

The Prospects for a Regional Climate Forum in the Middle East

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This paper examines the prospects for establishing a regional multilateral forum to help address climate change in the Middle East. The document defines the constructs of forums, analyzes the characteristics of various regional forums around the world, and discusses the pros and cons of such frameworks in general and their relevance to Israel in particular. The paper also describes opportunities for leveraging existing policy structures in the Middle East to enhance transboundary climate cooperation, presents new ideas for such regional cooperation, and points out the barriers to such an endeavor.

A. Introduction

The Middle East is one of the few regions in the world that lacks a broad-based multilateral framework for dialogue and cooperation on cross-border challenges. However, recent years have been marked by increasing calls to develop regional cooperation frameworks, including, for example, in the annual Manama Dialogue conference, hosted by the Bahrain International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).² The conference, which defines itself as a high-level forum of government officials and experts devoted to discussing burning Middle East issues, held two sessions on regional security cooperation frameworks in 2022.³ The British Chatham House policy institute⁴ also embarked on a new project in 2022 titled “Building a Cooperative Regional Security Architecture in the Middle East,” conducting a series of dialogues with representatives from more than 20 countries in the region and issuing over a dozen papers examining the feasibility of cooperation on cross-border

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² The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) is devoted to the study of security, risk, and armed conflict: <https://www.iiss.org/>

³ Information about the Manama Dialogue available at <https://www.iiss.org/events/manama-dialogue/manama-dialogue-2022/agenda-2022>

⁴ Institute website: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/>

challenges.⁵ The U.N. Security Council also discussed the idea in October 2020,⁶ and various papers written by senior officials currently serving in the Biden administration, including National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, expressed support for the idea.⁷

The first months of 2023 in Israel have so far been characterized by an all-consuming focus on domestic social rifts, with the exception of burning security threats. However, even at this time, it is incumbent upon Israel to continue addressing global and long-term challenges. Climate change is such a challenge, one that on one hand risks exacerbating internal and regional problems, but on the other hand, if handled correctly, could be a bridge to enhance regional resilience, form new connections, and mitigate threats. This paper examines the specific question of whether the appropriate framework for promoting regional cooperation in the Middle East is a climate forum, which would help countries cope with shared environmental threats, assist in de-escalation in other areas, and promote dialogue and cooperation. The paper also analyzes how a regional climate forum could promote Israel's integration into the region.

To answer this question, we reviewed literature on regional forums around the globe, cataloged existing regional cooperation frameworks, interviewed experts from a variety of fields, and held a roundtable workshop on the nature of Israel's integration into regional frameworks. The document begins with a definition of the term "regional forum," describes various examples and characteristics of regional forums in other contexts, and reviews existing regional Middle East initiatives with an emphasis on those in which Israel participates. The paper then presents ideas for climate cooperation that Israel and its partners can promote in the Middle East, highlights key takeaways, and proposes recommendations for policymakers.

B. What is a regional forum?

There is no single agreed definition of the term "regional forum", but it is possible to derive one based on different fields of knowledge.⁸ According to its legal definition,⁹ a regional forum is a legally established body that focuses on "the definition and execution of strategies for developing and supporting activities" in the geographic area in which it operates.

⁵ Information about the Chatham House project is available at <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/categories/regional-security>

⁶ UN (2020), 'Remarks at the Security Council Meeting on the "Maintenance of International Peace and Security: Comprehensive Review of the Situation in the Persian Gulf Region": Speech, António Guterres, Secretary-General, Security Council, New York', 20 October 2020, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-10-20/comprehensive-review-of-situation-persian-gulf-region-remarks-security-council>.

⁷ Benaim, D. and Sullivan, J. (2020), 'America's Opportunity in the Middle East: Diplomacy Could Succeed Where Military Force Has Failed', Foreign Affairs, 22 May 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-05-22/americas-opportunity-middle-east>

⁸ The Cambridge Dictionary offers several definitions of "forum": 1) (in ancient Rome) a public place where meetings were held; 2) a place where people can exchange opinions and ideas on a particular issue; 3) an internet community or discussion group. In our context, the term is used to describe frameworks of cooperation.

⁹ See glossary <https://www.lawinsider.com/dictionary/regional-forum>

According to self-definitions by various regional forums around the world,¹⁰ a forum is an important platform for dialogue, an intergovernmental mechanism that allows a regional space for learning and knowledge exchange,¹¹ or an initiative that enables dealing with a regional existential challenge from a regional perspective.¹² According to various academic sources,¹³ a forum is a multilateral framework, which is usually an independent body working to advance its stated goals.

A review of different forums around the world points to a number of common characteristics of multilateral cooperation frameworks, including the involvement of more than two participants, demarcation of the geographic area and identification of potential partners, continuity and consistency of the forum's activity, and an orderly and agreed management and leadership mechanism.

Based on the variety of definitions and characteristics of forums, we chose to define a regional forum as **an independent body operating in a defined geographical area that convenes governments or organizations from different countries and serves as a framework for regular and ongoing engagement and activity. A regional forum has a defined structure and it approaches its goals with a regional perspective.**

Regional forums have various advantages. First, they are regular and long-term engagement mechanisms that facilitate connections and promote trust among players. Forums also create an additional communication channel between countries with diplomatic relations, as well as pave the way for formal or informal communications channel between countries with no bilateral diplomatic relations. In addition, forums can enhance collaboration by providing participants with the opportunity to learn about others' interests and motives, which helps to dispel wrong assumptions and misconceptions.

