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Center for Applied Research
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08

BRIEF

11.09.2017

Environmental Challenges in a Conflictive Environment

Iranian and Saudi Perspectives on the Risks of Climate Change and Ecological Deterioration

by Jan Hanrath and Wael Abdul-Shafi

Introduction

Scarce water resources and desertification, sand and dust storms, and pollution-related health problems are just a few of the many environmental challenges Iran and Saudi Arabia are facing today. Industrial contamination, repercussions of violent conflicts, waste of energy, a lack of awareness of environmental issues and many other causes have

Executive Summary

The repercussions of climate change and environmental challenges pose enormous risks to Iran and Saudi Arabia alike. While there are differences in geography and climate in both countries, they also have many environmental challenges in common. Problems such as sand and dust storms or diminishing water resources are border-crossing phenomena that no country can deal with alone; therefore, cooperation is key. At this point in time, however, willingness to cooperate is utterly lacking in a region marked by geo-strategic rivalries, ongoing military conflicts and deep-rooted mutual distrust between regional rivals, and between Saudi Arabia and Iran in particular.

CARPO and the EastWest Institute initiated a meeting of experts from Saudi Arabia and Iran as part of their 'Iran-Saudi Track 2 Initiative'. The participants discussed environmental challenges to reach a better understanding of the political context and to identify opportunities and limits for Iranian-Saudi cooperation in the field of regional environmental policy. Participants agreed that climate change and ecological deterioration pose a major challenge to their countries and the region. Fully aware that the current political situation makes cooperation very difficult, participants discussed potential avenues of exchange below the level of national governments and proposed initiatives for cooperation on a regional and international level.

contributed to increasing environmental stress in all countries in the region. Environmental degradation will only continue to increase due to ongoing climate change in this very vulnerable region due to global warming, reduced precipitation, dust storms and rising sea levels. Moreover, competition over ever scarcer resources could further raise and extend the already high levels of conflict and political turmoil beyond the region's boundaries. Such ecological challenges are border-crossing phenomena that no country can deal with alone. Thus, these issues demand collaboration and could potentially serve as prototype topics for regional cooperation. At this point in time, however, willingness to cooperate is utterly lacking in a region marked by geostrategic rivalries, ongoing military conflicts and deep-rooted mutual distrust between regional rivals, and Saudi Arabia and Iran in particular.

Against this backdrop, CARPO and the East-West Institute (EWI) organized a workshop in April 2017 to discuss the political, social and economic risks posed by current environmental challenges. This meeting was part of an ongoing 'Iran-Saudi Track 2 Initiative', begun in 2015. Due to the intensified political tensions during the time of the conference, ensuring balanced participation from Saudi Arabia and Iran was more difficult than with previous workshops. Even so, CARPO and EWI were able to ensure the participation of academics, environmental experts, security analysts and former diplomats. In addition, European experts on the region from renowned institutions joined the workshop, as has been the case in previous meetings. The participants discussed environmental challenges to reach

a better understanding of the political context and to identify opportunities and limits for Iranian-Saudi cooperation in the field of regional environmental policy.

Environmental challenges in Iran, Saudi Arabia and the region

All participants agreed on the overall assessment of the challenges in the region: Climate change and environmental issues pose enormous risks to Iran and Saudi Arabia alike. These issues include growing water scarcity, general land degradation with increasing desertification and deforestation, sand and dust storms, air and water pollution, maritime degradation and the loss of biodiversity. While it became clear that the two countries feel the impact of these phenomena in different ways due to their different geographical situation and natural conditions, they have many core issues in common. In particular, diminishing water access, overuse of natural resources and the increasing intensity of sand and dust storms in both Iran and Saudi Arabia were mentioned. Various participants stressed the interconnectivity of all these phenomena and warned of isolating single issues: 'the environment' must not be reduced to water or air, but must rather be seen as a broader framework with implications for security, economy and society. Environmental issues must be neither isolated from others nor their implications for security and conflicts underestimated.

