Arab Reform Initiative

Conference Report, 4 January 2023

Webinar Summary: Documenting the Impact of Armed Conflicts on the Environment in the Middle East



On 29 November 2022, the Arab Reform Initiative's Environmental Politics Program , in collaboration with Orient Matters and the Robert Bosch Stiftung organized a webinar entitled "Documenting the impact of armed conflicts on the environment in the Middle East: Filling the Gaps" which explored the impact conflicts in West Asia and North Africa have on the environment, with a focus on Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Sudan. The webinar sought to frame and answer issues related to how has armed conflict impacted the environment, how environmental issues have contributed to conflicts, how humanitarian efforts, reconstruction initiatives, peace building and transitional justice can and should integrate environmental considerations, and the role environmental activists can play in peace building.

Three speakers with different backgrounds contributed to the discussion. Dr. Younes Abouyoub, Director of the Governance and State-Building Division for the Middle East and North African Region at the United Nations, Natasha Carmi, Lead Water Specialist at the Geneva Water Hub, and Wim Zwijnenburg who serves as Humanitarian Disarmament Project Leader for PAX. Sarine Karajerjian, Environmental Politics program director at the Arab Reform Initiative, moderated the discussion.

Dr Younes Abouyoub started by stressing how environmental factors are an integral part of a conflict's dynamics. "We cannot say that environmental degradation or global warming is the main factor behind violent conflicts. But it is becoming one of the main drivers. Traditionally among the main drivers of conflict - we would all agree - are injustice, socio-economic injustice, political marginalization and inequality (…) environmental degradation is a risk multiplier. It worsens conditions that are already prone to the rise of violent conflict." To illustrate this, Dr Younes Abouyoub brought forth the case of the Darfur conflict, which has been ongoing since 2003. Although often characterized as an ethnic conflict, the reality is more complex as the conflict started with disputes between farmers and herders competing for land following severe recurrent droughts in the 1980s and early 2000s. Due to the specificities of Sudan's institutional setup, namely government policies favoring some ethnic groups over others, the conflict developed dynamics and characteristics that went beyond the scope of the original nature of the fighting. "Violent conflicts weaken these communities and countries so that they are not in a position to adapt to the changing world around

them."

Natasha Carmi followed by explaining the work of the Geneva Water Hub, which was founded in 2014, and in 2015, 15 co-convening countries launched a Panel recommending how to best use water to build sustainable, equitable and long-lasting peace. Indeed, during armed conflicts, "water is both a tool and a victim", meaning that it simultaneously exists as a weapon of war, a cause for conflict, a victim of the conflict, and also a means towards a just and sustainable peace. Natasha Carmi also added that water infrastructure is an indication of political stability, meaning that water quality is an equally crucial factor that must be accounted for while assessing the relationship between conflict and the environment. To further promote using water as a tool and instrument for peace, the Geneva Water Hub established the Global Observatory for Water and Peace in 2018, as a space where local voices, along with other partners, share and reflect on how water can be used as a leverage for peace. Indeed, the Observatory allows "local voices youth, women, media, as well as think tanks and policy-making entities to come together and voice their reflections and share experiences".

Wim Zwijnenburg focused on understanding how remote sensing and satellite imaging are used to detect and document the destructive effects of conflict on the environment. He illustrated this by presenting different satellite images taken over Syria showing how oil pollution caused by conflict-induced infrastructural neglect has damaged the Syrian coastline. He also presented satellite pictures of the damage extensive logging has done to Syrian forests. In his words, an "increase in fuel prices led to a lot of deforestation. Since 2015, there was a rapid increase in this phenomenon that saw over 30% or close to 40% forest loss in all of Syria". He stressed that the reason researchers use remote sensing is to allow them to monitor the direct impact of conflicts and to complete some knowledge gaps. However, this method is prone to creating narrow and shallow perspectives as it cannot account for already existing socio-economic dynamics, hence the importance of travelling and doing ground verification with the affected people. As he stated, "We need local communities to be involved in that debate (…) because what we see is not always directly what they experience or consider a priority."

Answering a question from the audience on how should NGOs understand and contextualize human needs and turn from linear to circular economic aid, Dr

Younes Abouyoub responded that this is a collective problem in search of a collective solution. Thus, it is a systemic problem, meaning that there is an imperative to reconsider "our development paradigm, our international governance system, and seriously take actions (…) it is about structural issues, that have to be dealt with nationally, and most of all, internationally."

On the question of the evaluation processes and the indicators that can be used to measure the impact of the environment on peace and war, Natasha Carmi responded that there is a need to define what we mean by peace. In her words "Is it the absence of armed conflict? Or is it more within a broader issue which is the attainment of the sustainable development goals?" Each definition requires different indicators and would result in vastly different policy recommendations.

Wim Zwijnenburg answered a question on the Responsibility to Protect, the obligation to protect civilians in times of conflict, and how this relates to conflict-induced environmental degradation. According to him, the impact of conflict on the environment is so multifaceted and complex, there are no special mechanisms within international frameworks on how to deal with it. He stated that "we should be looking towards an established framework with additional funds capable of dealing with acute clean-up and remediation efforts." He also stressed that civil society should be involved in those processes and can serve as a partner in response and reconstruction efforts.

The issues discussed during the webinar served as the foundation for our in-person conference to be held between 31 January and 2 February in the Rotana Gefinor Hotel in Beirut. The conference will host six panels that will be discussing the various nexuses between conflicts, the environment and climate change. More than 25 speakers are expected to join us to contribute with their unique insights and perspectives to what we hope will be a stimulating and enriching gathering.

Arab Reform Initiative

About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

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