



# Environmental Diplomacy: The UAE and Israel before and after October 7

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Environmental cooperation was a key component highlighted in the Abraham Accords between Israel and the UAE in 2020. However, it has since received limited attention compared to other aspects of their bilateral relations. In this article, we analyze how environmental diplomacy between the two countries has evolved using interviews, media reports, and participant observations at conferences such as COP28. We contrast this cooperation before and after the terror attacks of October 7 and the subsequent Hamas-Israel war.

Our analysis highlights the potential for environmental collaboration before October 7, not only for its symbolic, economic, and sustainability benefits for both countries but also for regional integration. We then contrast this with the post-October 7 period, showing how environmental diplomacy was used as a platform for covert diplomatic interactions and continued, though limited, collaboration.

Furthermore, we examine the factors that influence and may continue to influence the potential of environmental diplomacy, including accusations of “ecocide” and “econormalization” since the start of the war. Finally, we discuss how environmental cooperation between Israel, the UAE, the Palestinians, and other Arab states could play a crucial role in post-war recovery and regional stability. We apply the framework of environmental peacebuilding to analyze the impact of such collaboration on bilateral relations and the broader region.

*Keywords:* Environmental diplomacy, Abraham Accords, Environmental Peacebuilding, COP28, UAE-Israel relations, Green-tech, Hamas-Israel war, climate-resilient reconstruction, day after

## Introduction

The formalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) through the Abraham Accords in September 2020 is widely regarded as a transformative moment in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, reshaping long-standing dynamics between

Israel and the Arab world. The UAE and Israel entered into these Accords for several strategic reasons, most prominently to build a stronger regional security framework against shared perceived threats, particularly from Iran and its regional proxies (Valik et al., 2023). Beyond

security, the UAE saw an opportunity to reinforce its ties with the United States, especially at a time when American influence in the region appeared to be in flux. By aligning more closely with Israel, the UAE secured its position as a key ally of Washington, while also benefiting from the diplomatic and security advantages of this partnership. Economically, the Accords opened new avenues for collaboration, allowing the UAE to tap into Israel's advanced technology and innovation sectors—crucial for the UAE's ambitious plans to diversify its economy away from dependence on oil (Valik et al., 2023).

In recent years, much attention has been given to the political, economic, and security implications of the Accords. However, an often-overlooked aspect is the environmental diplomacy between the two nations. Collaboration on environmental and climate initiatives was explicitly mentioned as a goal in the Abraham Accords. We argue that this strategic emphasis on joint environmental projects has played a crucial role in the normalization process and in advancing several shared interests of both countries.

This article explores the effects of environmental cooperation on the relations between the two countries before and after October 7, using expert interviews and participant observations from several conferences and events, including COP28 in Dubai. Through interviews, media analysis, and press releases, we examine the tone and language surrounding these collaborations. Since the Accords were signed, numerous environmental projects and agreements have been established, ranging from high-level MOUs between officials to civil society initiatives involving academics and think tanks, as well as many private-sector climate collaborations between Israeli green-tech startups and Emirati companies. By comparing the environmental collaboration between the two countries before and after October 7, and analyzing the reactions of the international and regional communities, we can draw important conclusions about

the power and potential of environmental cooperation between Israel and the UAE and the wider region.

### *Climate Context*

To understand the context of these environmental agreements, it is important to note that, like many countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Israel and the UAE grapple with pressing environmental issues such as water scarcity, desertification, extreme weather events, rising temperatures and biodiversity loss. Despite deploying technological solutions like desalination, wastewater treatment, challenges persist due to the arid climate, climate change, and factors like population growth and regional water allocation dynamics (Paparella & Burt, 2023; Yosef et al., 2019). Israel sustains its agricultural sector through advanced farming techniques and robust water management, while the UAE invests in food technology and supply chain diversification (Singh, 2022; Talabani, 2024). Both nations face biodiversity risks from rapid urbanization and economic expansion, with the UAE additionally contending with ecological impacts from oil production and desalination (Sale et al., 2010).

The climate targets of Israel and the UAE, outlined in their respective reports to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), reveal discrepancies between aspirations and current trajectories. Israel's renewable energy ambitions lag, while the UAE aims for "Net Zero by 2050" and has invested substantially in clean energy projects yet continues to extract large amounts of fossil fuels (Climate Action Tracker, 2023). Both nations emphasize technological solutions to mitigate and adapt to these challenges.

### *Interests Behind Environmental and Climate Projects*

Both the UAE and Israel are home to successful environmental companies and have set ambitious climate targets, making clean and

green projects a central component of their national agendas. These initiatives are driven by a complex mix of economic, technological, and geopolitical motivations, and are critical to the economic diversification strategies of both countries. The global green tech and sustainability market—encompassing water technology, agricultural technology, and clean energy (solar, wind, and green hydrogen)—is projected to grow significantly, from \$19.83 billion in 2024 to \$83.59 billion by 2032 (Fortune Business Insights, 2024). This growth offers substantial opportunities for both nations to position themselves as leaders in the sector.

### ***Israel's Strategic Focus on Green Technology***

Israel has been at the forefront of environmental innovation, particularly in water management and agricultural technology (AgriTech). These investments are part of Israel's broader strategy to leverage advanced technologies for economic growth. Israel is recognized for its contributions to climate tech, hosting nearly 1,200 companies focused on energy storage, clean energy systems, and sustainable materials (CTech, 2021; Leichman, 2017).

In agriculture, Israeli innovations in precision farming, irrigation, and cultivated meat have significantly enhanced food production efficiency (Sune, 2023). Israeli technology in water management, including drip irrigation and desalination, is particularly noteworthy (Sune, 2023). The country's renewable energy sector is also rapidly advancing, with a strong emphasis on solar energy and energy storage technologies. This progress is fueled by substantial government and private investments (Eitan, 2021). However, Israel's focus on technological innovation sometimes overshadows the need for systemic environmental reforms, raising concerns about the broader ecological implications of its high-tech solutions.

This national commitment to climate action also enhances Israel's diplomatic relations,

particularly with Europe and North America, where climate policies are a major focus. By participating in global initiatives like the Paris Agreement, Israel bolsters its image as a forward-thinking nation while strengthening alliances with key international partners (Sommer & Fassbender, 2024).

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### ***UAE's Transition from Oil Dependency***

Historically reliant on fossil fuel revenues, the UAE has increasingly integrated climate policies into its economic planning. Recognizing the volatility of oil markets and the finite nature of fossil fuels, the UAE has prioritized economic diversification through investment in renewable energy and climate technology. These investments aim to reduce the country's reliance on hydrocarbons and position it as a global leader in solar and clean energy technologies (Zumbraegel, 2022).

Since 2009, the UAE has invested over \$700 million in renewable energy projects in developing countries and has hosted and supported the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) to further global sustainability efforts. The UAE's diversification strategy reduces its vulnerability to global oil market fluctuations and its dependence on OPEC, thereby enhancing national energy security (Chadha, 2015; Kader & Zaman, 2018). The Emirati leadership has articulated a long-term vision that places sustainability at the core of the nation's development goals. Initiatives like the UAE Energy Strategy 2050 and green "mega-projects" such as Masdar City reflect this commitment. By championing renewable energy, the UAE seeks to enhance its global stance as a forward-thinking and responsible nation, contributing to global sustainability. This is part of a broader strategy to assert soft

power and influence international discourse on climate and energy issues (Zumbraegel, 2022).

As the first Gulf country to sign the Paris Agreement, the UAE has committed to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions, with investments in renewable energy serving as a crucial component of meeting these international obligations.

### **Types of Cooperation**

The UAE and Israel had already engaged in a form of environmental cooperation even before formalizing their diplomatic relations in the form of the Abraham Accords. Notably, Israel had an official representative in the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), headquartered in Abu Dhabi, UAE, well before the Accords (Times of Israel, 2015). This cooperation was a significant early indicator of both nations' willingness to collaborate with each other for mutual benefits in the field of renewable energy. The renewable energy context provided the framework for a neutral, low-risk platform for Israel and the UAE to interact diplomatically, setting a precedent for the more direct collaborations that followed. From a diplomatic perspective, Israel's involvement in IRENA could be seen as a first official bridge in the otherwise estranged relations between the two countries. This cooperation likely contributed to the trust-building necessary for the eventual Abraham Accords, demonstrating how environmental and energy concerns can transcend political barriers.