There was also agreement on the security implications of this analysis: Environmental challenges, one participant emphasized, should

not be viewed as 'soft security threats': In fact, they constitute the 'most essential security threat' to human beings. Direct man-made factors such as over-pumping of aquifers and industrial pollution, as well as indirect effects of anthropogenic climate change and global warming, result in a change of the equilibrium between resources and population, and consequently to a change in the availability of resources. A decrease in resource quality, availability and accessibility leads to scarcity in water, food and energy and increased competition for these resources. Such competition may result in conflict, escalate to violence and, in the worst case scenario, precipitate in state failure. As the climate becomes hotter and drier and food production decreases, entire regions may become unproductive and uninhabitable. Subsequent migration – often unregulated and unsafe – could further escalate competition and conflict among directly affected populations, as well as with other populations hosting these migration flows. In turn, a vicious circle of violent conflict may intensify scarcity even further. And while causal environmental phenomena easily cross borders, migration usually takes place within national borders and leads to increased urbanization. Or, as one participant put it, migrants respect borders more than climate phenomena do.

Presentations by experts left no doubt that environmental challenges are extremely pressing in both countries. The main environmental concern the two countries have in common is the increasing level of water

scarcity, which is exacerbated by the effects of climate change, mismanagement of water resources, and pollution. Saudi Arabia's water supplies have been depleted by about two-thirds since 1980, among other things due to inefficient irrigation practices. Thus the country is substantially reliant on water desalination. Likewise, Iran has been suffering a critical water shortage due to both limited total resources and public sector mismanagement. This has led to the drying up of significant bodies of water, with severe socio-economic impact on surrounding populations and economies. The most prominent example given was Lake Urmia, which recently contained 95 percent less water than three decades earlier, a phenomenon that triggered protests in Iran and has garnered significant international attention.

Sand and dust storms present a significant transboundary issue between the two countries that has even led to minor accusations by officials.¹ Generated by strong winds and reinforced by loose soil and deforestation, sand and dust storms have substantial health, environmental, and economic consequences in both countries. Poor land management and water depletion have exacerbated the phenomenon over the past 30 years in Saudi Arabia and Iraq, and have also impacted Iran due to the eastward movement of storms. These cross-border environmental incidents, though not intentionally caused by any party, further complicate the already fragile regional relations between the two countries.

¹ Al Arabiya English (22.02.2017): Iran blames Sandstorms on Iraq after protests over power cuts. Available at <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/variety/2017/02/20/Iran-blames-sandstorm-on-Iraq-after-protests-over-power-cuts.html> (30.08.2017).

Actors, approaches and discourses on environmental issues in Saudi Arabia and Iran

The conference discussions generally displayed a divergent awareness of environmental challenges in Saudi Arabia and Iran on various levels, not least due to the very different socio-political contexts in the two countries. Iranian participants explained that environmental topics have been discussed for some time on the political and societal level in Iran, and have also found their way into public discourses. While the environment ranks behind other issues on the political agenda, more and more actors are becoming involved and overall awareness is increasing. In Saudi Arabia, according to its participants, environmental issues receive only limited attention. However, one Saudi participant reported a growing awareness on environmental issues; a general trend which can be built upon. Another Saudi participant further pointed out that generally Saudis were unaware of the concept of resource scarcity, and that a public consciousness of limited resources needed to be fostered.

On the political level, both countries are signatories to international agreements on climate change and environment, such as the Paris Declaration and the Kyoto Protocol. Both countries refer in their constitutions (known as Basic Law in Saudi Arabia) to environmental challenges and stipulate a need for the conservation of nature. In Saudi Arabia, the recent Vision 2030 states that by “preserving our environment and natural resources, we fulfill our Islamic, human and moral duties”.²

However, economic considerations usually outweigh environmental issues, which therefore have lower priority on a policy making level. While a number of Saudi ministries and governmental agencies are involved in issues regarding nature conservation, energy efficiency and dealing with phenomena such as water scarcity and sand and dust storms, clarity in regulatory responsibility is lacking. In Iran a number of laws, regulations and governmental initiatives address environmental issues on the legal and operational level. The Iranian Parliament discusses such topics regularly, and many governmental agencies are involved in environmental policies. As one Iranian participant summarized, environmental problems are not due to a lack of Iranian governmental provisions, but due to weaknesses in implementing the laws and standards.

