A MENA regional approach to address the implications of climate change



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The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a climate hotspot. Already the most water-stressed region worldwide, it is warming and drying up at twice the average pace, making some parts of it likely unliveable by mid-century.[1]Climate change could also increase instability in the region, acting as a 'threat multiplier' and exacerbating existing problems. While MENA countries differ in their ability to adapt to climate effects and related security risks, ultimately these transnational impacts reach across borders, undermining regional and global resilience. To mitigate climate change and adapt to its implications,[2] MENA countries will need to address their core problems of poor governance, wide socio-economic and ethnic gaps, and population growth, to name a few. However, even if individual countries successfully make progress in silos, they will suffer from a 'climate kickback' from the negative transboundary impacts of climate change. This creates a clear impetus for regional cooperation.

The timing for such cooperation is now opportune, for several reasons. First, climate change initiatives are springing up frequently across the MENA region, illustrating that the topic is at least declaratively high on national agendas. Second, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) respectively are hosting the next two UN climate summits in November 2022 and 2023, putting a spotlight on the region. Further, the flurry of diplomatic activity in 2021–22 (namely, the Abraham Accords and the related Negev Summit; Turkey amending ties with Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and possibly with Syria; Qatar repairing the rift with other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC); Iran and Saudi Arabia engaging in talks; and US President Joe Biden's visit to the region in July 2022), indicates that MENA countries see more merit in diplomacy than in conflict, creating space for interest-based collaboration. And because of the cross-border nature of climate effects and their multiplied associated risks – political instability and mass migration, for example – there is a built-in incentive for regional cooperation. Finally, environmental issues are perceived as softer grounds for cooperation that can help to build trust and test the water for dialogue, coordination and even de-escalation in areas of 'hard' security.

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Shira Efron
Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation Director of Policy Research, Israel Policy Forum; Senior Fellow, **Institute for National Security Studies**

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