This article focuses on the evolution of climate and environmental cooperation between Israel and the UAE, dividing it into three distinct periods:

#### **2020-2022: Post-Accords Cooperation**

After the Abraham Accords were signed in 2020, Israel entered a new phase of regional cooperation with the UAE. During this time, both nations prioritized environmental and climate topics, seeing these as key areas for

collaboration. The Accords opened the door for joint ventures in renewable energy, water management, and agricultural technology, aligning with Israel's broader strategy to enhance its technological exports and the UAE's goal of economic diversification. However, the emphasis on climate cooperation was more pronounced during the period when Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid succeeded Netanyahu, particularly from 2021 to 2022. Their new coalition government took a more moderate approach, placing greater emphasis on regional cooperation, including on climate issues, which led to significant advances in bilateral and especially multilateral environmental projects.

#### **2022-2023: Netanyahu's Return and Policy Shifts**

Benjamin Netanyahu's return to power in late 2022 resulted in a noticeable shift in national priorities. The importance of climate and environmental issues on the national agenda declined. The hardline stance of Netanyahu's right-wing coalition regarding settlement policies and the pursuit of annexation plans of parts of the West Bank, led to a cooling of some regional cooperative efforts, such as the Negev Forum and the water-energy exchange deal (which will be discussed later). The change in focus, particularly in multilateral settings, sparked regional criticism, most notably from Jordan and, to a lesser extent, the UAE. The heightened escalations overshadowed the earlier momentum in environmental cooperation, slowing down both bilateral projects and broader multilateral environmental initiatives.

#### **Post-October 7, 2023: Israel's War against Hamas and Regional Tensions**

The events of October 7, 2023, and the Israel-Hamas war, marked a significant shift. The war, coupled with increasing involvement in regional conflicts against Iran's proxies, further strained Israel's relations with its Arab partners, including the UAE. In this context, the nature

of environmental cooperation between Israel and the UAE took on a different character. While some bilateral projects continued, the broader regional cooperation suffered, as the UAE, along with other Arab nations, expressed growing concern over Israel's military actions.

### ***Overview of Environmental Collaboration: 2020 to October 7, 2023***

Following the Abraham Accords in 2020, Israel and the UAE engaged in significant environmental collaborations, with numerous Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) signed on climate-related topics. These agreements spanned areas like sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, and space research for environmental projects. For example, in March 2022, UAE Minister Mariam Almheiri and former Israeli Agriculture Minister Oded Forer signed an MOU focused on sustainable agriculture and food security (CFTIC, 2022). This agreement, which received considerable publicity, marked an important step in the growing environmental cooperation between the two nations.

### ***Multilateral Environmental Projects***

One of the most prominent initiatives during this period was the trilateral agreement between Israel, Jordan, and the UAE, known as the water-for-energy deal or "Prosperity Blue and Prosperity Green." This agreement, hailed as a model of regional cooperation, stipulates that Israel would purchase solar energy from a Jordanian power plant constructed by Masdar Power, the UAE's leading state-owned renewable energy company. In exchange, Jordan would acquire desalinated water from an Israeli facility on the Mediterranean coast. This deal could not only ensure water and energy security for Israel and Jordan but also bring significant economic benefits to all three nations involved.

The concept behind this agreement was initially proposed in a 2017 study by the environmental peace organization "EcoPeace Middle East." However, it was only after the UAE's involvement, facilitated by the Abraham Accords,

that the project gained momentum. Before the Accords, discussions about exchanging water for energy involving Israel had stalled due to low levels of trust and poor relations between the parties. The UAE's participation was pivotal, acting as a "confidence-building measure" that facilitated the progress of the deal. An expert closely involved in the agreement noted, "Jordan and Israel really trust the Emirati involvement—Israel because of geopolitical and security interests that align, and Jordan due to its economic ties with the UAE. Masdar is therefore seen as a fair broker, adding an additional layer of trust."

This deal was expected to be profitable for all parties involved: Israel would benefit from producing cost-effective desalinated water, while Jordan would provide the ideal conditions for solar energy production. Furthermore, the agreement could allow Masdar Power to diversify its tender portfolio, enhancing its prospects for securing similar contracts in the future. Engaging in complex projects like this one, which integrates desalination with solar energy production, may open doors for Masdar in other regions with similar climates, such as Lebanon and Syria, potentially expanding their influence and market reach (Sommer and Fassbender, 2024).

This agreement has been widely celebrated—particularly in the EU and the US, as well as in the MENA region—as a model of successful regional rapprochement and a step towards a more diplomatic and less confrontational Middle East. Notably, US Special Envoy for Climate John Kerry and Secretary of State Antony Blinken were part of the inauguration ceremony for the MOU and visited Israel and the UAE several times to support this initiative. However, the deal has faced criticism for excluding Palestinian interests, as political opposition to normalizing relations with Israel remains strong.

The implementation of the water-for-energy deal, initially expected to be reinforced at COP28 in the UAE in 2023, has been put on hold by the King of Jordan due to the ongoing Hamas-



Israel conflict. Despite this delay, the agreement has not been canceled. Jordan has requested that Israel consider extending the agreement for another year, with the Israeli government reportedly preparing to conduct consultations to determine whether the deal, which is due to expire at the end of May 2024, will be extended. As of now, no official response has been issued by the Israeli government regarding this request.

Water shortages have long been a severe issue for Jordan, contributing to significant public discontent directed at the royal family and government. As such, Jordan finds itself in a challenging position, needing to balance public opposition to the deal with Israel—especially in light of the ongoing Hamas-Israel conflict—with the urgent need for water resources. Postponing the implementation of the agreement might provide Jordan with the necessary time for the conflict to de-escalate, allowing for a more stable environment in which the deal could be reconsidered.

Another significant multilateral project was the Negev Forum. The Forum was initiated in March 2022, under the coalition government of then Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. Senior officials from Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Morocco, the UAE, and the United States convened to explore opportunities for advancing regional integration, cooperation, and development. One of the forum's working groups focused on food security. However, like the water-for-energy deal, the Negev Forum has faced criticism for excluding the interests of crucial stakeholders such as the Palestinians and, in the case of the Negev Forum, also the Jordanians.

The Negev Forum has been at a standstill since mid-2023. Morocco, which was set to host the next meeting, canceled it following a decision by the Israeli cabinet in June 2023 to change the authorization process for the construction of illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank. This decision was made under the new far-right coalition government led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu,

who had returned to office in December 2022 after succeeding Yair Lapid. (Lazaroff, 2023)

### *I2U2 Group and the IMEC*

The I2U2 Group, a multilateral agreement involving India, Israel, the UAE, and the United States, represents another key initiative. Formed during a meeting of the foreign ministers of these four countries in October 2021 under the coalition government led by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, the group's first joint statement was released on July 14, 2022, when Yair Lapid had just taken over as Prime Minister. This statement outlined their cooperation on investments and initiatives in critical areas such as water, energy, transportation, space, health, and food security.

Often referred to as the "West Asian Quad," the I2U2 Group aims to identify and support projects that can attract joint investments in these essential sectors. The group's objectives include modernizing infrastructure, promoting low-carbon development, and improving public health by leveraging private sector capital and expertise. The first Leaders' Summit of I2U2, held virtually in July 2022, included Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, then Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid, UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and US President Joe Biden (Times of India, 2022).

The ongoing Hamas-Israel conflict poses challenges to the I2U2 Group but does not threaten its existence. The US-Israel bloc within the I2U2 appears to be operating more on a bilateral level, with the UAE maintaining both distance and balance. Meanwhile, India is also navigating a complex situation, balancing its foreign policy objectives with domestic political considerations (Mishra, 2024).

Building on the foundation laid by the I2U2 Group, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) seeks to pursue a far more ambitious set of objectives. IMEC is a grand US-led connectivity project designed to link India to Europe via the Gulf, focusing on communication,

transport, and infrastructure. This initiative also emphasizes two critical global challenges—food security and clean energy—addressing these issues across local, trans-regional, and long-term dimensions. The initial memorandum of understanding for IMEC, signed in September 2023 by the United States, the European Union, France, Germany, Italy, India, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, envisions two sections: an eastern maritime link between India and the Gulf, and a northern section connecting the Arabian Peninsula to Europe. These sections would be connected by a new railway network linking the Gulf with the Mediterranean through Jordan and Israel. Beyond transport infrastructure, undersea cables are planned to facilitate data exchange, while long-distance hydrogen pipelines would support the participants' climate and decarbonization goals (Suri & Sethi, 2023).