At the same time, regional forums have a number of disadvantages. First, establishing and participating in a regional forum require an investment of resources, such as personnel and budgets. In addition, forums can add a layer of bureaucracy, which might slow decision-making processes. Moreover, forums can become a platform for mutual bashing and criticism among countries. However, the most fundamental disadvantage of forums—which is also sometimes an advantage—is the interdependence between participants, which can be perceived as undermining their sovereignty if the interests and positions of other players and the regional perspective trumps national considerations.

¹⁰ According to the Australian government's description of ASEAN <https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/regional-architecture/asean-regional-forum-arf>

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¹² According to the UN definition <https://unece.org/regional-forum-background>

¹¹ From a proposal to establish a regional water management forum in the southern United States <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1035&context=scwrc>

¹³ See, for example, Tsuyoshi Kawasaki (2006) "Neither skepticism nor romanticism: the ASEAN Regional Forum as a solution for the Asia-Pacific Assurance Game," *The Pacific Review*, 19:2, 219-237, DOI: 10.1080/09512740500473254; Stephanie Lawson (2017) "Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands Forum: a critical review," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 55:2, 214-235, DOI: 10.1080/14662043.2017.1280205.

C. Characteristics of regional forums

There are numerous types of regional forums, which have varying characteristics that accordingly shape their nature and conduct. They can be grouped according to the following categories:

1. **“Hard” versus “soft” forums** – The terms “hard” and “soft” power are used to describe the way one actor makes another take a certain course of action. Hard power will include measures such as sanctions, vetoes, and the use of physical force (usually military), while soft power will include public diplomacy and discourse, cultural activities, funding, promoting research and policy directions, and others. Regional forums also differ in the means they use to achieve cooperation among its participants. **“Hard” forums** can force players to act by threatening to sanction them, whereas **“soft” forums**, on the other hand, serve as platforms for engagement and the creation of a common language that enables direct information exchange between players. They provide infrastructure and encourage joint action but without a coercive mechanism. The C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, comprising nearly 100 cities worldwide, is more of a hard forum, requiring its members to meet the emissions reduction targets set by the forum or risk expulsion. The organization offers a support network for formulating and implementing climate policy, and cities that do not present action plans and concrete implementation measures may receive a “warning card” and find themselves ousted. The organization includes four Middle East cities among its members: Amman, Istanbul, Dubai, and Tel Aviv.¹⁴ On the other hand, the Union for Mediterranean (UfM) is an example of a softer forum. It raises funds to support a wide range of regional projects, writes policy guidelines, and conducts regional dialogues between government representatives and civil society organizations. Israel is also a member of this organization.¹⁵
2. **Forums that represent a “cooperative” approach versus a “collective” approach** – **A collective approach framework, “security against,”** usually entails security cooperation against a common external threat. For example, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was born in preparation for a possible attack by the Soviet Union. Arab-Israeli security cooperation, which reached its peak with the 2020 Abraham Accords, was interpreted, among other things, as an attempt to establish a Middle Eastern alliance dedicated to regional defense against the Iranian threat.¹⁶ On the other hand, **cooperative frameworks have a “security within” mindset**, and are intended to strengthen ties and cooperation, develop dialogue to deal with broad challenges, and reduce the risk of conflict between countries that lack mutual trust. Historical precedents indicate that forums can start out as “collective” organizations and turn into cooperative settings down the line, and vice versa. Forums can also start operating without organized institutions, which might only develop later. For example, the Organization for Security

¹⁴ C40 Cities (2022) <https://www.c40.org/cities/>

¹⁵ <https://ufmsecretariat.org/who-we-are/member-states/>

¹⁶ Mohamed Chtatou, “The Middle East NATO: From Fiction to Fact,” Fikra Forum, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 14, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/middle-east-nato-fiction-fact>

and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) grew out of the 1975 Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), an informal conference on security and cooperation. The conference resulted in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, designed to reduce tensions between the Soviet bloc and the West through agreement on the post-World War II status quo. With the end of the Cold War, various institutions began developing within the organization in the 1990s to deal with issues of economics, environment, and democratic governance. The OSCE now has 57 members, even some opposing geopolitical blocs, such as Russia and the United States.¹⁷

- Government versus non-official forums – **A non-official forum** is less constrained by state-level relations, enabling informal and sometimes even clandestine meetings between representatives from countries that do not have diplomatic ties. Therefore, a non-official forum can build infrastructure for cooperation where there is an official channel vacuum. Moreover, civil society and business organizations are often better connected to the needs of communities and less prone to corruption and bureaucratic failures. The EcoPeace Middle East North Africa Regional Forum is an example of a civil-society forum led by the Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian environmental organization EcoPeace. The forum has established a relationship and trust among its participants and brings together representatives of civil society, government, academia, and the private sector. The forum meetings have already yielded a number of business and NGO collaborations and made introductions between government officials of different countries.¹⁸ EcoPeace has also succeeded, after three decades of effort, to promote the conceptual infrastructure for the Prosperity Green and Blue, desalinated water-for-renewable energy project between Israel, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates.¹⁹ **A government forum** wields a wide range of influence, with decision-making and execution authority. Such a forum can provide the necessary infrastructure for meetings between civil society and business representatives, as well as affect diplomatic relations between countries. While a government-level forum usually requires more diplomatic effort and faces diplomatic barriers, experience shows that cooperation that begins at the official level has greater prospects for success and wider impact. This requires political motivation, a sense of mission, and regional actors to lead the initiative. An example of a government-level framework is the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM), a forum that brings together legislators from 34 countries for political dialogue.²⁰ Another example is the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), which is comprised of government ministers (usually energy ministers).²¹ Forums that

