

**“The position of the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries  
in regards to the COP21”**

By Lea PFEFFER

Course “Sociologie des Relations Internationales dans le Monde Arabe”

Taught by Laurent Bonnefoy at Sciences Po (Doctoral School)

Fall 2015

This paper has received the *KSP Student Paper Award*  
of the Kuwait Program at Sciences Po

Lea Pfeffer  
Mr. Bonnefoy  
Sociologie des Relations Internationales dans le Monde Arabe

### **The position of the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries in regards to the COP21**

Climate Change is a dynamic problem with various interests engaged: geopolitical, national, sovereign, social and economic variants. With the upcoming Conference of the Parties in Paris each member state of the UNFCCC is preparing its concerns and interests in regards to establishing a new binding climate change agreement. The Westphalia system places significant barriers to a possible international cooperation since the national interests prevail over the interest of the society as a whole.

The volatility of the Middle East is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Recently, many sources have stated that the temperatures are likely to increase to 122 degrees Fahrenheit this summer.<sup>1</sup> If there are no significant reductions to the emission of greenhouse gases (GHG) this region will become too hot for humans to inhabit. The journal, *Nature and Climate Change* has advocated the possible effects the increasing temperatures could have on the annual pilgrimage of the *hajj* stating that it “is likely to become hazardous to human health”.<sup>2</sup>

There is an impending precedent to curb GHG emissions in order to adhere to a 2 degree Celsius level of global warming. This seriously affects the oil production of the GCC and imposes constraints on the well being of their economies. The OPEC in which four members are part of the GCC (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Kuwait) detain oil reserves that will last for at least 100 more years, according to the *Financial Times*. This fuels national security interests to defend their market shares before the production of oil no longer becomes lucrative.<sup>3</sup> To analyze the positioning of the GCC countries it is important to first analyze the Intended National Determined Contributions (INDC) as well as understanding the importance of diversifying the economy. Secondly, to comprehend the obstacles integrated within the GCC and then highlight the social mobilization that is taking place to address climate change in the Middle East. The real concern is whether the Gulf countries will be able to surmount their national interests in the effort for a global solution to climate change.

#### **I. Climate Change and the Need for Immediate Action**

##### ***a) The Climate Change Initiatives***

An overview of the INDC of the GCC countries is vital to understanding their official positioning. Saudi Arabia’s contribution to the COP21 is crucial since it is the world-leading exporter of oil and is one of the main geopolitical actors in the Middle East. It is also important

---

<sup>1</sup> SILVA, Christina. *Middle East climate change could become too hot for survival*.

<sup>2</sup> SCHWARTZ, John. *Deadly Heat Forecast in Persian Gulf by 2100*.

<sup>3</sup> MORTON, Alan. *Opec should consider impact of climate change*.

to analyze the position of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates who both strive in becoming the leader in the region for renewable energy.

A states identity is influenced by the lifestyle of its population. Changing a lifestyle and habits is not an easy endeavor. The countries within the GCC are the highest emitters of GHG per capita in the world. Based on the World Bank Data of the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (metric tons per capita) Qatar represents the greatest share of 44.0 in 2011, which has been reduced since 2007 from 55.3. The UAE CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in 2011 are 20.4 with a reduction as well since 2007 from 23.2. From 2007 Saudi Arabia increased in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from 15.1 to 18.1 in 2011.<sup>4</sup> This quantitative overview is to emphasize the important role these three countries have in order to address the issue of climate change

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia INDC hopes to reduce by 2030 a total of 130 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub>. This measure is intended to continue the growth of their economy through various diversification measures. While oil production is the primary economic activity of Saudi Arabia, it states to invest in renewable energy such as solar, thermal and wind energy. With the Carbon Dioxide-Enhanced Oil Recovery program, the ambition is to purify 1,500 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> a day. Saudi Arabia is experiencing a decrease of revenue in oil exports as well as an increased domestic demand of oil; to counter this problem Saudi Arabia understands the urgent need to finance complementary sources of energy. The INDC of Saudi Arabia does not depend on international financing but it acknowledges the importance of technological cooperation in order to achieve its stated goals.<sup>5</sup>