IMEC continues to garner significant interest, even amidst the ongoing Hamas-Israel war. However, there are increasing concerns at the political level regarding the feasibility of routing the corridor through Israel and Jordan in the face of the current escalation. The rising risks may deter potential investors, and there have been discussions at the EU level about possibly altering the route. Meanwhile, other organizations are strategizing to incorporate this initiative into broader peacebuilding efforts, including environmental peacebuilding that also involves Palestinian stakeholders, which will be discussed further in this analysis (Mishra, 2024).

Throughout the period from 2020 to October 2023, the establishment of multilateral environmental forums and projects involving Israel, the UAE, and other regional partners was notably enabled during the more moderate government periods in Israel. Initiatives like the Negev Forum and the I2U2 Group thrived under coalition governments led by figures such as Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, who prioritized regional cooperation and recognized the strategic importance of environmental

collaboration. These governments, in conjunction with the UAE's role as a trust-building partner, laid the groundwork for significant agreements like the water-for-energy deal, which involved not just bilateral but trilateral cooperation with Jordan, enhancing regional integration.

However, the return of Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing government in late 2022, coupled with escalating conflicts, particularly the ongoing war with Hamas, has strained these initiatives.

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**Ecoppia, an Israeli company that is a leader in robotic cleaning solutions for solar panels and has a manufacturing base in India, signed a landmark deal in 2021 with the UAE for a solar energy project**

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### *Private Sector Collaborations*

On the private sector level, several initiatives have been developed to enhance environmental cooperation between Israel and the UAE. For instance, Ecoppia, an Israeli company that is a leader in robotic cleaning solutions for solar panels and has a manufacturing base in India, signed a landmark deal in 2021 with the UAE for a solar energy project (GN Focus, 2021). A senior economist at the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy, highlighted the UAE's long-standing and fruitful relations with India and noted how the Abraham Accords have opened up opportunities to include Israel in such initiatives.

Bilateral projects have also been launched, such as the collaboration between EDF Israel, a renewable energy company, and Masdar, the state-owned Emirati renewable energy company. (Masdar, 2021) Experts have noted that these collaborations are not only commercially beneficial but also set precedents for both countries to explore market conditions in each other's territories.

Other smaller commercial cooperations included the application of Israeli startup Watergen in the UAE, which produces water

from air and was first implemented throughout the Emirates (Watergen, 2021). Another initiative was a collaboration between Israel's Vertical Field, a startup that has developed a vertical farming system, with the Emirati company Emirates Smart Solutions & Technologies. They piloted vertical farms in the Emirate of Umm Al Quwain ahead of a wider rollout in the UAE (Times of Israel Staff, 2021a).

### ***Enhancing Collaboration Through Conferences and Events***

Conferences, webinars, and events have also been pivotal in connecting businesspeople, students, academics, and climate activists from both countries. Events such as the peace and environment conference and the UAE Business Council meetings facilitated these connections. The Expo 2020 in Dubai featured a designated area for sustainability, where several events were planned between Israel and the UAE, most notably the MOU between Jordan, Israel (Sommer and Fassbender, 2024).

### ***Press and Media Analysis***

An analysis of articles released by the UAE's state-owned news agency, WAM, reveals the underlying motives and purposes of environmental projects aimed at fostering relations between Israel and the UAE. These articles primarily focus on governmental exchanges and agreements on environmental collaboration. For example, an article highlighted the symbolic gesture of the UAE and Israel's ambassadors planting a peace tree for Earth Day, emphasizing their joint commitment to environmental sustainability (WAM, 2021a). The narrative often revolves around the mutual benefits of their leadership roles in green technology and their collaborative efforts to achieve climate targets by reducing emissions. As one article states, "Israel has one of the best startup ecosystems in the world, and with the AgTech sector dominated by innovation, the UAE is particularly keen to

explore collaboration in this area. Similarly, we have much we can offer by way of reciprocation" (WAM, 2021a).

Other news sources also discuss specific environmental collaborations, such as the partnership between Watergen and Baynunah, which will work closely with the Moshe Mirilashvili Institute for Applied Water Studies at Tel Aviv University (Watergen, 2021). Additionally, strategic alliances have been formed between Israeli and Emirati renewable energy companies (Masdar, 2021). Several articles explore opportunities for green tech companies in both countries to collaborate and their potential impact on the environment and economy of Israel and the UAE (al Suwaidi & Fredman, 2021; Schaefer, 2023; Shulman, 2021; Valik et al., 2023; Goren et al., 2023).

State press releases consistently emphasize themes of combating climate change together, being innovative leaders, and promoting peace and stability in the region. For instance, press releases from October 5 and 6, 2023 highlighted Israel's role in the I2U2 initiative alongside India and the U.S., aimed at enhancing global food security by investing in a food corridor in India to stabilize food prices. Another article emphasized that the Abu Dhabi International Progressive Energy Congress recognized the UAE and Israel among other countries for their contributions to the global energy industry's efforts in decarbonization and innovation. (WAM 2023a; WAM 2023b) This demonstrates that, up until early October 2023, the UAE continued to promote Israel as a climate co-leader and highlighted their joint multilateral initiatives.

All these collaborations and the narrative through which the media framed them until October 7, showcased how environmental cooperation was not just about shared initiatives but was a strategic layer in broader diplomatic and economic frameworks, shaping the relationships between Israel, the UAE, and the wider region.



### ***Excursus: Israel's Role in the UAE-Saudi Rivalry Over Climate Leadership and Sustainability***

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the UAE for regional leadership has expanded into the realm of environmental sustainability. Both nations are vying to position themselves as leaders in this field, using prominent initiatives and global partnerships to boost their influence. For example, the UAE hosted a climate dialogue forum featuring John Kerry and other Arab dignitaries, coinciding with Saudi Arabia's launch of the "Saudi Green Initiative." The parallel timing of these events illustrates the competitive efforts of both countries to lead the region's climate agenda (Zumbraegel, 2022).

Experts suggest that this rivalry is a key reason the UAE seeks collaboration with Israel, particularly in the environmental sphere. Israel's recognized expertise in green technology makes it a valuable partner for the UAE, enhancing its competitive edge vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia. By working with Israel, the UAE further develops its image as an innovative leader in sustainability, gaining access to new markets and support from Western allies (Sommer and Fassbender, 2024).

A clear example of this dynamic is the 2021 water-for-energy deal between Israel, Jordan, and the UAE. As a part of this deal, Israel provides desalinated water to Jordan in exchange for solar energy produced by a UAE-funded plant in Jordan. This milestone project faced opposition from Saudi Arabia, which sought to block the UAE's involvement to maintain its leadership position, as reported by the *Times of Israel* (2021a) and confirmed by sources involved in the negotiations.

### **Analyzing the Potential Impact of Climate Projects on Israel and UAE Relations**

Primarily using the framework of environmental peacebuilding, let us analyze the potential impact of climate projects on the relations between Israel and the UAE. Through interviews

with experts and participants in environmental collaborations, along with an analysis of the tone and sentiment in press releases, we have summarized the potential effects these projects could have on binational relations.

Environmental peacebuilding is a framework that encapsulates processes by which shared environmental challenges act as catalysts for peace among conflicting factions, particularly over shared resources like land and water (Dresse et al., 2018). This framework does not need to focus solely on shared resources but can be applied more broadly to environmental collaboration that impacts relations and peace between countries that do not share resources (Sommer and Fassbender, 2024). By focusing on cooperation over shared environmental challenges, environmental peacebuilding seeks to build trust and collaboration, creating pathways for dialogue and reducing tensions. This approach can involve various mechanisms and stakeholders, including governments, communities, and international organizations, to develop practices that promote both ecological sustainability and peace.

While some might argue that there has not been a direct conflict between Israel and the UAE, and that a peacebuilding framework may seem misplaced, we contend that there have been several aspects of tension in their relations. These include the initial discontent within UAE civil society regarding the accords, as well as a lack of fully developed trust on various levels of their relationship (Valik et al., 2023). Relations also became more strained when tensions between Israel and the Palestinians further escalated, after the re-inauguration of Netanyahu in 2022, ongoing violence in the West Bank, and inflammatory comments and actions from his government that the UAE condemned (Valik et al., 2023).

Additionally, this framework offers a systematic analysis of the effects of environmental cooperation on international relations, which is crucial in this context.