¹⁷ <https://www.osce.org/> -Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

¹⁸ <https://ecopeaceme.org/> EcoPeace Middle East

¹⁹ Danny Zaken, "Foreign Relations: Israel, Jordan and UAE Sign Agreement to Accelerate Water Project in Exchange for Electrification," Globes, November 8, 2022, <https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1001429191>

¹⁹ <https://www.pam.int/en>

²⁰ <https://emgf.org/> East Mediterranean Gas Forum

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combine representation by government and other sectors is optimal, such as the committees operating under the Gas Forum, including an advisory committee of private sector representatives who elevate various issues and challenges so that the forum can address them.

4. Regional versus intra-regional forums – **Regional organizations** focus on representing and strengthening the region's ability to influence global policy as a collective. For example, the Nordic Co-operation and Climate Change Forum established professional working groups and institutions dealing with climate research and policy in order to formulate a regional position on various issues and influence international agreements as a group.²² As a single regional body, the OSCE cooperates with 11 different countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia; similarly, the secretariat of the Organization of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), described in more detail below, conducts negotiations with various countries as a single unit. **Intra-regional forums**, on the other hand, emphasize strengthening ties and relationships within a region. For example, the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) focuses on strengthening trade channels among the member countries, establishing joint institutions, and formulating a regional strategy on various issues.

5. Topic-focused versus broad-based forums – Regional cooperation forums can focus on a single topic or a broad range of topics.²³ Occasionally, **topic-focused forums** emerge from a crisis to identify a specific response. Such focused cooperation was notable in the strategy that the African Union jointly developed with the African Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) to deal with COVID-19.²⁴ This cooperation provided a basis for partnership between countries and health organizations in a focused response to the pandemic. It awarded the African Union international prestige and donations from various organizations, such as the European Union, which have invested in health infrastructure, information dissemination, and vaccines. A specific focus helps fine-tune a forum's goals and activities. On the other hand, forums dealing with **a wide range of topics** are more flexible, which is an advantage. These forums usually consist of working groups that change and adapt according to emerging challenges and opportunities. ASEAN is a kind of complex "patchwork quilt" of a number of forums, some governmental and some representing civil society, that collaborate with other frameworks and include mini-forums that operate flexibly and address challenges as they arise.

²² Nordic Policy Organization <https://www.norden.org/en/information/nordic-co-operation-and-climate-change>

²³ Owie, Udoka Ndidiamaka. 2022. "Multilateralism and Management of Public Health Emergencies: A Case Study of the Africa Joint Continental Strategy for COVID-19 Outbreak". Southern African Public Law 37 (1):15 pages. <https://doi.org/10.25159/2522-6800/10290>.

²⁴ Link to the official strategy document:

https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/38264-doc-africa_joint_continental_strategy_for_covid-19_outbreak.pdf

6. Forums led by an external versus a regional actor – A number of international bodies support the establishment of regional cooperation frameworks, chiefly the U.N. and its affiliated institutions, the European Union, and the United States. Such **international support** for a regional process is advantageous in providing knowledge, budgets, international support, and levers of influence that attract various players. For example, the Asia-Pacific Regional Forum on Environment and Health was established and supported by the U.N. in 2007, and includes 36 member states. It is a professional forum with structured working teams addressing a wide range of topics, including air quality, health and impact assessment, chemicals, and waste, within the framework of sustainable development as defined by the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). On the other hand, the main disadvantage of frameworks supported by an international organization is that their mission and operation are dictated by an external agenda that does not necessarily reflect local needs and aspirations. **Frameworks led by regional actors** have an inherent advantage in creating buy-in and ownership and having the freedom to determine the agenda and overarching goals. ASEAN is an example of a regionally led forum administered by the countries that established it. The forum's activity has expanded over the years, both in the number of member states and in its areas of activity, and its secretariat rotates among partner countries.

Notwithstanding their different characteristics, analysis of the various types of forums yields important insights:

- A forum that aspires, among other things, to promote de-escalation and prevent conflict should opt for an expansive approach and invite as many regional actors as possible, including those on opposing sides of conflict. However, since not all countries are likely to join at the outset, it is advisable to start with those that do join and build the forum over time, leaving the door open to additional participants. For example, some OSCE members joined only about a decade after its founding and others joined even later.²⁵
- Formal state-level forums have clear advantages, but involving other sectors is important to accurately define either sectoral or societal needs and operating methods. Broad representation of officials alongside civilian participants, combined with a platform for knowledge exchange and capacity-building channels, can also help raise generous international funding.
- A country or entity perceived as a neutral actor may assist in developing a regional track, as Finland did in the Helsinki process. External actors can also act as hosts, conveners, or observers and assist with funding. On the other hand, such frameworks' prospects for success increase when they are led by local players, with external actors having an important contribution but not controlling the process. The Cypriot initiative (analyzed below) is particularly interesting since Cyprus is a regional player in a state of dispute with Turkey, but not with Israel, the Arab world, or Iran,

²⁵ <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/a-middle-east-regional-security-dialogue-process-getting-the-ball-rolling>; Jones, P. (2022), "A Middle East Cooperation and Security System: Has the Time Come?", Middle East Policy, 29(1), pp. 74–89, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12620>

rendering its leadership as both an internal and external actor while being perceived as neutral by most countries.