Experts from both countries stressed the need to raise environmental issues ‘up the food chain’ and to bring them closer to the center of political decision making. Given the very different political contexts in the two countries, assessments of how to nationally do so varied. Some Saudi participants demanded a securitization of environmental issues: only when environmental matters are discussed in their direct relation to ‘hard’ security issues will awareness and engagement among political actors and relevant power brokers increase. In contrast, Iranian participants stressed the need to raise more awareness on a societal level to empower citizens to hold their representatives accountable regarding environmental policies. A successful example of this is the case of Lake Urmia: the awareness-raising campaigns by local

² Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2016): Vision 2030, p 23. Available at <http://vision2030.gov.sa/download/file/fid/417> (30.8.2017).

and international actors alike resulted in the Iranian government successfully implementing a program in cooperation with the UN to save and revive the lake.

Civil society in Iran is active in many fields of environmental issues on the national to the local level, and non-governmental organizations are part of the government's overall approach to implement policies. Iranian participants highlighted the various actors involved, ranging from NGOs and local initiatives to think tanks and research institutions. Clerics and religious seminaries are also active, identifying religious sources addressing nature conservation and laying the fundamentals of a 'theology of environment'. According to Iranian participants, climate change, pollution and environmental policies are regular topics of public, and often very critical, debates on TV, social media or in the press. Furthermore, a growing interest in Iranian academia can be identified with a rising number of students and researchers taking up environmental topics. However, it was noted that a much more has to be done with regard to awareness-raising among the general population and, in particular, among certain societal groups such as the youth. For example, to address general water waste, an Iranian expert urged an increase of water prices and the introduction of market logic in this sector. Saudi participants also found merit with this particular proposal. Experts also agreed on the need to introduce ecology and environmental issues to other academic fields, such as engineering, and to adapt curricula to connect life sciences and social sciences.

In the Saudi case, environmental issues are only starting to gain the attention of broader segments of society, as currently it is mainly discussed only among the elite. Participants stated that only a limited number of organizations direct their efforts to the environment, nature conservation and the challenges of decreasing resources; to date, academia and think tanks play no relevant role. One Saudi participant noted that generally, any civil society activism is limited in Saudi Arabia, thus only a few actors have taken up environmental issues. Activism by religious charities is also limited: although some clerics do call for saving water and respect for nature, so far their impact remains minimal. The same participant further suggested that top-down approaches were necessary to raise awareness on environmental issues. Regarding the private sector, one Saudi expert highlighted the role of big corporations, stating they have to be held more accountable regarding the environmental impact of their industries. He pointed to the Saudi example of ARAMCO, which has slowly begun to accept responsibility and to introduce environmental standards and respective technologies. Such private sector initiatives could be more important than any government initiated step.

Potentials for cooperation on environmental issues

As in so many interactions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, environmental issues are overshadowed by regional and national politics. There was disagreement among the participants whether an overall political solution

(some termed it a 'cease-fire') was necessary before any cooperation or rapprochement could take place. Top-down approaches were discussed against bottom-up initiatives. Nevertheless, environmental issues were seen as a field where cooperation seems not only possible, but a necessity. Against this background, some participants felt the need to go beyond the government-to-government level, since Iranian and Saudi governments will likely only be able to cooperate where there is some sort of overall political agreement, which may be difficult to achieve in the foreseeable future. However other sectors may cooperate more easily, in particular the private sector and academia. While many experts lamented the lack of political will for cooperation, one participant stressed that such will was also absent at the societal level. Thus societal will for cooperation has to be created as well and the benefits of mutual cooperation promoted.

Saudi and Iranian participants agreed that in their countries local authorities, such as city councils, are the first institutions people approach to voice their environmental grievances. These participants also voiced a careful hope that exchanges between local actors – facilitated by regional or international actors – could lead to mutual learning and then to low-level cooperation in the longer run.

Since direct bilateral cooperation on environmental issues between Iran and Saudi Arabia seems impossible for the moment, multilateral programs could offer alternative avenues for exchange. As experts from both countries

agreed that the specific wording used when discussing environmental challenges is of utmost importance, such forums could reflect on terminology and fill words with actual meaning. Furthermore, multilateral programs could foster exchanges of experiences and best practices, for example between coastal towns facing similar challenges, and focus on concrete issues at the technical, rather than political, level.