### ***Partners to Achieve National Ambitions on Climate and Environment***

Drawing from the analysis of their environmental and climate initiatives, it is evident that both Israel and the UAE saw each other as beneficial partners for environmental collaboration. Both countries view each other as climate leaders in the region, possessing the economic capital, technological prowess, and political expertise necessary to implement collaborative environmental projects. Israeli stakeholders emphasize the economic and political possibilities of collaborating with the Emiratis, while Emirati experts highlight Israel's technological advancements. A Gulf expert based in the UAE remarked, "The UAE is extremely advanced as a nation. They are interested in purchasing the best technologies to thrive and strengthen their country, and they find a lot of these technologies in Israel." (Sommer and Fassbender, 2024)

### ***Financial Aspects of Collaboration***

Despite expectations of significant bilateral financial benefits from trading green technologies and collaborating on green tech, the actual gains have been modest due to small market sizes and high entry barriers in each country, particularly for Israeli startups. However, the real potential for profit lies in regional and multilateral projects, which offer broader collaboration and market access (Sommer and Fassbender, 2024).

Both Israel and the UAE are seen as complementary testing grounds for green technologies in specific fields such as archaeology, space research, and water extraction. For businesses, Israel's climate conditions are ideal for testing renewable technologies, which is challenging in neighboring countries like Lebanon and Syria due to geopolitical instability and political volatility.

### ***Opening Doors to Multilateral Environmental Collaborations***

A senior economist at the RAND Institute noted that the high intellectual property ratio of Gulf

countries attracts foreign companies. Israel's collaboration with the UAE could provide a "backdoor access" for Israel to the largest market in the MENA region, Saudi Arabia, despite the lack of formal diplomatic relations. The UAE and Israel's focus on environmental projects has fostered new possibilities for collaboration with third countries and facilitated multilateral platforms such as the Negev Forum and I2U2. Environmental cooperation has proven to be a trust-building factor in the region, as demonstrated by the UAE-Jordan solar-water-exchange deal.

Additionally, the CEO of a renewable energy company explained that Israel and the UAE are optimal business partners for regional projects compared to investors from the US or EU. Their understanding of Middle Eastern business culture and conditions allows them to navigate complexities and risks more effectively. Both countries are interested in expanding renewable energy cooperation in North Africa, a region with untapped potential.

### ***Political Aspects***

The UAE's approach to environmental and sustainability projects is intricately linked to their strategic geopolitical location and the desire to strengthen existing and foster new partnerships (Luomi, 2015; Reiche, 2010 as cited in Zumbraegel 2022). The political capital of environmental diplomacy has been increasingly recognized by the leaderships in Abu Dhabi, and Tel Aviv, who use these initiatives to pursue their political agendas. For instance, the UAE's role in brokering and financing part of the water-energy exchange plan between Israel and Jordan showcases its leadership in fostering regional collaboration on environmental sustainability (Axios, 2021; Riedel & Sachs, 2021). This move not only enhances the UAE's environmental credentials but also strengthens its geopolitical influence in the region. Moreover, the proactive role of the UAE on the international environmental front helps improve its standing in the global community and showcases its

green leadership. This strategy acts as a “trojan horse” for these ambitious states to diversify international linkages and improve their reputations (Zumbraegel, 2022).

Both the UAE and Israel leverage their expertise in multilateral institutional contexts, such as the UN. (Tal, 2020). This context underscores the significant role that climate diplomacy plays for both the UAE and Israel. It explains why both countries recognize each other as leaders in climate action in the Middle East and view each other as beneficial partners for further cooperation in this field. Multilateral projects and MOUs signed between Israel and the UAE have bolstered their standing as climate leaders, gaining endorsement from their allies in Europe and the US. The water-for-energy deal between Jordan, Israel, and the UAE is a prime example of this enhanced leadership. The UAE’s involvement in this agreement has been particularly impactful in advancing its position in the regional competition for climate leadership, especially against Saudi Arabia. The latter’s attempts to sabotage and stop the water-for-energy deal underscore how they perceive this agreement as a significant threat to their own ambitions of being the leading climate authority in the region. This competitive dynamic underscores the strategic importance of environmental collaborations for both the UAE and Israel in solidifying their roles as key players in the regional (climate) agenda.

### ***Regional Collaboration and International Support***

Regional collaboration in the MENA area is highly valued by US and EU leaders for several reasons. Firstly, it is perceived to promote regional stability by fostering cooperation among countries that might otherwise be in conflict. Secondly, these collaborations align with global climate goals, contributing to the collective effort to combat climate change. Thirdly, regional collaboration creates new economic opportunities by pooling resources and expertise to develop innovative technologies.

For Israel and the UAE, this international support enhances their legitimacy and standing on the global stage, presenting them as proactive leaders in the fight against climate change. This recognition can attract foreign investment, boost tourism, and open doors to further international cooperation. Additionally, aligning with US and EU climate goals strengthens their political alliances, securing support in other areas of international diplomacy.

### ***Building Trust***

Building trust between Israel and the UAE had been challenging at both the civil society level and among elites, due to the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and previous setbacks in security-related projects. However, up until October 7, environmental collaboration had emerged as a promising path for trust-building. Interviews indicated that this approach had been effective in reestablishing trust across various segments of society, including businesspeople, students, professors involved in academic exchanges and projects, as well as experts from think tanks, non-profits, and government officials.

Environmental cooperation had served as a neutral and non-controversial channel for collaboration. Unlike defense or other security-related projects, which were often fraught with political sensitivities, environmental initiatives were seen as more inclusive and could engage many parts of society. This inclusivity, along with the less controversial nature of environmental projects, made them a beneficial medium for dialogue and engagement, allowing both countries to collaborate without provoking political tensions (Ide, 2019; Sommer and Fassbender, 2024).

Experts had highlighted that these environmental initiatives brought together individuals with shared visions and missions, particularly concerning climate change, creating common ground for understanding and collaboration. These initiatives often involved well-educated scientists, academics,

and businesspeople with similar worldviews and strong English skills, facilitating effective communication and the development of joint projects. These individuals often acted as multipliers within their societies and networks (Sommer & Fassbender 2024).

In the UAE, the renewable energy sector is closely tied to political elites, particularly through figures like Sultan al-Jaber, who holds key roles as CEO of ADNOC, chair of Masdar, and leader of the country's climate initiatives. His influence across both energy and political spheres had helped ensure that environmental cooperation not only fostered trust within business and technical communities but also strengthened political relationships, further solidifying ties between the collaborating nations.

### **Impact of the October 7 Hamas Attack on Israel-UAE Environmental and Political Collaboration**

The October 7 attacks on Israel by Hamas and the ensuing war in Gaza affected the diplomatic and political dynamics between the UAE and Israel, with implications also for environmental and regional collaboration. This analysis draws on geopolitical assessments, academic literature, expert interviews, and observations from international conferences, including COP28, to explore these complex developments.

In response to the conflict, the UAE has carefully navigated a treacherous diplomatic landscape. While initially condemning Hamas' attacks, the UAE has also expressed concern over what it views as Israel's disproportionate military response, urging de-escalation and renewed efforts toward a two-state solution. This diplomatic stance reflects the UAE's attempt to balance its relationships with both Israel and the Palestinians while addressing regional and domestic pressures.

The Abraham Accords, which have boosted the Emirati political capital in Washington, improved its international image, and bolstered

trade and defense ties, have faced increased scrutiny in the context of the Gaza conflict. The war has heightened regional and domestic criticisms of Emirati policies, particularly as Emirati citizens have experienced harassment, and frustration has grown within the UAE over the government's perceived inaction regarding the impact of the war in Gaza (Esfandiary & Jandali, 2024).

Despite these challenges, the UAE has maintained its cooperation with Israel, engaging in mediation efforts in the current conflict, including planning for post-war reconstruction (CSIS, 2024, Mladenov, 2024). The UAE's humanitarian efforts have been particularly notable; since October 7, 2023, it has delivered nearly 39,000 tons of humanitarian supplies, provided a floating hospital to treat wounded, and deployed a field hospital in the region (Ignazius, 2024).

From an environmental perspective, to supply Gaza with clean water, the UAE has built six desalination plants in Egypt since the war began. This initiative also aims to reduce the risk of waterborne diseases, a major concern in Gaza. While these efforts seem to focus on UAE-Palestinian cooperation, they are often closely coordinated with Israel's COGAT (Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories). The role of the Emiratis in Gaza highlights not only a commitment to humanitarian aid but also the trust and willingness to collaborate with Israel, even during an ongoing conflict (Esfandiary & Jandali, 2024).

This balanced approach is designed to sustain the UAE's regional sway, support Palestinian rights, and preserve the strategic benefits of the Abraham Accords. The UAE emphasizes that its relationship with Israel is being used to positively impact the humanitarian situation in Gaza (Esfandiary & Jandali, 2024). Moreover, the UAE has signaled its readiness to participate in a temporary international mission in Gaza to ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid and to help establish stability, contingent on meaningful reforms by the Palestinian

Authority and progress toward a viable two-state solution (Middle East Monitor, 2024; New Arab Staff, 2024).

