as fast as the rest of the world.
- Livingston added that several countries have established mid-century net zero targets, and Saudi Arabia launched its vision for regional sustainable development strategies.
- Livingston recommended using clean energy abundance, not detracting from usage, and focusing on regional integration reforms.
- He also recommended focusing on regional integration, referencing the Negev Forum.
- Livingston recommended aiding Project Prosperity with the UAE, Jordan, and Israel via the Negev forum.

National Security, Climate Change, and the Middle East: Current Challenges and Future Prospects

- **Aisha Al Sarihi, Research Fellow, National University of Singapore**, argued that the Arab Spring is linked to climate change; for example, the protests in Tunisia in 2011 were impacted by drought that affected the increase in food prices and led to conflict. Al Sarihi recommended that governments build on existing regional governance structures to integrate climate change into national security and development strategies and better integrate water management.
- **Mazen Malkawi, Regional Advisor, World Health Organization**, argued that the Middle East is the “land of the emergencies”, observing that countries with preexisting crises are less likely to combat climate change effectively. He also recommended using financial and technical resources to emphasize climate-focused programming and increase advocacy to convince more countries to address climate change.
- **Carol Chouchani Cherfane, Director, Arab Center for Climate Change Policies, and Cluster Leader, UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia**, emphasized that there is not enough collaboration between countries in the MENA region, and that vulnerability is a significant

point of importance—for example, a flash flood in the UAE has much smaller impacts than a flash flood in Gaza, due to differences in capacity and resilience. Cherfane recommended redirecting funds and attention to adaptation rather than mitigation and increasing resources available to vulnerable countries.

- **Paul Jerome Sullivan, Lecturer, John Hopkins University**, emphasized the need for desalination reliant on nuclear power, as well as the need to generate less overall waste. He also said that existing initiatives to combat climate change are not enough, and we should work on developing circular carbon economies, increasing energy efficiency at all levels, and removing carbon. Sullivan also mentioned that there should be some way to regulate state action by potentially creating penalties for inaction.

Impacts of Resource Scarcity and Population Growth in the Middle East

- **Eckart Woertz, Director of the Institute for Middle East Studies, German Institute for Global and Area Studies**, discussed current issues with food in the MENA region. He mentioned that on the demand side, a significant problem is food waste, whereas, on the supply side, the two main issues are the considerable food import dependence in the MENA region, as well as the fact that most of the money GCC countries spend is on high-quality food (meat, dairy, etc.). Woertz recommended that GCC countries should have an honest conversation about how their import dependence can be managed, and countries should conduct research on diets and micro-nutrition.
- **Harry Verhoeven, Senior Research Scholar, Columbia University**, discussed that water consumption is not sustainable in most countries and predicted that the wars of the 21st century would be about water rather than oil. He also mentioned that there is little evidence that resource scarcity is driving conflict, and that, in fact, these conflicts are driven by the deep bureaucratically created inequities of how land and resources are shared.
- **Hanan Bakr Sakr, Finance Resilience Lead, UN Climate Change High-Level Champions Team**, discussed how the war in Ukraine disrupted supply chains, leading to economic stress, emphasizing that this will most impact vulnerable groups. Sakr recommended adaptation and resilience investments to prepare for these realities and the diversification of the importation of all resources in MENA.
- **Svetlana Emeades, Lead Agriculture Economist, World Bank Group**, explained how food security is of great importance to the World Bank, primarily due to food inflation, as current prices remain around 33 percent higher than in 2019. Svetlana recommended supporting food provisions

and building resilience in the food system, which means governments must create annual sustainability programs.

Highlights from the Second Keynote Speech – H.E. Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, Minister of Industry and Advanced Technology and Special Envoy for Climate, UAE

- Al Jaber explained that the region has been suffering from desertification, risks of extreme heat, and water scarcity.
- Al Jaber discussed the UAE's plans, emphasizing that the UAE is investing in promoting clean energy and was the first country to launch a plan to reach carbon net zero.
- Al Jaber also recommended that investments in producing hydrocarbons should be maintained.

Energy Industries, Infrastructure, and Politics in the Middle East: Opportunities and Challenges for a Clean Energy Transition

- **Zoheir Hamidi, Regional Programme Officer for the Middle East and North Africa, International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA)**, discussed the International Renewable Energy Agency's partnership with European investment banks and the UN to help develop reports on general energy technology manufacturing. Hamidi recommended that the MENA region enhance the role of the private sector and increase investments. He also suggested that MENA countries should streamline regulations to increase their market size in order to compete with larger markets such as China. Moreover, MENA countries should integrate their renewable energy targets within a more comprehensive regional perspective to develop a renewable energy strategy.
- Bora Guray, Director, Istanbul International Center for Energy and Climate, Sabanci University, recommended that governments direct the use of renewables by expanding the use of solar energy as a heat source and transferring it to less intensive-energy industrial sectors. Guray also stressed that international cooperation should play a role in transforming the industrial energy-intensive industry into a more sustainable future.
- **Olga Khakova, Deputy Director, European Energy Security, Global Energy Center, Atlantic Council**, highlighted how the energy crisis is a global problem. Khakova recommended expanding hydrogen production through natural gas investments and emphasized that cooperation and partnership are vital to the Middle East region, particularly while climate is reshaping the landscape.
- **Syed Adeel Abbas, Regional Coordinator, Climate Change, The World Bank**, discussed how climate change is a threat multiplier. He stressed the importance of energy security, especially given that the region is far behind

in terms of energy transactions and production. Abbas recommended working on a green hydrogen approach. He also recommended a regional development plan for upstream engagement, as well as enhancing private partnerships and creating structural reforms that promote the private sector.