- Establishing norms to which all members agree to adhere, such as respect for the sovereignty of others, is of key importance, as is quickly promoting confidence-building measures that demonstrate the benefits of cooperation. Members must be assured that cooperation yields greater benefits than independent action.²⁶
- At the same time, even a forum with established norms cannot prevent players from acting upon their self-defined key interests, especially in extreme cases. For example, despite a decades-long mandate to prevent conflict and develop norms, the OSCE failed to prevent Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the organization now is at an unprecedented low.

D. Why a regional forum is the right climate response framework for the Middle East

The climate crisis is the type of challenge that requires cooperation, as demonstrated by the global mobilization of commitments, conventions, and annual conferences. Whether we like it or not, the crisis demonstrates the interdependence among countries. At the same time, although the crisis is global, its physical manifestations are mostly regional. Therefore, cooperation focused on the climate problems that are region-specific has clear advantages. Moreover, even if countries do their best to mitigate the effects of climate change within their borders, they will still be vulnerable to the 'climate kickback'—the transboundary effects of climate change, which challenge nearby countries. These threats are particularly acute in regions vulnerable to both climate change and poor governance and instability, such as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Indeed, the MENA is considered a climate change hot spot,²⁷ warming at twice the average global rate and recently reaching 1.5 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial era—the limit that the international community aspires to refrain from exceeding in order to secure a safe future for humankind.²⁸ It is the most arid region in the world, home to 11 of the 17 countries suffering from the most extreme water stress.²⁹ The combination of water shortages, poor

²⁶ For a consideration of the Helsinki model's applicability in the Persian Gulf, see Wigell, M., Aaltola, M. and Hagglund, M. (2020), "The Helsinki Process and its applicability: Towards regional security-building in the Persian Gulf," Briefing Paper 288, Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/the-helsinki-process-and-its-applicability>

²⁷ Mekelberg, Y. (2022), "Without urgent action on climate change, the Middle East will become uninhabitable", TRENDS Research & Advisory, 23 March 2022, <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/without-urgent-action-on-climate-change-the-middle-east-will-become-uninhabitable/>

²⁸ Duenwald, Christoph, Yasser Abdih, Kerstin Gerling, et al. "Feeling the Heat: Adapting to Climate Change in the Middle East and Central Asia." International Monetary Fund (IMF), Departmental Papers 2022, no. 008 (2022). [file:///C:/Users/Shira%20Efron/Downloads/ACCMECAEA%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Shira%20Efron/Downloads/ACCMECAEA%20(1).pdf)

²⁹ Rutger Willem Hofste, Paul Reig and Leah Schleifer, "17 Countries, Home to One-Quarter of the World's Population, Face Extremely High Water Stress," World Resources Institute, August 6, 2019 <https://www.wri.org/insights/17-countries-home-one-quarter-worlds-population-face-extremely-high-water-stress>

water management, agricultural problems, and unhealthy dietary habits make most countries in the region completely dependent on food imports.³⁰ Accelerated desertification is leading to an increase in the frequency and intensity of dust and sand storms.³¹ Between 243 to 272 dust days are currently recorded each year in Iraq, and this number is expected to rise to 300 by 2050 under a business-as-usual scenario.³² Extreme weather events—with storms (including cyclones and hurricanes) on one hand, and prolonged heat waves on the other—are striking the MENA. Scientific analysis predicts that the Mediterranean's sea level could rise sharply by as much as one meter by the middle of the century in a severe, but possible scenario (including tides and seasonal storm effects), threatening to inundate wide areas including in the cities of Alexandria, Benghazi, and Algiers, as well as sections of Tunisia's touristic coastlines.³³

In addition to its environmental, economic, and health implications, climate change is considered a threat multiplier that exacerbates socioeconomic and ethnic tensions, creates a conducive environment for the emergence of sub-state actors such as terrorist organizations, and increases the risk of mass migration and government destabilization. This risk is especially frightening in the countries of the MENA, many of which suffer from wide socioeconomic gaps, a lack of proper institutions, poor governance, and particularly rapid population growth. While countries in the region differ in their ability to cope with the climate crisis, its cross-border effects could affect regional climate resilience and security as a whole.³⁴ A notable recent example of this phenomenon is Syria's civil war, which began partially as a result of a particularly severe drought that pushed 1.5 million people from rural areas into cities, heightening existing tensions and placing additional pressure on poor infrastructure, is a useful example in this context.³⁵