### ***Continuation of Projects Amidst Reduced Public Visibility***

Similar to economic cooperations, post-October 7, environmental initiatives between the UAE and Israel continued at an operational level, though there was a noticeable reduction in new high-profile projects. As late as on October 5 and 6, 2023, there were press releases and articles from the UAE news agency WAM highlighting the environmental cooperation between the two nations. However, these announcements abruptly ceased, with the exception of mention of COP28. Previously, new environmental initiatives were celebrated and often publicized through Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs), press releases, and public events, showcasing the growing ties between the two nations. After the attack, the emphasis on public displays of new agreements diminished, reflecting a strategic, more cautious approach due to heightened political sensitivities.

However, this does not mean that cooperation has ceased. Key ongoing initiatives include Aquestia's water management solutions and IDE Technologies' desalination and water treatment projects. Additionally, the partnership between Israel's Watergen and the UAE's Ma Hawa, utilizing technology to generate drinking water from the air, has led to the widespread installation of Watergen machines across the UAE. Netafim's drip irrigation technology continues to be implemented in UAE agriculture, in collaboration with government agencies, research institutions, and private companies (Aviad, 2024).

Nonetheless, the Hamas-Israel conflict has reportedly impacted the dynamics of many ongoing collaborations and the likelihood of new ones. A delegation of Israeli businesspeople who attended a conference in the UAE reported receiving significant recognition for and

interest in their AI-based environmental tool. However, they were indirectly informed that Emirati investments were mostly divested from Israeli companies due to the political circumstances. Nonetheless, there was ongoing dialogue and positive interactions between the businesspeople, demonstrating that certain channels are still open.

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The outbreak of the conflict on October 7 also negatively impacted the I2U2 group, consisting of the US, India, the UAE, and Israel, which had reportedly experienced a short-term loss of momentum and pause in joint initiatives. Nonetheless, experts from the Observer Research Foundation commented that this period of tension could serve as an opportunity for the I2U2 to demonstrate resilience by working with existing regional forums to maintain its effectiveness (Taneja, 2023). Reports suggest that the US-Israel bloc within the I2U2 is now operating more bilaterally, with the UAE taking a balanced stance and India managing its own foreign policy challenges. Despite the pause in new collaborations, such as those between the UAE and Israel, ongoing projects like the food park investment in Gujarat indicate a sustained commitment to the group's long-term objectives (Mishra, 2024). The Biden administration has reiterated its dedication to the I2U2, underscoring its significance for enhancing food and energy security, space operations, and other initiatives (NDTV, 2024).

Other multilateral collaborations, like the Negev Forum, have also been affected, with activities still on hold. Additionally, the Water for Energy deal between Jordan, Israel, and the UAE, intended to be finalized at COP28



in December 2023, has been temporarily put on hold by Jordan due to the war. However, the deal has not been canceled, and experts believe that Jordan remains interested in the agreement, given its critical need for water. Civilian pressure, particularly from Jordan's large Palestinian population, has influenced the government's current stance on collaboration with Israel. (New Arab Staff, 2024)

The Hamas-Israel conflict has underscored the importance of addressing regional issues, such as the Palestinian question, which remains central to future economic or political strategies in the Middle East. Observers speculate that regional cooperation will need to engage with these underlying issues to achieve lasting progress.

### ***Strategic Use of International Conferences***

International environmental and climate conferences have become strategic platforms for managing nuanced diplomatic relations amidst broader regional tensions for the UAE and Israel. These events are leveraged to showcase commitments to normalized relations between the countries while simultaneously supporting broader regional stability and acting as mediators in ongoing conflicts. This strategic approach is exemplified by significant conferences like COP28, which serve as prominent venues for these efforts.

The Conference of the Parties (COP) is the supreme decision-making body of the UNFCCC. It brings together representatives from nearly every country in the world to discuss and negotiate global climate policies and actions. Held annually, the COP aims to review the implementation of the UNFCCC, assess progress in dealing with climate change, and establish legally binding obligations for developed countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. The COP meetings are pivotal in shaping international climate agreements and fostering cooperation among nations to combat climate change. COP28, held in Dubai

from November 30 to December 12, 2023, was the largest COP ever, with over 80,000 participants from 197 countries, including more than 150 Heads of State and Government. This unprecedented level of participation highlights the growing global commitment to addressing climate change (World Economic Forum, 2023).

In the lead-up to COP28, several related events also served as platforms for delicate diplomacy. One such conference took place in Europe, shortly after October 7, with the backdrop of the upcoming COP28. This event brought together high-ranking officials, including an Emirati ambassador, an Israeli representative, and representatives from regional environmental organizations, and was organized by a European MP from a green party. The gathering allowed Emirati officials to voice their nation's condemnation of recent conflicts, particularly the events of October 7, while emphasizing future environmental cooperation, with a focus on renewable energy as essential for regional stability. Discussions highlighted that climate challenges are existential and that collaboration between nations with advanced technological solutions is both logical and necessary. Officials framed their participation in terms of their broader roles. The Emirati ambassador stressed his engagement due to the upcoming COP28, which the UAE was hosting. The Israeli official remarked, "We didn't just join for climate reasons but to show both logos of the countries next to each other at a joint event," emphasizing the symbolic importance of the event.

The event was carefully designed to avoid controversies. The Emirati ambassador and Israeli official did not appear on stage together. Instead, the ambassador spoke first and left before the Israeli official took the stage, a deliberate move to manage sensitivities and avoid direct joint appearances. Still, the event underscored that by late 2023, it remained possible for both countries to participate in shared forums, as long as environmental collaboration or climate action served as the framework.

In preparation for COP28, Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen highlighted the strategic role of foreign relations in the climate conference, stating, “The Abraham Accords signed three years ago, and the bilateral relations between Israel and the UAE, form an important layer of Israel’s foreign relations, especially now. The Israeli delegation’s presence at the conference is further proof of the strength of these ties” (gov.il, 2023).

### ***COP28: The Interplay of Environmental Initiatives and Political Diplomacy***

COP28 served as a significant platform where the intricate dynamics of environmental initiatives and political strategy were prominently displayed. The UAE and Israel utilized this conference to sustain and expand their diplomatic engagements within the realms of environmental and climate policy.

#### ***Strategic Pavilion Placement***

A pivotal and highly symbolic act at COP28 was the strategic placement of the Israeli pavilion next to the UAE pavilion. This arrangement, within a venue spanning an area comparable to Central Park in New York and encompassing hundreds of national pavilions, was highly strategic. The UAE’s pavilion, centrally located according to its status as the host country, was positioned next to the conference’s main architectural landmarks, highlighting the prestige of the event. The pavilions of Israel and the US were placed directly adjacent to the UAE’s, underscoring the close proximity of these nations’ representatives at the conference.

This placement demonstrated in a subtle diplomatic way the UAE’s support for its relationship with Israel. An Israeli delegate highlighted the importance of this gesture:

“The placement next to the UAE pavilion provided an extra layer of security and demonstrated a strong public commitment to our partnership. Given the small size of our delegation during this difficult time, this gesture was profoundly meaningful to us.”

The Palestinians had their first-ever pavilion in the Blue Zone at COP28, though it was not situated close to the UAE’s.

**Fig. 1. The UAE and Israel Pavilions at the COP28 in Dubai 2023, picture: Francesca Fassbender**



#### ***Bilateral Discussions and Private Meetings***

In response to the evolving dynamics of the Hamas-Israel war, the Israeli delegation significantly reduced its size from what was initially planned, opting to bring only a dozen people. An Emirati delegate intimated that although climate events had been planned between the UAE and Israel, they were canceled due to the Israeli side scaling down their participation and resources.

Nevertheless, high-ranking Israeli delegates visited the UAE, indicating the enduring significance they attached to the COP28 conference. An Israeli delegate explicitly shared that the Israeli delegation decided to come to show presence and strength in the international arena, Israel’s commitment to climate targets, and in support of the Abraham Accords, thereby also supporting UAE-Israel relations (gov.il, 2023). President Herzog attended COP28, instead of Prime Minister Netanyahu, a move seen by experts as strategic due to Herzog’s less controversial stance in the Arab world and greater engagement in climate issues.

