

The level of disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic has revealed how ill-prepared governments and international institutions are for anything beyond their routine activities. When normality is once again restored, the world must learn the lessons from today's events in order to prepare for, and mitigate, the worst effects of an even bigger challenge: climate change and global warming. For the MENA region, one of the most pressing questions will be how to handle flows of people displaced by climate change.

Among many neglected aspects of the consequences of climate change is that of climate migration and refugees. This is not just an apocalyptic prophecy of a distant future; people becoming displaced in their own countries or becoming refugees in foreign countries due to climate change is taking place already. According to the World Migration Report 2020, of the 28m new internal displacements across 148 countries and territories in 2018, 61% (17.2m) were triggered by natural disasters.^[1]

Conflict, resource insecurity and population displacement

There is a consensus among experts that the MENA region, in particular, will be intensely affected by large movements of people caused by climate change.^[2]

Civil conflict, escalating sectarian violence and terrorism has already pushed millions beyond their borders to become refugees in the region. The wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya have made clear the role of climate change in the vicious cycle of deprivation and conflict: climate change exacerbates food and water insecurity, triggering wars and population displacement, which leads to even greater resource scarcity – and more conflict.

In more stable and prosperous parts of the region, droughts, sandstorms and flash floods are becoming increasingly common, affecting food and water security for both rural and urban populations, endangering lives and taking a huge economic toll.

In Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, floods have resulted in 122 people killed and more than 350 missing; and in Alexandria rising sea levels are putting as many as 5m people at risk. Decreasing rainfall and higher temperatures have caused the Dead Sea to shrink by almost a third in the last two decades, putting at risk thousands of jobs in tourism, agriculture and mineral extraction sectors in Israel, Jordan and

Palestine.

Evidence of the relationship between climate and migration in MENA is weaker than in most other regions, so it is difficult to say to what extent households in climate-affected areas perceive deteriorating weather conditions to be a threat, or how many people move as a result of climate change. ^[3]

In 2014 the World Bank estimated that climate probably accounted for between 10% and 20% of migration in the region, and that these flows were mostly internal, from rural to urban areas.^[4]

A regional survey carried out in that year found a strong perception, especially among those in the agriculture sector, that rainfall was more erratic – or that there was less of it – temperatures were rising, droughts becoming more frequent, and air pollution worsening, all resulting in frequent crop failures leading to loss of income, and a higher probability of migration.^[5]

Fostering cooperation, investing in tech – solutions to stem the tide

MENA governments have the ability to prevent climate-related population displacement through domestic, regional and global cooperation, and by working with the private sector to develop and deploy technology solutions to slow climate change.

Desalination, especially via solar-powered units, combats both [water shortages](#) and greenhouse gas emissions. The MENA region is a leading force in the water desalination market and accounts for 48% of global desalination projects. According to some estimates, investment in this industry is expected to reach \$4.3bn within the next two years.^[6]

[Advanced irrigation systems](#), especially computer-controlled drip irrigation could increase food production with less water, and therefore will enhance food security and reduce climate migration.

The region should also develop a cooperation mechanism with the twin goals of meeting the criteria set by the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, and develop strategies to respond to population displacements as these occur.

One example of regional cooperation to reduce the impact of climate change on populations and their livelihoods is the agreement signed by the governments of Israel and Jordan to co-fund a pipeline

carrying water from the Red Sea to the Dead Sea. This might not come without a price, as Red Sea water will probably cause some harm to the Dead Sea's delicate ecosystem; yet, without this project it will be only a matter of time before the Dead Sea disappears anyway.

Governments also need to develop programmes that provide support for those hit by floods and droughts and assist those who move to towns and cities. Instead of seeing climate migrants as a burden, it would be useful to help them to find jobs and establish their own businesses, including through their existing tribal and family networks.

Acknowledging the threat

Addressing the problem of climate-related population displacement head-on means bringing to an end, or at least marginalising, climate change denial and apathy, coupled with legislative action that recognises the specific phenomenon of climate refugees. Further research is required that will guide all segments of society on how to limit the impacts of climate change, including those natural disasters that are a result of our overheated planet.

Yossi Mekelberg is a professor of international relations and the faculty lead on outreach projects at Regent's University, London, and a senior consulting research fellow with Chatham House's MENA programme. His interests include politics of the Middle East, Israeli politics, the Middle East peace process, International relations theory and US foreign policy towards the region. Yossi is a consultant at Castlereagh Associates.

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