The main controversial point in all the critiques towards Saudi Arabia's INDC is that it has not stated a baseline in which the reductions would be made from. Climate Action Tracker (CAT) reviews the various INDC with the rankings from role model, efficient, medium to inadequate. CAT has rated the intended projections of Saudi Arabia as, inadequate. Due to low oil prices Saudi Arabia has delayed projects to diversify its economy for eight years. This delay is done in the hopes of creating their own renewable manufacturing business in order to capitalize on the emerging energy resource market accentuated by the international climate change regime. Saudi Arabia does recognize the importance of diversifying its economy due to the decreased demand of oil exports especially since the production of sulfur gas in the United States.<sup>6</sup> The government recognizes the urgent need to mitigate the effects of climate change but this is not formulated in its INDC plan.<sup>7</sup>

The UAE and Qatar propose both ambitious INDC in order to confront the impending consequences of climate change. The UAE promotes "Vision 2021" with various sub-programs. One of which is the Green Growth Strategy focusing on the economic and social sustainable development through efforts of decarbonizing the energy sector.<sup>8</sup> Qatar's positioning does not differ much from the one proposed by the UAE but it does include the need for the, "freedom of

---

<sup>4</sup> World Data Bank : Climate Change, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions

<sup>5</sup> INDC, UNFCCC, Saudi Arabia

<sup>6</sup> *L'Arabie saoudite dévoilée (enfin) sa contribution à la COP21*. Huffington Post.

<sup>7</sup> Climate Action Tracker, Saudi Arabia

<sup>8</sup> INDC, UNFCCC, UAE

economic enterprise on the basis of social justice.”<sup>9</sup> The government of Qatar stresses the need for technological transfers and increased research and development. It has also incorporated within the Ministry of Environment a department dedicated to climate change.

The INDC of Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia recognize decision 24/CP.18. It stresses the need for increased economic diversification especially for countries with a high dependence on fossil fuel production. The COP 18 in Doha marked a turning point in the reflection of the GCC countries imperative in taking proactive measures towards climate change. The INDC of Qatar and the UAE are more comprehensive than the INDC proposed by Saudi Arabia. The biggest difference is they integrate programs geared towards consumer awareness. This can be seen with the Ecological Footprint Initiative in the UAE and the creation of a world-class education system with specific programs on climate change in Qatar. All three INDC mention the fragility of the system in regards to water resources but Qatar and the UAE stress additionally the issue of food security.

CAT had first stated that the UAE has the most ambitious climate program in the Middle East and it is the first country to propose a Green Growth Strategy program.<sup>10</sup> Now that it has officially reviewed the INDC of UAE it qualifies their initiative as inadequate, on par with the rating of Saudi Arabia. CAT indicates that the INDC of the UAE fails to provide economy wide GHG with a targeted baseline year. It provides qualitative measures of its intended projects without quantifying it in relations to GHG emissions. Until more transparency is provided in terms of baseline emissions and the targeted GHG emissions of the projects, CAT states the INDC of the UAE as inadequate due to its business as usual framework. Though, CAT mentions the potential of the UAE in becoming the leader of the region in regards to climate change stating the example of Masdar City and IRENA (International Renewable Energy Agency).<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, CAT has yet to publish its views of the INDC of Qatar but it can be expected to receive the same critique as for Saudi Arabia and the UAE; that the baseline year of reductions is not clear making the evaluation of their INDC impossible.

#### *b) Diversifying the Economy*

There are various actors who advocate the need to diversifying the GCC economies. Most importantly the decreased dependence of oil reserves from the GCC makes the diversification process more urgent than ever. However the low price of oil has halted productive measures towards economic diversification.