Minister of Environmental Protection, Idit Silman, highlighted, “The climate crisis persists even during these challenging times for Israel. Participating in COP is crucial, and Israel will be represented by a senior professional delegation from the Ministry of Environmental Protection and the Foreign Ministry” (gov.il, 2023). Foreign Minister Eli Cohen expressed pride in the Foreign Ministry leading the Israeli delegation, despite the ongoing conflict, and stressed the political significance of participating in COP28. He emphasized Israel’s commitment to climate action and the importance and gratitude of cooperation with the UAE, stating, “The Abraham Accords and bilateral relations with the UAE are vital in Israel’s foreign relations, especially now. The arrival of the Israeli delegation at COP28 proves the strength of these relations” (gov.il, 2023).

### ***Political Leaders’ Engagement***

The summit facilitated substantial political dialogue among Israel, the UAE, and various global figures. Reports from Politico highlighted discussions between U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Vice President Kamala Harris regarding the Hamas-Israel conflict. (Dewan, 2023; Weise et al., 2023)

President Herzog used the X social media platform to detail his engagements with numerous global leaders. These discussions, while private, likely focused on soliciting support—or at least tolerance—for Israel’s actions in the conflict with Hamas and efforts to secure the release of the remaining 136 hostages abducted by Hamas on October 7.

It can be assumed that such a political use of the event was facilitated by the Emirati organizers, since they were part of some of these conversations and explicitly invited President Herzog to the conference. (Weise et al., 2023)

### ***Controversies and Absences***

President Herzog did not deliver his scheduled address on the climate crisis. His speaking slot elapsed without a presentation. Instead,

President Herzog was engaged in meetings with global dignitaries, including King Charles III and leaders from the UAE, Qatar, the European Union, the UK, India, and the United Nations (Weise et al., 2023). The absence of other key leaders such as Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas from their scheduled talks reflected a contentious atmosphere, largely attributed to ongoing political tensions with Israel over the war in Gaza. The Iranian delegation’s walkout over Israel’s presence, coupled with criticisms from Iran’s energy minister about Israel’s politically charged participation, highlighted the complex political dynamics of the summit (Al Jazeera, 2023; Harb, 2023).

While the UAE apparently facilitated Israeli use of COP28 to push forward their political stance, COP28 was also used by Israeli critics to bring forward their concerns. Several leaders openly used their platforms to make political statements against Israel and the war in Gaza. King Abdullah II of Jordan underscored the interconnectedness of climate change and regional humanitarian crises. The King emphasized that the conference must recognize the link between climate change and unfolding humanitarian tragedies. He highlighted the plight of the Palestinian people in Gaza. On several occasions during COP28, the UAE, despite its reputation for suppressing protesters and activists and limiting the freedom of speech, permitted pro-Palestinian and ceasefire demonstrators to gather in a prominent and significant area near the pavilion designated for global climate negotiations (Al Jazeera 2023; Dewan, 2023). This demonstrated a complex diplomatic balancing act: on one hand, the UAE showed support for the Palestinian cause, while on the other, it continued to strengthen its relations with Israel. The Israeli delegation also noted that at smaller events at COP28, where they participated in other countries’ pavilions, there were instances where other participants boycotted or canceled their participation due to the war in Gaza.

On a more interpersonal level, the Israeli and Emirati delegations engaged in several private encounters with the Emiratis, among others providing a private tour of their pavilion and discussing political issues beyond environmental concerns. This engagement showed, according to an Israeli delegate, the Emiratis' extraordinary accommodation. However, some Emirati delegates from the environmental sector, were very critical of Israel's war in Gaza, focusing on the humanitarian situation it causes and the destruction of infrastructure funded by the Emirates, such as desalination plants, solar panels, and the contamination of groundwater. This criticism highlighted the dual nature of the interactions, where high-level politics facilitated numerous meetings, but there was also a clear expression of concern about the environmental and human impact of the war in Gaza.

### ***Press Releases and Framing***

Before and after COP28, several articles were published that highlighted Israel's participation in the conference and various initiatives, demonstrating that the UAE was still open to positively acknowledging Israel's role in such efforts. For instance, Israel was part of a global initiative, spearheaded by the UAE and the US, announcing a significant expansion at COP28 — more than doubling its investments, partners, and Innovation Sprints in climate-smart agriculture and food systems innovation (WAM, 2023b). Additionally, COP28 saw the launch of a partnership to support women's economic empowerment, with Israel among the countries joining this effort. Furthermore, the UAE President welcomed the heads of delegations at COP28, which included Israeli representatives, indicating continued diplomatic engagement (WAM, 2023b).

In contrast, more than 95% of other articles published by WAM (the Emirates News Agency) between October 2023 and May 2024, that mentioned Israel in some way (numbering around 50), were in the context of condemning its actions in the war in Gaza. These articles

predominantly displayed support for the Palestinians, offering humanitarian aid, and endorsing a two-state solution along with peace and mediation efforts, but with a mostly negative framing of Israel. Therefore, environmental and economic collaboration, such as that highlighted in the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPA) signed between the states, was one of the few frameworks in which the relationship was still portrayed in positive terms. This dichotomy illustrates the complex dynamics at play, where environmental and economic initiatives served as rare positive counterpoints in the broader narrative.

### **Sustainability Discourse in the Hamas-Israel Conflict**

Numerous NGOs, climate activists, experts, and scholarly journals discuss the environmental and sustainability aspects of the conflict between Hamas and Israel, along with potential peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts. Such perspectives can fall into one of two primary groups. The first uses climate and environmental issues to hold Israel accountable for the conflict's impact on Gaza's environment. Since COP28, there has been an increase in discussions focused on the war's effects on climate and the environment, critically assessing Israel's environmental relations with regional actors such as the UAE and portraying Israel's environmental actions as oppressive. Focusing on post-war Gaza, the second asserts that environmental and climate considerations should feature prominently in reconstruction. This approach aims to rebuild all critical infrastructure in a sustainable and resilient manner, necessary for Palestinians to restore their livelihoods and access their human rights. These efforts should involve the support of Israelis and other regional actors like the UAE, using the environment as a tool for peacebuilding.

Both groups influence the future role of the environment in UAE-Israel relations.



### ***Israel's Green Tech Image Under Fire: Environmental Initiatives and Regional Criticism***

Not only during the COP28 conference did environmental activists and scholars increasingly scrutinize Israel's role in the sustainability sphere, pointing out a pattern of behavior that they described as "green colonialism," especially in the context of the ongoing conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon, and the wider Middle East.

### ***Eco-Normalization and Green Colonialism***

Scholars and activists have recently begun to frame Israel's environmental and climate projects with countries in the region as eco-normalization. This refers to the strategic use of environmental cooperation and projects to normalize relations between Israel and Arab states under the guise of environmental stewardship, without adequately addressing underlying political and human rights issues, especially those of the Palestinians. This concept has been highlighted in the context of the Abraham Accords, where Israel and several Arab states, including the UAE, Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, have engaged in numerous environmental initiatives. (Shqair, 2024)

These initiatives, including renewable energy projects and agreements on water management, are often presented as mutual efforts to combat climate challenges. For example, Israeli companies like Enlight Renewable Energy and NewMed Energy have launched a renewable energy project across several Arab countries. Critics argue that while these projects are marketed as steps toward regional sustainable development, they serve to mask or divert attention from Israel's policies, particularly in Gaza.

Environmental collaboration can sometimes impair action to resolve underlying injustices, a problem widely recognized in the field of environmental peacebuilding and thereby divert from peacebuilding efforts. For further

reading on the subject, see "The Dark Side of Environmental Peacebuilding" by Ide (2020).

### ***Criticism and the Accusations of Greenwashing***

Critics argue that Israel's environmental initiatives in the region are a form of greenwashing, where environmental efforts are used to improve the country's global image while continuing policies that oppress Palestinians and exploit natural resources. This criticism is particularly pointed regarding water resources and renewable energy projects that involve Israeli companies operating in disputed or occupied territories, such as the Golan Heights and parts of the West Bank (Shqair, 2023). The term "green colonialism" specifically refers to the accusation that Israel uses environmental initiatives as a cover for territorial annexation and resource exploitation. For instance, Israel's involvement in water deals, such as the exchange of desalinated water for energy with Jordan, is seen by some as a continuation of its control over regional water resources, further deepening Jordan's water crisis while deflecting responsibility (Shqair et al., 2023).