In addition to the environmental case for regional cooperation, increased regional diplomatic activity over the past couple of years is an indication that at this moment in time, the countries of the region prefer dialogue to confrontation. This activity includes Qatar repairing ties with several of its fellow Gulf Cooperation Council states the normalization of Turkey's relations with the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel; Syria's readmission to the Arab League; the UAE and Saudi Arabia's resumption of diplomatic ties with Iran; and, of course, the Abraham Accords. This flurry of diplomacy, growing attention to climate

³⁰ Ferid Belhaj and Ayat Soliman, "MENA Has a Food Security Problem, But There Are Ways to Address It," The World Bank, September 25, 2021 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/opinion/2021/09/24/mena-has-a-food-security-problem-but-there-are-ways-to-address-it>

³¹ Duenwald et al., 2022

³² Chenar Chalak, "Dust storm hospitalizes thousands across Iraq, Kurdistan Region," May 16, 2022, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/160520224>

³³ Wehrey, Frederic, and Fawal, Ninar, "Cascading Climate Effects in the Middle East and North Africa: Adapting Through Inclusive Governance," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 24, 2022 <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/02/24/cascading-climate-effects-in-middle-east-and-north-africa-adapting-through-inclusive-governance-pub-86510>

Duenwald et al., 2022

³⁴ Sagatom Saha, "How climate change could exacerbate conflict in the Middle East," MENA Source, Atlantic Council, May 14, 2019 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/how-climate-change-could-exacerbate-conflict-in-the-middle-east/>

³⁵ Carmit Valensi, Shira Efron and Kim Noah. "A Decade of the War in Syria: Climate Change, Political Stability and Everything in Between," INSS Issue 1449, March 24, 2021, INSS (Institute for National Security Studies), <https://www.inss.org.il/he/publication/syria-climate-change/>

issues and the global climate summits hosted by MENA countries (COP27 in Egypt in November 2022 and COP28 in the UAE in November-December 2023) all incentivize for intra-regional cooperation.³⁶

As the following section demonstrates, the MENA already has regional frameworks for environmental cooperation. However, this unique combination of circumstances creates the potential for enhancing such cooperation, possibly by establishing dedicated forums.

E. Regional MENA forums, with and without Israel

Regional multilateral cooperation organizations have existed in the MENA for many years, including the Arab League³⁷, established in 1945, and smaller regional organizations such as the GCC³⁸ and the Arab Maghreb Union, established in the 1970s and '80s. The Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership is a relatively new regional framework that brings together countries of the region, excluding Israel, as well as international actors. Its main objective is to bring stability to Iraq and the region through cooperation.³⁹ Israel, neither Muslim nor Arab, has not been integrated into these regional frameworks because of its conflict with the Palestinians and the Arab world, and several such frameworks, especially the Arab League, are platforms for anti-Israel activity.

There are specific environmental and climate-focused MENA regional initiatives in which Israel does not take part. For example, the Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment in the Persian Gulf⁴⁰ brings together eight countries, including Iran, and the Regional Initiative for the Assessment of the Impact of Climate Change on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region (RICCAR) facilitates cooperation between Arab states and the U.N. on studying the impact of climate change on water resources in the Arab world.⁴¹ Another prominent regional climate framework is the Saudi Green Initiative, launched in 2021 to combat climate change and desertification. It includes projects for planting trees, promoting renewable energy, and preserving biodiversity, along with the establishment of a financial carbon market, issuing green bonds, and more. The initiative seeks to unite the countries of the Middle East and formulate a joint action plan. Israel is not currently a member of the initiative, although the framework offers interesting prospects for future integration.⁴²

³⁶ Efron, Shira. A MENA regional approach to address the implications of climate change, "Building a Cooperative Regional Security Architecture in the Middle East", Chatham House, October 20, 2022, <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/a-mena-regional-approach-to-address-the-implications-of-climate-change>

³⁷ The Arab League was founded by Egypt and the British in 1945, it began as a forum of 7 countries and today brings together 22 Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa region.

³⁸ The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) brings together six countries (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar). It was established in the 1980s to stabilize the region during the Iraq-Iran War by strengthening security and economic cooperation.

³⁹ Italian Institute for International Political Studies (USPI), The 2nd Baghdad Conference: A starting point for regional stability? December 22, 2022 <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/2nd-baghdad-conference-starting-point-regional-stability-37114>

⁴⁰ Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment <https://ropme.org/>

⁴¹ Regional Initiative for the Assessment of Climate Change Impacts on Water Resources and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in the Arab Region (RICCAR) - <https://riccar.org/index.php/riccar>

⁴² <https://www.greeninitiatives.gov.sa/mgi-summit/>

In contrast, Israel has participated in various regional forums in recent years. For example, Israel is a party to the Barcelona Convention, a multilateral framework devoted to protection of the Mediterranean Sea, and is a signatory of a number of the convention's protocols on issues such as the movement of ships and goods and waste treatment. The convention includes seven protocols, such as biodiversity and the circular economy, and coordinates events and activities. Professional representatives of Israel's Ministry of Environmental Protection participate in convention conferences and meet regional representatives, including those from enemy states such as Lebanon and Syria. Israeli representatives contribute their knowledge, mainly in the fields of desalination and water management, positioning the country as having unique expertise and knowledge to share. Israel, as part of the Mediterranean Basin, attaches great importance to the convention and the meetings, pays membership fees, and has designated officials in the Ministry of Environmental Protection who manage the relationship with the Central Secretariat (although flexibility is maintained and Israeli representatives at meetings are selected according to their professional role). While Israeli representatives have occasionally faced negativity from Palestinian representatives, for the most part the meetings are professional and devoid of politics.⁴³