Christine Lagarde urges the GCC to diversify their economies because their revenues can no longer be supported solely on the reliance of oil and gas. It is estimated that the price of gas is likely to drop to \$47.42 a barrel in December, which has continuously dropped since January 2015. An emir from Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, expressed the urgency to change the current reliance on oil revenues because the population is heavily dependent on the state for

---

<sup>9</sup> INDC, UNFCCC, Qatar

<sup>10</sup> Climate Action Tracker, UAE

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

everything.<sup>12</sup> The other facet is that with low oil prices and a surplus of reserves the issues around renewable energy loses its relevance and as a consequence so does climate change.<sup>13</sup>

In the UAE, a conference was held to discuss how the low oil prices could provide an opportunity to restructure and expand the revenue sources of the GCC. Evidently, the lower oil prices in the short-term would hurt the GCC economies but in the long-term it is important to increase the diversification of their revenues. During the conference the panelists had proposed the idea of introducing a value added tax (VAT) to increase revenues as well as decreasing subsidies. These solutions seem improbable due to the current geopolitical situation within the GCC. This VAT would first be possible in UAE and Oman could then influence the other GCC countries to follow suit.<sup>14</sup>

## II. Challenges and Hope for Change

### a) *The Obstacles Facing the GCC*

Despite that all GCC countries have both signed the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol their involvement has considerably slowed down the negotiation process. The common argument mobilized by the GCC is clearly stated by Dr. Thani Ahmed Al Zeyoudi, director of climate change and energy in the UAE, that the UAE will not sign a binding agreement that could impede on their economic growth since they are still developing countries. The UAE currently extracts 1.7 million barrels of oil per day and plans to increase this to 3 million barrels of oil per day. This is just one example that brings particularly to light the difficulty of overcoming national interests in relation to the actions needs to surmount the effects of climate change. Essentially the argument that is utilized by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE is a way to bypass any concrete actions to mitigate GHG emissions. The measurement of the GDP per capita based on US \$ is particularly pertinent in order to debunk the argument of being a developing country. To provide a baseline comparison the GDP of the United States, a developed country, is important. In 2014, the GDP of the US was 54,629, for Saudi Arabia the total was 24,161, for the UAE the amount was 44,204.3 and finally Qatar with an astonishing value of 97,518. This data is demonstrative of the fact that Qatar, the UAE, and lastly Saudi Arabia can no longer utilize the developing country discourse.

Another impediment to the negotiation process during the UNFCCC is in part due to the delicate fabric between the government and the people. All GCC countries are rentier states and use their abundant supply of oil to literally buy peace through energy subsidies. These subsidies create a social contract between the government and its population. The issue today is that the energy and electricity demand has increased between 5-10%. As a result, the GCC countries have one of the highest energy demands in the world. For example, the GCC spends over \$100

---

<sup>12</sup> HARDING, David. *IMF chief urges Gulf to adapt to sustained oil price drop.*

<sup>13</sup> PIVEN, Ben. *Oil bubble bursts: Are low prices a crude awakening for climate activists?*

<sup>14</sup> SAXENA, Avinash. *Raise taxes call to GCC Nations.*

billion per year on energy subsidies.<sup>15</sup> The GCC countries are facing increasing domestic demand of fossil fuels, which hinders their ability to fund public projects.

Renewable energy projects have a great potential in the Gulf states with prominent examples like Masdar City in the UAE and King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy in Saudi Arabia. The region could become a world leader in solar energy due to its extensive amount of desert land. For example, the GCC solar radiation is 3 times higher than in central Europe and the government has the funds to be able to implement such projects. The diversification of the economy could also potentially increase job creation. Despite the relatively low official unemployment in the Gulf with 1.7% in Qatar and 25% in Saudi Arabia there exists a huge influx of non-nationals entering the GCC job market each year.