### ***The Gaza Context and Accusations of Ecocide***

Since the war between Hamas and Israel in Gaza begun, there have been alarming reports of what some scholars and activists describe as "ecocide"—the deliberate destruction of the natural environment as a strategy of war. Israeli military actions are said to have severely damaged Gaza's water infrastructure, including desalination and wastewater treatment facilities, leading to a humanitarian and environmental crisis. The contamination of water sources, combined with restrictions on electricity and fuel, has exacerbated the spread of waterborne diseases and made large swathes of agricultural land unusable. (Shqair et al., 2023)

This destruction of environmental infrastructure in Gaza is used by critics to argue that Israel's image as a green technology leader



is fundamentally at odds with its actions. The damage to the environment in the Gaza Strip is viewed as part of a broader strategy that undermines the prospects for sustainable development and environmental recovery in Palestinian territories.

### ***Implications for Regional Relations and Israel's Green Tech Image***

The juxtaposition of Israel's leading role in green technology with its actions in Gaza and the more loudly voiced framing of environmental cooperation with Arab states as negative eco-normalization is causing a significant reputational risk. Critics argue that by pursuing environmental projects that fail to address or even exacerbate underlying injustices between Israelis and Palestinians, Israel risks losing its credibility as a genuine leader in climate action. Especially after October 7, there have been a number of conferences where these arguments have been voiced, such as at the "Second Annual Conference on Conflict Climate Change and the Environment in the Middle East and North Africa Region" organized by the Arab Reform Initiative (2024), and in articles and books about Israel's practices. These discussions often analyze and criticize the Oslo Accords and the water agreements within them. (Gause & Daoudy, 2023)

This growing criticism could affect Israel's ability to maintain and expand its environmental footing in the region. There is a call among activists and some regional players for projects to genuinely serve the interests of all parties, including Palestinians, and to not be used as a tool for political normalization that ignores deeper injustices (Shqair, 2024; Gause & Daoudy, 2023). Comparing the environmental projects and agreements between Israel and the UAE with former agreements between Israel and regional countries, especially Jordan, the Palestinians, and Oman, it can be said that all these environmental collaborations were deeply affected by the unresolved nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Before October 7, it seemed that environmental relations held potential for the UAE and Israel to expand their cooperation mostly independent of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But since the world has turned its eyes back to the Palestinian issue, the pressure on and criticism of relations between Israel and the UAE have grown. Environmental relations and projects have already been affected and as the impact of the war grows and the longer it continues, the UAE's view of Israel as a regional partner in climate action comes under strain.

### ***Environmental Peacebuilding Potential of Climate Cooperation Between Israel and the UAE***

The enduring Hamas-Israel conflict has compromised regional environmental sustainability. However, it has also prompted initiatives that leverage environmental cooperation as a peacebuilding tool. Various regional organizations are developing strategies to foster cooperation among Palestinians, Israelis, Jordanians, and the wider region, including the UAE. They aim to address ecological challenges while building trust and stability.

The UAE, with its established diplomatic ties with Israel and humanitarian involvement with the Palestinians, has already demonstrated its capacity to contribute to peacebuilding efforts. Its participation in projects like desalination plants in Gaza and current ones in Egypt that provide water to Gaza shows how environmental cooperation can directly address urgent needs while fostering collaboration. Through these concrete initiatives, the UAE plays a key role in promoting stability and building trust between conflicting parties in the region.

### ***The Water and Sanitation Crisis in Gaza***

The ongoing conflict in Gaza has precipitated a severe crisis in water and sanitation services, impacting the Gazan residents. The destruction of vital infrastructure has rendered most water systems damaged or inoperative. Prior to the conflict, water supply in Gaza depended on

desalination plants, wells, and connections provided by the Israeli Water Authority (Mekorot). The war, however, has drastically impaired these systems, reducing Gaza's water production capacity to just 20% of pre-war levels. The population now faces a drastic reduction in water availability, heightening the risk of waterborne diseases (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024).

### ***Advocacy for Immediate and Long-term Solutions***

International organizations, including UNICEF, are urgently advocating for immediate access to critical supplies needed to restore essential water and sanitation services. They emphasize the urgency of addressing immediate needs, such as electricity and fuel, which are crucial for operating infrastructure. However, the scale of destruction demands more than just temporary fixes; a comprehensive overhaul of Gaza's water and sanitation systems is imperative. This reconstruction must prioritize resilience to future conflicts and include redundant systems to prevent total collapse during crises. Such an approach, supported by the environmental peacebuilding organizations EcoPeace and the Arava Institute, international donors and development agencies, will likely be crucial for ensuring long-term sustainability (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024).

### ***Sustainable Reconstruction and Regional Cooperation***

EcoPeace Middle East advocates for an ecologically sustainable reconstruction of post-war Gaza. Initiatives like the water-for-energy deal, initially agreed upon by Israel, Jordan, and the UAE, highlight the Emirati interest in regional cooperation on water and renewable energy infrastructure. Though paused due to the conflict, this plan demonstrates the UAE's commitment to complex regional projects that address both environmental and geopolitical interests.

EcoPeace stresses the importance of including Palestinian interests in these initiatives. Their Green Blue Deal for the Middle East supports large-scale desalination projects and improved electricity transmission from Israel to Gaza, benefiting not only Palestinians but also the broader region, including Israel and Jordan (Bromberg et al., 2020). Expanding the water-for-energy deal to fully integrate Palestinian concerns is crucial. EcoPeace warns that environmental issues, like sewage contamination, impact the entire Mediterranean region, affecting Israel and Egypt. Regional cooperation is essential for addressing these challenges.

The UAE is ideally positioned to play a leading role in advancing these initiatives. Its involvement in humanitarian aid for Gaza, close ties with both Palestinians and Israelis, and experience with desalination projects—such as those in Egypt that now serve Gaza—equip the UAE with the expertise and influence to drive these efforts forward. By leveraging its regional standing and technical capabilities, the UAE can help facilitate sustainable water solutions that are vital for both Gaza and the broader region.

The Arava Institute, an environmental research organization, plays a crucial role in promoting collaboration between Palestinians, Jordanians, and Israelis. Experts Tahani Abu Daqa and Yosef Abramowitz advocate for rebuilding Gaza in a more sustainable and climate-resilient way, reducing its heavy reliance on diesel generators and fuel from Israel, which leaves critical infrastructure like hospitals, sewage systems, and desalination plants vulnerable. They propose localized sustainable solutions, such as installing solar panels on hospitals and developing small-scale, locally operable desalination plants. One suggestion includes deploying Israeli air-to-water generators to provide freshwater for Palestinians. This vision for a post-conflict Gaza emphasizes rebuilding with a focus on climate resilience and local governance of essential infrastructure, including desalination,

freshwater production, and solar energy. This approach would reduce dependency and increase resilience to future conflicts and environmental challenges. Israel, the UAE, and other actors can support these efforts by funding green technologies. Locally managed solutions not only enhance resilience but are easier to implement without a functioning government, offering immediate benefits to Palestinian civilians (Abramowitz & Abu Daqa, 2023).

### ***Integrating the Peace Triangle into IMEC***

EcoPeace's "Peace Triangle" proposal seeks to incorporate the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) into a broader regional framework that includes Palestinians, Israelis and Jordanians. The IMEC, part of the I2U2 initiative, involving US, India, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, the EU, France, Italy and Germany, is designed to facilitate the transportation of critical resources, including food, water, energy, and infrastructure. By establishing stronger links between the Middle East and Europe—where demand for renewable energy is growing—IMEC has the potential to create significant incentives for the development of renewable energy projects, particularly solar and hydrogen, in the Middle East.

Expanding this corridor to include Gaza could provide opportunities for sustainable energy investments that meet both local needs and broader European market demands. The integration of Gaza into the IMEC framework would not only enhance regional economic interdependence but also encourage investment in renewable energy infrastructure in the Palestinian territories. This would allow the region to leverage Europe's demand for clean energy, fostering economic development while advancing environmental sustainability goals. In this way, the IMEC could serve as a strategic platform for promoting renewable energy, benefiting both the local economies and the wider region.

The international community, including actors such as the World Bank and the

European Parliament, has shown considerable interest in expanding the IMEC. While the full implementation of such a large-scale project may be a long-term goal, such a strategic vision is crucial for post-war reconstruction. These projects align with both economic and sustainability goals, offering spillover benefits in peacebuilding. The UAE's involvement in such initiatives not only enhances its regional leadership but also reinforces the benefits of the Abraham Accords. By advocating for Palestinian inclusion, the UAE and Israel could strengthen their role in regional cooperation and ensure broader regional support for the corridor, which is crucial for the UAEs political and economic ambitions, particularly in the emerging hydrogen market.