- **Tareq Emtairah, Director, Dept. of Energy, UN Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)**, explained that certain countries have had more transformational change in the energy transition, such as Jordan, Egypt, and several Gulf states, because they tend to have more private sector engagement. Emtairah recommended enhancing public transportation in Jordan and Tunisia, preparing infrastructure for decarbonization, enhancing regional cooperation, and highlighting corruption issues.

DAY 2

Highlights from the Third Keynote Speech – H. E. Mariam bint Mohammed Almheiri, Minister of Climate Change and the Environment, UAE

- Almheiri discussed the urgency of preparing for a new climate reality and emphasized that climate change is already triggering worsening situations of displacement, resource competition, socioeconomic stress, and food and water insecurity.
- She stressed the importance of multilateralism and building regional synergies to align responses to climate change.
- Almheiri highlighted the UAE's commitment to fighting climate change and investing in clean energy ventures.
- "At the heart of the new [climate] reality is the Middle East that is amongst the world's regions most vulnerable to climate change..." "Climate change challenges are intertwined and together are already triggering worsening situations of displacement, resource competition, socio-economic stress and food and water and energy insecurity that cast a shadow on national security in the region and pain a bleak future for us..."
- "We believe in multilateralism as a powerful vehicle for creating the sustainable future we want our children to live in..."
- "We are keen on building regional synergies to align our response to climate change..."

Between COP27 and COP28: Diplomatic Efforts of Middle Eastern Countries in Addressing Climate Change

- **Professor Asit K. Biswas, Distinguished Visiting Professor, University of Glasgow**, discussed how geopolitics has changed dramatically since COP26, and that the war in Ukraine has substantially changed the geopolitical situation, causing an energy crisis and high inflation. Biswas also pointed to the breakdown of climate diplomacy between the world's

greatest two carbon emitters, China and the US. He emphasized that although many Middle Eastern countries have agreed to become carbon neutral by 2050 or 2060, they do not have a clear strategy for doing so and recommended that COP27 and COP28 address how to help the most vulnerable countries finance climate change initiatives.

- **Nuran Atef, *Regional Lead for the Middle East and North Africa, UN Environment Programme Finance Initiative***, discussed how the UNEPFI (United Nations Environmental Programme Finance Initiative) is promoting sustainable finance around the world. Atef recommended that governments work to close the gap between public and private finance by supporting the engagement of the private sector.
- **Osama El Gohary, *Assistant to the Prime Minister, Arab Republic of Egypt***, said that the main threat of climate change is its impact on food resources. Gohary emphasized that Egypt in particular faces many risks, such as increasing desertification and drought, as well as the threat that the rise of the Mediterranean Sea will drown inhabited areas. As the host country of COP27, Gohary said, “Egypt is determined to do its part” to “find a diplomatic resolution to geopolitical conflicts.”
- **Sheikha Shamma bint Sultan bin Khalifa Al Nahyan, *Executive Director, UAE Independent Climate Change Accelerators***, discussed the UAE’s independent climate change accelerator, which is convening public and private sectors to provide policy recommendations to the government. She recommended that governments incentivize the private sector and hold them accountable for their commitments.

Multilateral Green Security Initiatives: The Start of a New Green Era Towards Collective Environmental Security in the Middle East

- **Noura Mansouri, *Research Fellow, King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Center, Research Affiliate, MIT***, emphasized that access to affordable energy is critical for health, education, and livelihoods. Mansouri mentioned that there is a food security and water security crisis in the Arab world. She recommended using a circular carbon economy approach.
- **Alya Al Awadhi, *Economics Researcher, TRENDS Research and Advisory***, discussed the importance of long-term, economically sustainable environmental security initiatives. Al Awadhi recommended promoting consumer agency to enhance universal commitment, investing in research and development to encourage innovation, incentivizing private sector investment to make the developing region a more attractive market, and participating in multilateral initiatives that pool risks and resources.

- **Hamad Al Kaabi, Editor in Chief, Al Ittihad Newspaper**, emphasized the importance of the media, stating that “without media, science would not have a voice.” Al Kaabi recommended that the media attract attention to the climate crisis and tailor the message depending on their target audience.

Closing Remarks and Recommendation

- **William Wechsler, Senior Director, Rafik Hariri Center and Middle East Programs, Atlantic Council**, delivered closing remarks. He thanked all the speakers, mentioning that TRENDS and the UAE are some of the Atlantic Council’s most far-sighted partners, and emphasized that few regions in the world will be hit as hard by climate change as the Middle East.
- **Sumaya Al Hadhrami, Deputy Chief Global Officer, TRENDS Research & Advisory**, gave the closing recommendations for the conference. She recommended focusing on implementing negotiated multilateral climate outcomes by aligning national agendas through legislation, regulation, and mobilizing finance.
- Al Hadhrami also recommended incentivizing major investments in renewable energy and infrastructure, sustainable food systems, natural carbon sinks, and sustainable business innovations. She recommended using private sector technology and innovation to achieve larger-scale impacts.
- She also stressed the importance of enhancing the roles of local banks and investing in capacity building, as well as strengthening individual and societal engagement and awareness of climate-related issues to emphasize behavioral changes, such as reducing water usage per capita.

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