The number one barrier to renewable energy and diversifying the economy is due to rentierism. After the Arab Spring, the elites within the GCC maintained their power due to their ability to increase social spending and the cancellation of subsidy reforms. Energy subsidies allow for well-paid government jobs to nationals creating a patronage system between the employees and their respective governments. This in turn creates corrupt and ineffective bureaucracies hindering any possible foreign investment. The GCC remains tied to their subsidy system because their removal would create social and political instability. When the Iranian government in 2010 sought to remove energy subsidies this resulted in an increase of energy prices by 2000% and an increased inflation of 20% in less than 24 hours. This led to the crash of the economy and political instability in the years that ensued. The GCC countries keep the events in Iran and the Arab Spring in consideration when it comes to decisions on abandoning energy subsidies.<sup>16</sup> Though it is understood that removing the barriers of rentierism would be beneficial for the economy it would, in revenge, be detrimental to the ruling elite. Due to the abundance of fossil fuels, renewable energy and the end of energy subsidies does not seem probable due to the political risks engaged.

#### *b) Social Mobilization*

The social mobilization that occurred during the Arab Spring prompted structural changes within the governmental structures. There is an emergence of a social mobilization around climate change in the Middle East that could provide the avenue for responsive government policies in regards to mitigation and adaptation to climate change.

There now is an Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change. It calls on all Muslims from around the world to bear in mind during the COP21 the importance of reducing GHG, setting clear targets and goals and “leading the rest of us to a new way of relating to God’s Earth.”<sup>17</sup> The declaration was created by academics to provide a template for differing representations to adhere to when at the COP21. The idea behind the elaboration of an Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change is that the dynamics of climate change encompasses not only a social and economic crisis but it is also a moral crisis. Versus from the Qur’an are

---

<sup>15</sup> Lilliestam, Johan, PATT, Anthony. *Barriers, Risks and Policies for Renewables in the Gulf States*.

<sup>16</sup> LILLIESTAM, Johan, PATT, Anthony. *Barriers, Risks and Policies for Renewables in the Gulf States*.

<sup>17</sup> Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change

mobilized throughout the text to acknowledge the importance of living in coexistence with the earth's nature. One particularly powerful verse of the Qur'an 55: 7-10 states:

He raised the heaven and established the balance  
So that you would not transgress the balance.  
Give just weight - do not skimp in the balance.  
He laid out the earth for all living creatures.

The preamble recognizes the anthropogenic influence on climate change. It was intended that the human species be the stewards or *khalifah* of the earth but it has instead been the root of the corruption and devastation. Finally, the declaration presses for urgent measures to be taken in regards to the COP21 otherwise the equilibrium or *mizan* will be destroyed.<sup>18</sup>

The other important mobilization is concentrated among the youth through the Arab Youth Climate Movement (AYCM). It strives to create a conscious awareness movement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to create legally binding agreements to counter climate change within international negotiations. The AYCM was established in response to the COP18 negotiations and it currently has 20 national coordinators represented in 15 MENA countries.

A common theme is the use of religion to address climate change. The AYCM uses the lessons from Ashura and Karbala to promote climate consciousness. It uses Imam Hussain's insistence on sacrifice in support of the truth to bring awareness to the fact that the "business as usual" trajectory will bring humanity to a point of no return. It also mentions the importance of Zaynab bint Ali, Hussain's sister, during the mission of Karbala. This is to express that women have an important role to play in the solutions towards climate change. The AYCM stresses the importance of equity in the decision making process of the UNFCCC stating that in 2012 the average number of female delegates was a mere 36%. To emphasize the fragility of small-island states it mobilizes the actions of Hadrat Abbas, Hussain's brother, of *ithaar*. This is to demonstrate that altruistic behavior is needed from the OPEC to keep the oil reserves untapped in order to ensure the survival of small island states. In the end all the Prophets advocated the message of *tawheed* with the idea that humans like plants and animals are biological species that depend on the well being of the earth to thrive.<sup>19</sup> Islam is a unifying factor within the Middle East and the use of religion can be the catalyzer needed to reinforce the population to demand more robust climate initiatives from their governments.