Although aware that implementation is currently highly problematic given the political state of affairs, some participants offered proposals and visions for cooperation between Saudi and Iranian actors from different fields, such as non-governmental organizations, academia, the private sector and governmental agencies.³ These proposals range from 'green growth networks' and public-private partnerships to elaborate structures of regional governance to tackle issues such as sand and dust storms. Ideas even included joint projects on desalination, solar energy and carbon capture and storage. And while being realistic that all efforts and approaches depend on a general improvement of relations between both countries, participants from both Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed that particularly the private sector could lead the way in increased cooperation.

As one Iranian expert pointed out, Saudi-Arabia and Iran will continue to be rivals, even when relations improve. However, abandoning perceptions of mutually exclusive gains and moving to a win-win thinking could lead to positive rivalries and to creative ways of

³ One example given by an Iranian participant for Lake Urmia showed that cooperation between academic institutions and the private sector, in this case the Sharif University of Technology and the University of Melbourne together with the private sector in Australia, which have extensive experience in water reform and management, has been fruitful.

finding and implementing cross-boundary solutions. Iran and Saudi Arabia share many interests – not least regarding the risks of climate change and ecological deterioration.

Recommendations

- **Foster cooperation at the private sector and academic level.** While government-to-government cooperation is currently difficult, exchanges on a local and community level can establish channels that can be built upon in the future, when the political context allows for broader cooperation. Concrete steps, for example in the private sector and through academic exchanges, can be taken now.
- **Engage experts from both countries, as well as other regional and international actors, in intensive and continuous discussions on a technical level** to find technical solutions such as physical stabilizers, windbreaks, and early warning systems to mitigate the effects of sand and dust storms. Though the potential solutions would not be implemented immediately, they can be made ready for implementation as soon as the political climate for cooperation has improved.
- **Encourage mutual and international learning on a regional level.** Both countries should exchange best practices in dealing with environmental challenges. International actors, such as the United Nations or the European Union, can facilitate forums for mutual exchange and engage in capacity-building in all affected countries in the Gulf to tackle cross-border environmental issues. Best practices can also be exchanged through the sharing of experiences between coastal towns around the Gulf that face similar environmental challenges, whether through city twinning, green growth networks, or public-private partnerships.
- **Give more attention to environmental issues in political decision making in Saudi Arabia and Iran.** While the level of attention to these topics varies, political actors in both countries need to focus more on the challenges created by the waste of resources, environmental degradation and the resulting effects, such as water scarcity and sand and dust storms. Both countries have to acknowledge the fact that without collective efforts, cross-border environmental challenges cannot be properly tackled.
- **Increase awareness on environmental challenges among broader segments of society.** Environmental education should be promoted through information campaigns on social media, capacity-building for civil society actors, and the introduction of ecology in university curricula. Furthermore, clergy and religious seminaries in both countries should be engaged to raise awareness on the necessity to protect the environment. Debates among religious scholars on environmental issues already take place in both countries and should be further encouraged.

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About CARPO

CARPO was founded in 2014 by Germany-based academics trained in the fields of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Political Science and Social Anthropology. Its work is situated at the nexus of research, consultancy and exchange with a focus on implementing projects in close cooperation and partnership with stakeholders in the Orient. The researchers in CARPO's network believe that a prosperous and peaceful future for the region can best be achieved through inclusive policy making and economic investment that engages the creative and resourceful potential of all relevant actors. Therefore, CARPO opens enduring channels for interactive knowledge transfer between academics, citizens, entrepreneurs, and policy-makers.

About EastWest Institute

The EastWest Institute (EWI) is an independent NGO focused on conflict resolution. EWI has a 35-year track record of convening power, trust building and back channel diplomacy to develop sustainable solutions for today's major political, economic and security issues around the world. Recognized as an "honest broker," EWI's success is predicated on providing a platform where political, military and business leaders find common ground and solutions to international conflicts. EWI's Middle East and North Africa Program provides a platform for dialogue between regional rivals and engages major stakeholders in an attempt to find common ground in tackling root causes behind the rise of ISIS. Headquartered in New York City, EWI has offices in Brussels, Moscow, San Francisco and Washington D.C.

The Iran-Saudi Dialogue project is funded by ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) with resources provided by the German Federal Foreign Office. The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of CARPO or the EastWest Institute.

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ISSN 2364-2467

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