

## **ARAB STATES CAN HELP SAVE THE CLIMATE**

By Fouad Hamdan\*

“Climate change? What climate change?” These are the two questions I often hear when I mention this issue to Arab officials. If I insist, they get irritated and change the subject. Others try to play it smart and argue like some US oil corporates, claiming current climate changes are natural phenomena and not connected to any human activity. This defensive approach is understandable in a region that has enough political and economic problems ranging from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to civil wars in Iraq and Sudan, huge discrepancies between poor and rich in most societies and visible pollution in the air of cities as well as along rivers and coastlines.

But the longer Arab leaders ignore the issue of climate change the higher the price Arab societies will pay in the future. And this price will be paid with money and human lives. Sadly, environmental protection is not high on the agenda of Arab governments, the 2005 Environmental Sustainability Index found out. Its scores, given to 146 countries, are attributed to substantial natural resource endowments, low population density, and successful management of environment and development issues. Finland ranked first, followed by Norway, Uruguay, Sweden and Iceland. The index put Iraq at 143, Kuwait at 138, Saudi Arabia at 136, Lebanon at 129 and the UAE at 110. The three best Arab states ranked 55 (Tunisia), 83 (Oman) and 84 (Jordan). Israel landed at 62.

But what strikes me most is the lack of knowledge among Arab decision-makers about the main causes of climate change and what could be done to stop it. Fact is that a United Nations scientific panel agrees that climate change is one of the biggest threats facing our planet. The main reason is the global rapid growth in energy production and consumption since the 1950s – by burning fossil fuels like coal, gas and oil. Burning them, but also intensive agriculture or the cutting of forests emit carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) that heat up the Earth. The result is more devastating freak weather events such as flash floods, storms, heat waves, mudslides or droughts. This greenhouse effect also leads to the melting of icepacks in the North and South poles, causing sea levels to rise.

We are heading into global average temperature increases of 2 to 3 degrees C with rising sea levels wiping countries off the globe. Developing nations will be hit first and worst. Meanwhile, the World Health Organisation said 150,000 people die every year as a result of climate change. In the Mediterranean region, climate change has started to undermine efforts for sustainable development. It adds to existing problems of desertification, water scarcity and food production, while also introducing new threats to human health, ecosystems and national economies.

Last January, the European Union published a report dealing with the disasters that will take place along the northern shores of the Mediterranean. Assuming a global 3 degree C rise, the basin would face crippling shortages of both water and tourists by 2050 and tens of thousands will die of heat in southern Europe. The annual migration of rich northern Europeans to the south could stop – with dramatic consequences for the economies of Spain, Greece and Italy. If they will be hit so badly, one can imagine the economic and health impacts climate change will have on the Maghreb states, Egypt, Palestine/Israel, Lebanon and Syria.

The EU said in 2005 that annual precipitation in the Mediterranean basin has experienced a reduction of 20 per cent. Cairo is among the 22 cities that the UK government's recent Stern report tipped to face increasing risks of coastal surges and flooding as the Earth warms by about 3ø from the 2050s. Floods from rising sea levels could displace up to 200 million people worldwide. For Egypt this means that the Nile Delta is under threat. “Climate-related shocks have sparked violent conflict in the past, and conflict is a serious risk in areas such as West Africa, the Nile Basin and Central Asia?” the UK report noted.

Arab states need to face that climate change is already hitting them and that they must deal with it. No one is saying that oil and gas should be left untouched underground. But to help avert the crisis, a serious global cut of CO2 emissions should go hand in hand with much less oil, gas and coal burnt. This must not mean an economic disaster for Arab oil-producing countries. It can be a historic chance, and this chance is called hydrogen produced in a sustainable way with solar power.

Let us imagine all over the Arab world millions of square kilometers of solar panels producing hydrogen. This would create a hydrogen economy in which energy is stored and transported by pipelines or tankers. When burning hydrogen in heating systems, energy plants, vehicles or aircraft the exhaust pipes and chimneys will only release water in the atmosphere. Such an energy revolution needs decades of massive investments in this technology and in a new global infrastructure. Under this strategy, oil countries would slowly reduce their oil output while exporting more and more hydrogen. Oil reserves would last longer.

This is not a dream because the technology is there and the idea is not so new: Dubai took in 2005 a cautious step towards the eventual production of renewable hydrogen in close cooperation with German car maker BMW. The emirate was the departure point for a tour of ten liquid hydrogen-powered sedans halfway around the globe to drum up support for this zero-emission transportation technology. A study on this experiment recommended further action along the path to producing hydrogen from solar energy.

One would assume that hydrogen would be difficult to sell in the Gulf, the world's main source of oil. But this is anything but paradoxical. It is a matter of survival because the cry for sustainability is becoming increasingly urgent. From Morocco to Iraq and from Syria to Yemen large unpopulated and desert areas could be used to produce hydrogen from solar energy. Clean hydrogen made there would save the planet and secure the economic survival of the Arab world in the post-oil era.

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**COMMENT**

### Arab states ignore climate change

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But the larger Arab leaders ignore the issue of climate change, the higher the price Arab societies will pay in the future. And this price will be paid with money and human lives. Sadly, environmental protection is not high on the agenda of Arab governments, the 2005 Environmental Sustainability Index found out. Its scores, given to 160 countries, are attributed to substantial natural resource endowments, low population density, and successful management of environment and development issues. Finland ranked first, followed by Norway, Uruguay, Sweden and Iceland. The index put Iraq at 143, Kuwait at 138, Saudi Arabia at 136, Lebanon at 129 and the UAE at 110. The three best Arab states were Tunisia (55), Oman (53) and Jordan (48). Israel ranked at 62.

But what makes me most at a loss is the lack of knowledge among Arab decision-makers about the main causes of climate change, and what could be done to stop it. A United Nations scientific panel agrees that climate change is one of the biggest threats facing our planet. The main reason is the global rapid growth in energy production and consumption since the 1950s—by burning fossil fuels like coal, gas and oil. Intensive agriculture and the cutting of forests also emit carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions that heat up the Earth. The result is more devastating fresh weather events such as flash floods, storms, heat waves, mudslides or droughts. This greenhouse effect also leads to the melting of glaciers in the North and South poles, causing sea levels to rise.

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Arab states need to face that climate change is already hitting them and that they must deal with it. No one is saying that oil and gas should be left untouched underground. But to help avert the crisis, a serious global cut of CO2 emissions should go hand in hand with much less oil, gas and coal burnt. This does not mean an economic disaster for Arab oil-producing countries. It could be a historic chance to produce hydrogen in a sustainable way with solar power.

Let us imagine all over the Arab world, millions of square kilometers of solar panels producing hydrogen. This would create a hydrogen economy, in which energy is stored and transported by pipelines or tankers. When burning hydrogen in heating systems, energy plants, vehicles or aircraft the exhaust pipes and chimneys will only release water in the atmosphere. Such an energy revolution needs decades of massive investments in this technology and in a new global infrastructure. Under this strategy, oil countries would slowly reduce their oil output while exporting more and more hydrogen. Oil reserves would last longer.

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