Measuring the influence of these two social mobilizations would allow the understanding of their impact on society and the government. The collaboration of the Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change had set up a symposium for two days in order to draft the declaration. The partners of the symposium were Islamic Relief World Wide, Green Faith: Interfaith Partners in Action for a Green Life, Ifees: Eco Islam and Climate Action Network. The collaborators of the event were the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the International Islamic Fiqh Academy. Despite the numerous professional speakers who attended the symposium a declaration has no meaning if it is no put

---

<sup>18</sup> LILLIESTAM, Johan, PATT, Anthony. *Barriers, Risks and Policies for Renewables in the Gulf States*.

<sup>19</sup> AL OLAIMY, Tarik. *Climate Change Lessons from Ashura and Karbala*.

into action. During the COP21 there has been no mention of the Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change by the GCC, which shows its relatively minimal influence. To be able to educate the population about this Declaration social media is crucial and the innovative declaration does not utilize Facebook to spread their message. Despite the ambitious call on all Muslims to adhere to the Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change it has not been able to translate its concepts into precepts.

The AYCM for the COP21 has stated 8 demands translated from Arabic into French and English making it possible to influence and reach a wider audience. The most proactive demand is that by 2050 they hope that their governments utilize 100% clean renewable energy. There is also a demand to change the state identity through structural and lifestyle changes since the region is one of the largest emitters of CO<sub>2</sub> per capita in the world. The 8 points include everything from a gender responsive policy, transparency, a 1.5 degree global warming cap and the involvement of youth in the decision making process. One demand though stands out from the rest, number 6. It requests for the creation of an Arabic Climate Fund where the revenue from oil would be redirected equally towards MENA countries to aid in the transition toward renewable energy as well attend to mitigation and adaptation needs. The AYCM was present at the COP21, which enables a certain visibility to their actions and demands. They have transnationalized their message during the COP21 by exchanging with the African group to discuss their common goals. Based on their official website their influence could be considered mediocre because when wanting to access the national actions of the AYCM the sites remain under construction, except for Bahrain's. After numerous failed attempts to contact an AYCM representative (based on the emails provided on their website) a viewer could think that this cause initiated in Doha is a dying one. Nevertheless, AYCM is present on Facebook with 5,630 likes and daily posts about their movement. Neither Saudi Arabia nor the United Arab Emirates have their own Facebook page but the Qatari AYCM does with a meager 233 likes. Essentially this still remains a very new movement and their relative weight in the decision making of their respective governments is not influential.

Attempting to analyze the influence of a movement is very difficult with no interviews or fieldwork. Based solely on the media influence, which remains a valuable tool to spread a message, the AYCM is more influential than the Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change.

### III. Conclusion

The COP21 is highly important to the GCC because the issue of fossil fuels will be on the negotiation table and this remains the backbone of the Gulf economies. Any binding agreement made to reduce the use of fossil fuels will have serious impacts on the government and the societies of the GCC. The current low prices of oil, the increase of US interest rates, the diminishing growth of the Chinese economy, and the lifted sanctions on Iran does not equate to a disastrous situation for the GCC but rather offers an unprecedented opportunity to change.<sup>20</sup> The members of the GCC have made commitments towards alleviating the impacts of climate change

---

<sup>20</sup> *GCC Will be Able to Withstand Game-Changing Global Economic Events of 2015.*



but urgent political matters have clouded their commitments such as: Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Libya.<sup>21</sup>

National interests impede the ability to cooperate internationally on the issue of climate change. The former minister of oil in Saudi Arabia is known for stating that “the Stone Age did not end because a shortage of stone and the oil age will not end because a shortage of oil.”<sup>22</sup> There has not been a decrease in oil extraction within the OPEC because countries like China see it in their national advantage to stock oil reserves not solely for physical and energy security measures but because it is more profitable to detain oil reserves than dollar or euro reserves.