Israel is also a member of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), an official international organization formally established in September 2020 in Cairo, with the stated goal of developing the regional gas market and promoting energy security. Israel's natural gas reserves strengthen its position in this framework. The establishment of the forum took almost three years and created various complexities, especially in the Israeli-Palestinian context, such as how to define the status of the Palestinian Authority and whether it can be registered in the forum as a state. Each member of the EMGF has veto power, and the Palestinians vetoed the UAE's participation in the forum after it signed the Abraham Accords—a decision Israel was forced to accept. The EMGF's single-issue focus makes it possible to limit its dealings to professional issues and set aside political ones. The gas forum demonstrates the potential to improve relations and professional ties between governments and professional ministries, especially between Israel and Egypt. Being an equal partner in this grouping rather than at its forefront, Israel is learning to conduct itself as part of an international framework characterized by regional interdependencies among member states.⁴⁴

The Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East Climate Change Initiative (EMME-CCI), also known as the Cyprus Initiative, is a highly significant evolving framework led by the Cypriot government. It comprises 19 countries from the region, including Israel, which is represented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Environmental Protection. The framework operates on two levels—government and academic. Most of its activity focuses on compiling scientific knowledge and formulating recommendations by 13 thematic task forces, which allow collaboration among dozens of scientists from the region, including Saudi Arabia, Iran,

⁴³ Information on Israel's participation in the Barcelona Convention is based on interviews with officials from the Ministry of Environmental Protection.

⁴⁴ Information on the Gas Forum and Israel's standing within it is based on interviews with a number of officials in the Ministry of Energy, the Electricity Authority, and the gas industry.

Lebanon, and Israel.⁴⁵ In 2022, the initiative held meetings at the level of ministers, and of prime ministers at COP27, which culminated in a joint declaration on their shared willingness to cooperate on addressing the climate challenge.⁴⁶ Subsequently, the initiative moved on to the next phase—formulating an action plan for the partner countries and establishing executive institutions. These will include a secretariat to manage the initiative’s activities and an executive council consisting of representatives of the member states. The initiative does not oblige partner countries to take specific measures; rather, it provides an infrastructure and offers various pathways and opportunities to build voluntary cooperation between members.⁴⁷

Two years ago, Israel launched a regional cooperation process, inviting the foreign ministers of the UAE, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, and Bahrain, along with the United States as an observer, to a summit in the Negev region. The summit led to these countries establishing the Negev Forum, a multilateral forum that would convene annually, each time in a desert city in a different country. The forum, which was officially launched in Bahrain in June 2022, has six working groups: clean energy, education and coexistence, food and water security, health, regional security, and tourism,⁴⁸ and each group is jointly led by two countries. The content and goals of the groups are still being worked out. To assist in the process, the Atlantic Council has launched the N7 project, which convenes regional experts to propose ideas for regional projects corresponding with the working groups.⁴⁹

Jordan was invited to the Negev Summit and the forum, but has so far refused to join. According to interviews with U.S. officials, progress in the Negev Forum is slow and not all member states have expressed interest in this partnership. Even in the face of achievements, such as a free-trade agreement signed in March 2023 between Israel and the UAE, broader cooperation is being delayed. A ministerial-level meeting of the Negev Forum scheduled to take place in Morocco in March 2023 has been postponed until further notice. The postponement comes against the backdrop of delaying an invitation for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to visit the UAE, condemnations and appeals by the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and Jordan to the U.N. concerning Israeli actions vis-à-vis the Palestinians, and a general sense of a chilling of the Abraham Accords. However, the professional issues of the working groups and cooperation at the working level still present important opportunities to promote regional thinking about shared challenges. Thus, the Negev Forum could become a leading multilateral regional framework, should the parties succeed in overcoming a variety of challenges, especially diplomatic barriers, and invite other important partners—mainly Jordan and the Palestinians.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ More about the working groups:

https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/news/climate_change_meeting_environment_ministers_from_region/he/news_files_2022_Concept%20Note%20and%20Scoping%20Profiles%20211213.docx_.pdf

⁴⁶ <https://emme-cci.org/cop-27/>

⁴⁷⁴⁶ <https://emme-cci.org/>

⁴⁸ <https://www.state.gov/negev-forum-steering-committee-joint-statement/>

⁴⁹ N7 Initiative <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/n7-initiative/>

⁵⁰ AFP, Morocco increasingly struggles to balance Israel ties with support for Palestinians, March 29, 2023 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/morocco-increasingly-struggles-to-balance-israel-ties-with-support-for-palestinians/>

F. Ideas for different types of climate forums in the Middle East

Regardless of existing regional cooperation frameworks, in some of which Israel takes part, there is potential for a dedicated regional MENA climate forum. Such a forum should differ from the Cypriot initiative, both in its geographical approach (i.e. it would not focus only on the Mediterranean Basin, although deriving and leading a sub-initiative of the Cypriot initiative is also an option) and in its areas of focus. Generally, regional climate forums can promote cooperation for two types of goals. First, they can seek to improve the regional response to climate emergencies, such as floods, fires, or severe food shortages through policies like institutionalizing mutual aid infrastructure. Second, they can promote crisis prevention by improving regional climate resilience through making resources more accessible to partner countries in terms of sustainable agriculture, conserving water resource, transitioning to renewable energies, improving supply chain resilience, and investing in and adopting technologies and strategies unique to the challenges facing the region.