The UAE's role in financing and supporting desalination plants and other environmental projects is critical. The initial agreement between Jordan and Israel demonstrated the UAE's interest in such cooperation. Expanding this agreement to include the Palestinian side would further enhance the UAE's standing as a climate leader and a supporter of Palestinian civilians. By engaging the UAE not only as a financial contributor but also as a strategic partner in regional development, both Israel and the UAE could find compelling incentives for deeper cooperation. This approach positions the UAE as a leading force in climate efforts, protecting Palestinian interests, and contributing to regional de-escalation.

### ***The Importance of Accountability and Structural Reform***

While reconstruction is essential, experts and environmental scholars stress the importance of addressing underlying political and structural issues. Without accountability mechanisms, both legal and political, reconstruction efforts risk being temporary fixes that do not prevent future crises. Ensuring accountability and upholding international norms protecting civilian infrastructure are vital for creating a sustainable future for Gaza. This approach is

not just about rebuilding physical structures; it's about fostering resilience and integrating Gaza into a broader regional framework for stability and peace (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024).

### ***Environmental and Climate Diplomacy as a Medium for Navigating Complex Relationships***

In light of previous discussions on the environmental peacebuilding framework, we now examine how climate diplomacy has impacted UAE-Israel relations following the October 7 Hamas attacks and the ensuing war in Gaza.

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**Environmental diplomacy now functions as a form of “diplomatic cover,” allowing both nations to engage in dialogue without attracting the controversy that comes with overt political or military discussions.**

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### ***Shifting Role of Environmental Cooperation***

Despite the heightened tensions and deteriorating public relations between Israel and the UAE, environmental and climate diplomacy continues to serve as a key channel for maintaining a dialogue. However, the function of environmental cooperation has evolved. Before October 7, environmental initiatives were highlighted as a symbol of regional cooperation and leadership. In its aftermath, these collaborations are less visible, serving more as a discreet diplomatic tool rather than a public relations asset. Joint environmental projects, while still ongoing, now occur off the radar, with far fewer publicized initiatives.

For instance, COP28 saw only a limited number of Israeli delegates compared to earlier plans, with interactions now confined to high-level officials and technical experts. Instead of using environmental collaboration as a central theme to promote bilateral ties, the UAE and Israel now frame their interactions in a more

cautious, subdued manner, reflecting current geopolitical complexities.

### ***Environmental Diplomacy as a Diplomatic Cover***

Environmental diplomacy now functions as a form of “diplomatic cover,” allowing both nations to engage in dialogue without attracting the controversy that comes with overt political or military discussions. Climate issues, by their nature, transcend national borders and provide a neutral space for collaboration, making them less politically charged. Forums like COP28 offer a platform where political discussions can take place in the context of global climate challenges rather than direct conflict-related issues. This framework enables Israel and the UAE to maintain communication and cooperation, even if these efforts are downplayed or even camouflaged in public discourse.

Additionally, the environmental arena continues to attract educated, liberal participants, providing a more favorable setting for the UAE to engage with Israel. This carefully maintained engagement allows both countries to sustain diplomatic relations in a more palatable form.

### ***Multilateral Interest and Broader Acceptance***

Another important shift in environmental diplomacy between Israel and the UAE is the increasing emphasis on multilateralism. Climate and environmental issues are of high international interest, with significant backing from Europe, the US, and global institutions. Such multilateral collaboration provides a broader base of support for environmental cooperation between Israel and the UAE, making such collaboration more feasible, even under duress. For instance, European Green Party MPs and international think tanks have continued to organize forums where UAE-Israel environmental cooperation is discussed, highlighting the universal importance of climate challenges.

### *Strategic Engagement with Global Allies*

COP28 became a strategic venue for both nations to engage with their global allies, reinforcing the use of environmental diplomacy to secure broader geopolitical interests. Israeli President Herzog and UAE officials used the platform to engage not only on climate matters but also on shared security concerns regarding Hamas and Iran, effectively tying environmental cooperation to wider diplomatic efforts.

### *Challenges and Limitations*

Nevertheless, environmental diplomacy faces notable limitations. The war has exposed the fragility of these channels, as high-profile absences at COP28, such as Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas, signaled growing divisions. Moreover, protests, including Iran's walkout at the conference, underscore the complications of using environmental platforms for broader diplomatic purposes in such a charged political context in the region.

Additionally, there is increasing scrutiny from academic and activist communities, who argue that environmental collaborations between Israel and the UAE cannot be separated from the broader political context, especially in relation to Palestinian suffering in the current Hamas-Israel war. This critical perspective challenges the ability of the UAE and Israel to use environmental diplomacy as a prominent public tool for branding purposes post-October 7, limiting its visibility.

## **Conclusions: The Evolution of Environmental Relations Between Israel and the UAE**

The environmental relations between Israel and the UAE have evolved significantly since the signing of the Abraham Accords, with notable transformations following the events of October 7, 2023.

### *Pre-October 7: A Period of Promising Collaboration*

Prior to the conflict, environmental cooperation served as a key trust-building tool between Israel and the UAE, fostering diplomatic ties through shared environmental, economic and political goals. Both countries leveraged their technological expertise and economic strength to address issues such as water scarcity, sustainable agriculture, and renewable energy. This collaboration was not only a means for addressing environmental challenges but also a way to strengthen geopolitical relations. Key developments included:

- 1. Technological Synergy:** Israel and the UAE collaborated on advanced technologies in renewable energy and water management, aiming to position themselves as regional climate leaders.
- 2. High-Profile Engagements:** Bilateral meetings and multilateral forums—such as the Negev Forum and the I2U2 initiative—highlighted their commitment to international cooperation in environmental and climate issues. Projects such as the trilateral water-energy deal with Jordan demonstrated their potential to foster regional integration and sustainability.
- 3. Trust-Building Tools:** Environmental initiatives showed the potential for building trust between the two nations, allowing them to cooperate on shared interests while laying the groundwork for deeper diplomatic and economic ties.
- 4. Widespread Support:** These partnerships drew broad support from governments, private sector leaders, and civil society, cementing a narrative of joint leadership in environmental innovation.

### *Post-October 7: Strategic Recalibration and Diplomatic Subtlety*

The Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7 dramatically altered the dynamics of Israel-UAE environmental relations. Amid rising political



and military tensions, both countries reassessed their approach to environmental diplomacy:

- **Reduced Public Profile:** While some environmental projects continued, the visibility of these initiatives significantly decreased. For instance, Israeli participation at COP28 was scaled back, reflecting the sensitivities surrounding the conflict.
- **Environmental Diplomacy as a Diplomatic Channel:** Platforms like COP28 allowed Israel and the UAE to maintain diplomatic engagement through environmental cooperation, a less controversial avenue during tense political times. However, these interactions became more subtle and less publicized as both nations navigated the political turmoil in the region.

While environmental diplomacy remains a valuable tool, it also poses reputational risks, particularly for the UAE. Increasing scrutiny of Israel's role in regional environmental issues, along with accusations of "green colonialism" and "econormalization," may deter the UAE from publicly aligning with Israel on environmental issues. Critics argue that Israel's environmental initiatives sometimes overlook or even exacerbate the injustices faced by Palestinians.

### *The Path Forward: Credibility and Inclusivity*

Uniquely positioned as both a regional actor and a mediator, the UAE, can leverage environmental diplomacy to foster regional collaboration and perhaps even environmental peacebuilding. However, for these initiatives to be effective, they must be inclusive and address the broader needs of Palestinians and other regional stakeholders.

For Israel, the credibility of its environmental diplomacy—to the extent that this remains a national priority—hinges on acknowledging and addressing environmental damage resulting from its policies, especially in Gaza. While Israel is not solely responsible for the region's environmental attrition, taking responsibility for its role would likely be essential for maintaining

its reputation as a leader in green tech and climate action. Such accountability, alongside ensuring equitable access to resources like water and energy, would not only be a matter of strategic importance but also a morally sound approach. Failure to do so would likely risk undermining Israel's long-term partnerships, including key aspects of the partnership with the UAE, and its standing in the climate arena.

True progress will require initiatives that are not only geopolitically strategic but also rooted in justice and inclusivity. Addressing these concerns will be crucial for sustaining environmental cooperation and ensuring that, rather than exacerbating tensions, it contributes to peacebuilding.

It would be hard to overstate the importance of the pre-October 7 period in demonstrating the immense potential of environmental cooperation between Israel, the UAE, and the region writ large. By integrating inclusive partnerships into future initiatives, both nations could capitalize on environmental diplomacy as a powerful tool for advancing development, and regional stability.

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