It is vital for the members of OPEC within GCC to look towards the future and not linger on past contentious points. During the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 OPEC elaborated the argument that the high demand of energy results from the demand of industrialized countries. Furthermore, the responsibility should burden the industrialized countries rather than the developing countries.<sup>23</sup> The GCC must recognize the importance of adapting to climate change due to numerous factors: increased temperatures, the scarcity of water and food resources, and the vision of creating a carbon free world (which is extremely contentious as seen during the COP20). A positive change can come about with the long-term benefits of a diversified economy and an emerging social mobilization that pressures the formulation of appropriate climate change policies. The OPEC and the GCC have stressed that economic diversification necessitates international aid. It must not be forgotten that during the negotiations in September 2015 on the Sustainable Development Goals, goal number 17 advocates the need for creating partnerships to work together to combat climate change.

An interesting approach to combat the prevalence of national interests was tried during the simulation of the COP21 - Make it Work. The idea was to give water, underground oil reserves, air, etc... anthropomorphic representation. This new type of negotiation concentrated on debating alternative visions of the world instead of debating scientific and technological aspects. This may not be the solution but could remove the barriers imposed by the Westphalia state system anchored within the UNFCCC negotiations.

---

<sup>21</sup> ABEL, Raouf. *GCC and talks on climate change*.

<sup>22</sup> COOK, Chris. *The Age of Gas*.

<sup>23</sup> ROGER, Simon. *Climat: les pays pétroliers freinent les négociations*.

## Bibliography

- ABEL RAOUF, Mohamed. GCC and talks on climate change. *Arab News*, Nov. 20, 2015.
- AL OLAIMY, Tariq. Climate Change Lessons from Ashura and Karbala. *Arab Youth Climate Movement*, Oct. 24, 2015.
- Climate Action Tracker, UAE, March 2015, <http://climateactiontracker.org/countries/uae.html>
- Climate Action Tracker, Saudi Arabia, Nov. 2015, <http://climateactiontracker.org/countries/saudiarabia.html>
- COOK, Chris. The Age of Gas. *Trend News Agency Azerbaijan*, Nov. 16, 2015.
- L'Arabie saoudite dévoile (enfin) sa contribution à la COP21. *Huffington Post*, Nov. 11, 2015.
- GCC Will be Able to Withstand Game-Changing Global Economic Events of 2015. *Islamic Finance News*, Nov. 18, 2015.
- HARDING, David. IMF chief urges Gulf to adapt to sustained oil price drop. *Business Insider*, Nov. 8, 2015.
- Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change: <http://islamicclimatedeclaration.org>
- LILLIESTAM, Johan, PATT, Anthony. Barriers, Risks and Policies for Renewables in the Gulf States. *Energies*, vol. 8, Aug. 2015, p. 8263-8285.
- MORTON, Alan. Opec should consider impact of climate change. *Financial Times*, Jan. 8, 2015.
- PIVEN, Ben. Oil bubble bursts: Are low prices a crude awakening for climate activists? *Al Jazeera*, Dec. 19, 2014.
- ROGER, Simon. Climat: les pays pétroliers freinent les négociations. *Le Monde*, Oct. 21, 2015.
- SAXENA, Avinash. Raise taxes call to GCC Nations. *Gulf Daily News*, Nov. 16, 2015.
- SILVA, Christina. Middle East climate change could become too hot for survival. *International Business Times*, Oct. 26, 2015.
- SCHWARTZ, John. Deadly Heat Forecast in Persian Gulf by 2100. *The New York Times*, Oct. 26, 2015.
- UNFCCC. INDC of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Nov. 2015.
- UNFCCC. INDC of Qatar, Nov. 2015.
- UNFCCC. INDC of the United Arab Emirates, Oct. 2015.