Since disaster response and resilience-building are crucial for all countries of the region, yet at the same time are considered largely non-controversial, "soft" issues, climate is a possible point of cooperation even between countries in conflict. Such a forum may include Israel, Jordan, the Palestinians, Egypt, the UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and, in the future, Lebanon and Syria as well. In light of inherent diplomatic challenges, such a forum could start with cooperation between civil society and private sector representatives, yet would benefit from government financial support. Such backing would be based on the understanding that a forum could facilitate communication channels between countries, assist in de-escalation, and even develop into an official framework in the future. Israel would do well to invest resources in initiating and assuming a key role in such a forum, but in light of tensions with some countries in the region, allow an international or regional player to lead (as Egypt does in the regional gas forum).

Proposed ideas for a MENA climate forum:

- **Climate emergency response.** Countries in the region (such as Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Turkey, Cyprus, Egypt, and Jordan) already assist each other in addressing extreme weather events, especially in dealing with massive fires. Given the expected increase in the frequency and intensity of such events as a result of climate change, we propose institutionalizing this ad hoc cooperation and expanding it to additional partnerships. A climate emergency response forum can build structured mutual assistance mechanisms, enable joint training and exercises, develop a doctrine, pool resources, and enable the shared accumulation of assets (e.g. land and air fire fleet). Such a forum could also help with the response to earthquakes and other emergency events, as demonstrated by the global and

Yoel Guzansky, Ilan Zlat, Udi Dekel, "Between Huwara and Abu Dhabi: A Growing Challenge to Normalization Emerges," INSS Insight No. 1700, March 22, 2023
<https://www.inss.org.il/he/publication/huwara/> (Hebrew)

regional mobilization in which Israel participated after the February 2023 Turkey earthquake.⁵¹

- **A MENA weather forecasting and early warning forum.** Such a collaboration would develop regional systems for the early warning of extreme weather events and integrate these systems for cross-border impact analysis, including in low-lying areas such as Gaza, where early warning could prevent casualties and damages that typically occur every winter.
- **A MENA climate R&D hub.** This idea involves founding a collaborative center dedicated to dealing with climate problems unique to the region, including (but not limited to) desert agritech and mitigating the effects of dust storms on solar energy production and electricity infrastructure. This R&D center could be modeled after the Amman-based SESAME (Synchrotron-light for Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East) particle accelerator project, which was founded in 2017, receives funding from the European Union, and is run in cooperation with the U.N. It brings together scientists from Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Iran Turkey, Egypt, and Jordan, who jointly study physics using the accelerator.⁵²
- **A regional food security forum.** Such a forum would be devoted inter alia to R&D, knowledge exchange, jointly diversifying sources from which many MENA countries import food, improving supply chain resilience, reducing food waste, financial cooperation in commodity markets, examining the feasibility of a regional grain trade center, and securing commitments to avoid food export restrictions. It could even provide assistance to members in times of food crisis.
- **A forum for the protection of marine life and ecosystems.** Such a forum would be dedicated to the sea, focusing either on the Mediterranean Sea alone or also on the Red Sea. The Mediterranean region is particularly vulnerable to climate change, threatened both by sea level rise, which under certain scenarios could reach as high as one meter by the middle of the century, and degrading soil and coastal aquifers, which pose inundation risks for millions of people and infrastructure. High sea temperatures alter natural systems, affecting marine life and communities that rely on the sea. A forum dedicated to the challenges of the Mediterranean could be linked with the Cypriot initiative, focusing on embedding research into policymaking processes.⁵³

⁵¹ Israel's response to the earthquake in Turkey

<https://embassies.gov.il/yaounde/Departments/Pages/Israel's-response-to-the-earthquake-in-Turkey.aspx>

⁵² <https://www.sesame.org.jo/about-us/what-is-sesame>

⁵³ Efron, Chatham House, 2022

G. Conclusion and recommendations

This paper introduced the concept of a regional forum, reviewed examples of regional forums around the world and in the MENA, discussed the importance, advantages, and disadvantages of such forums, and proposed concrete ideas for a regional climate forum in the Middle East. Although such a forum would require substantial investment by each country and increase interdependencies, its advantages would outweigh its disadvantages. Specifically, a regional forum could become a direct communication channel between countries, strengthen cooperation, improve environmental resilience and, indirectly, promote regional stability.

This is especially true in the context of Israel, which aspires to assimilate into the region. Today, despite decades of exclusion from most regional frameworks, Israel maintains official and unofficial ties with many regional actors, enabling unprecedented integration into multilateral forums. However, to realize this potential and capitalize on the new regional circumstances and the transboundary nature of the climate crisis that incentivizes for cooperation, Israel should devote apt attention and resources to addressing climate change and promoting regional climate cooperation. Ideally, Israel should seek to join, expand, or establish a climate MENA forum along the lines suggested earlier. In doing so, it should consider the following insights and recommendations:

Capitalize existing regional frameworks to advance practical steps

Israel is already a partner in a number of regional organizations through which it can leverage political and climate interests. The formal level of the Cyprus initiative, for example, is currently under development, with member states being asked to lead and assume responsibilities. Israel should volunteer to coordinate one of the initiative's task forces, with an emphasis on areas in which it has clear advantages, such as agriculture and water. In addition, the Negev Forum's working groups should emphasize climatic issues important to MENA countries, such as desertification, sand and dust storms, urban heat, warming, and rising seas. The EMGF can also expand beyond its original mandate and become an energy forum, serving also as a platform for advancing renewable energy and transition of members to low-carbon economies (this is not a new idea and deserves further consideration, especially if it can lead to more countries joining). In light of talk about possible Israeli-Saudi normalization, Israel should try to integrate into the Saudi Green Initiative and even connect with the efforts of the Baghdad Conference through backchannel track II diplomacy.

If Israel initiates a new climate forum, it should do so thoughtfully, complementing existing initiatives, in order to avoid the perception that it is attempting to supersede or replace an existing track. Further, if Israel pursues a new forum, it should combine forces with regional or international partners, or both.

Support civil society and look for success stories

Experience shows that various organizations and platforms for meetings can gradually turn into permanent multilateral frameworks. Thus, Israel should ensure participation in conferences and informal collaborations and support civil society organizations and

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businesses engaged in regional cooperation. In addition, Israel would do well to take gradual steps, seek low hanging fruit, and build on modest success stories that can be expanded into more meaningful cooperation.

The Prosperity Green and Blue project between Israel, Jordan, and the UAE is an example of an initiative proposed by the NGO EcoPeace, which has evolved into an important diplomatic agreement. The deal is important in its own right, as well as for showcasing the benefits of environmental cooperation, despite skepticism and opposition by parts of the Jordanian public. All sides, especially Israel, should ensure the successful implementation of the agreement and perhaps even expand it to include the Palestinian Authority.

Transition from “the people shall dwell alone” state of mind into one of regional integration

The State of Israel is accustomed to relative isolation in the region and is hesitant about creating dependency on other countries. To a large extent, Israel functions as an island country: it is hardly connected by networks to its surroundings and maintains limited trade relations with its neighbors, except for the unique case of the Palestinians (although the water-for-energy agreement with Jordan and the free-trade agreement with the UAE may affect these trends). In both the Middle East and the global arena, Israel prefers bilateral ties over multilateral frameworks, partly because of anti-Israel bias in the U.N. and other international institutions because Israel often assumes that bilateral relations better serve its interests.

Even bilaterally, Israel is sometimes blamed for acting as more of a patron than a partner. In the region, Israel displays a “villa in the jungle” mentality, and many of its ideas for regional cooperation are based on the assumption that the countries of the region are the only ones that will benefit from Israeli capabilities, technology, and knowledge. It is important for Israel to assume that regional climate cooperation is a common interest of the highest order, for its own sake as well. Israel should also act humbly, seek to learn from other countries, and wisely know when to step back and let others lead. Israel should also advance its thinking on how to institutionalize and support cooperation and be willing to compromise and develop interdependencies.

Recognize that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains a barrier to regional integration

The conflict with the Palestinians has historically been a barrier to Israeli participation in regional forums and general integration into the Middle East; even though its importance has waned over the years, it remains an issue. While some argue that normalization with Arab states is detached from the peace process with the Palestinians, it has been consistently proven that this separation is not entirely realistic. Even though the Palestinians are not a top priority for Arab leaders, when tensions rise, public opinion in the Arab world still demands a response, as demonstrated by the recent reactions of leaders in Bahrain, Morocco, and the UAE to the Israeli flag march in Jerusalem and the

statements and actions of coalition members like Ministers Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben Gvir.⁵⁴

At the same time, Israelis sit alongside Palestinians in some regional networks, demonstrating the ability to work together to advance shared interests. Israeli and Palestinian membership in forums enables participation by other players without having to choose sides. Thus, it is important to encourage Palestinian participation in multilateral frameworks at the onset rather than trying to integrate them at a later and more difficult stage. A positive example in this regard is the EMGF, in which the Palestinians were members from the initial stages, in contrast to the Negev Forum, where they were not included. Their exclusion not only makes it difficult for them to join down the line, but it also keeps Jordan outside for now, and even reduces Egypt's motivation to actively participate. In contrast, in frameworks led by other actors (e.g. Egypt in the EMGF, the U.N. in the Barcelona Convention), Israel and the Palestinians can jointly leverage their membership to gain support for projects that develop Palestinian independence, protect water resources, and promote cross-border cooperation. Even if these are narrow technical issues, such cooperation can improve trust between the sides, and perhaps be leveraged under improved circumstances for diplomatic achievements.

⁵⁴ Joseph Epstein, "Why the Abraham Accords Are in Danger," *Newsweek*, March 31, 2023 <https://www.newsweek.com/why-abraham-accords-are-danger-opinion-1791627>; AFP 2023; רח' תובל 11, רמת גן 5252226 / info@mitvim.org.il / www.mitvim.org.il