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GCC'S CLIMATE CHALLENGE

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The contemporary global landscape is confronted with an array of challenges pertaining to global health, security and climate change. The world stands at a critical juncture when it comes to climate change, which has wreaked havoc in recent years and continues to do so with every passing day. The climate challenge also poses a significant threat to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states respectively. The impact of climate change has been devastating and has reached a critical point where immediate action is imperative.

Over the course of two consecutive years, the Arab world has undertaken the responsibility of hosting two significant climate change summits, known as the Conference of the Parties (COP). The most recent event, COP27, took place in Egypt in November 2022, and the upcoming COP28 is scheduled to be held in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2023. Prior to this, the Arab region had already hosted three other COPs, with two in Morocco (COP7 in 2001 and COP22 in 2016) and one in Qatar (COP18 in 2012). However, it is noteworthy that Morocco and the UAE, have demonstrated substantial leadership in fostering climate action. While host countries did establish administrative institutions to address climate change, concrete climate action at the national level was limited prior to the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015.

Until 2015, among the six GCC states, only the UAE had a consistent climate policy framework, while green energy initiatives across the GCC region primarily remained experimental or research-oriented, lacking practical integration as alternatives to hydrocarbons. Consequently, the cumulative

installed capacity of renewable energy in the GCC amounted to a mere 449 MW in 2016, falling significantly short of the region's energy demands.[1] However, subsequent to that period, the GCC's installed capacity for renewable energy has experienced a substantial surge, increasing nearly sevenfold to reach 3,498 MW by 2021, with the UAE accounting for more than 75 percent of this renewable energy capacity. [2]

In response to recent economic and energy security challenges, the GCC states have demonstrated considerable efforts to enhance their climate change strategies. This has entailed the establishment of new institutional frameworks aimed at mitigating the impacts of climate change and adapting to a changing environment. In addition to these measures, each GCC state has introduced a series of initiatives, regulations, and programs designed to tackle climate change and align with the objectives outlined in their respective national development plans. Impressively, all GCC nations, with the exception of Qatar,[3] have made commitments to attain a net zero emissions target by or around the mid-century mark, complemented by comprehensive national climate strategies.

Regional Responses

In response to the climate consciousness, regional initiatives related to climate change have also gained momentum in the Gulf region. Among the most remarkable endeavors in this regard is the Middle East Green Initiative, which sets forth the ambitious objective of afforesting the region with 40 billion trees and curtailing carbon emissions by 60 percent, facilitated by the implementation of clean hydrocarbon technologies.[4] Spearheaded by Saudi Arabia, the Initiative also unveiled several regional centers and programs designed to actualize its aspirations. Moreover, the Kingdom made an unprecedented announcement of a financial fund specific to the region, which aims to invest in two key initiatives. The first initiative focuses on seeking clean fuel alternatives for cooking, while the second advocates for the establishment of a Regional Investment Fund dedicated to Circular Carbon Economy (CCE) technology solutions. Saudi Arabia, the main country behind the Middle East Green Initiative, pledged 2.5 billion dollars for this initiative.[5] Similarly, Saudi Arabia has also initiated

1 Dr. Aisha Al Sarihi, Understanding the GCC's Post-COP27 National Climate Change Commitments, https://gulfif.org/understanding-the-gccs-post-cop27-national-climate-change-commitments/

2 Ibid.

3 Erhan Akkas and Erdogan Burak Ezeroglu, Gulf Net-Zero Pledges in a Challenging Global Energy Security Environment, The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, June 1, 2022, https://agsiw.org/gulf-net-zero-pledges-in-a-challenging-global-energy-security-environment/

4 Saudi Crown Prince announces Saudi Green Initiative, Middle East Green Initiative, Al Arabia News, https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/03/27/Saudi-Crown-Prince-announces-Saudi-Green-Initiative-Green-Middle-East-Initiative

5 Saudi Arabia commits $2.5 bln to Middle East green initiative - Crown Prince, Reuters, November 7, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/business/sustainable-business/saudi-arabia-commits-25-bln-middle-east-green-initiative-crown-prince-2022-11-07/

the Saudi Green Initiative, which is in line with its Vision 2030, which aims to address environmental challenges, with a focus on green energy.

This has been widely hailed globally and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) also welcomed the initiative as the core objective of the Middle East Green Initiative is to enhance collaboration and collective endeavors within the region with the aim of restoring 200 million hectares of degraded land, introducing 50 billion new trees, and increasing vegetation cover by 12-fold. These initiatives are projected to contribute significantly to mitigating global greenhouse gas emissions, specifically targeting a reduction and removal of 2.5% of these emissions, which correspond to a total of 670 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent. This reduction aligns with the combined nationally determined contributions of all countries in the region. It is important to note that the Middle East stands as one of the world's hottest and driest regions, making it particularly susceptible to the adverse impacts of escalating temperatures and extreme weathers.[6]

The GCC and the Journey towards Net Zero

The Gulf States, renowned for their prominence in oil and gas production, possess a substantial capacity to contribute significantly to worldwide endeavors aimed at bridging the gap and attaining net-zero objectives. This is attributable to their possession of considerable prospects for renewable energy resources, along with access to some of the globe's most carbon-efficient fuels. Furthermore, the Gulf Arab states possess varying degrees of substantial financial resources. Nevertheless, to fully harness this immense potential, it becomes imperative for the Gulf Arab states to diligently recognize and confront the diverse challenges obstructing their path towards achieving net-zero emissions. Despite notable advancements in implementing low-carbon energy investments and initiatives, the Gulf States still face a considerable disparity between the existing scale of these endeavors and their desired position in a net-zero future. Presently, the GCC hosts three significant Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) facilities, situated in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, collectively responsible for approximately 10% of the annual global CO2 captured. [7]

Among the Gulf Arab States, Bahrain is committed to reaching net zero by 2060 and has set a range of ambitious interim goals to ensure the road to net zero. By 2035, it will reduce emissions by 30 percent through de-carbonization and efficiency initiatives and double its deployment of renewables

6 UNCCD welcomes Saudi pledge of 2.5 billion for Middle East Green Initiative to restore land, https://www.unccd.int/news-stories/stories/unccd-welcomes-saudi-pledge-25-billion-middle-east-green-initiative-restore

7 Op.Cit, Understanding the GCC's Post-COP27 National Climate Change Commitments

from the targets set for this purpose. [8] Kuwait is also committed to achieving net zero targets by 2060 and the Kuwait National Committee on Climate Change oversees these initiatives. Oman also aims to achieve net zero by 2050 by reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 7 percent and has a number of initiatives like the National Climate Strategy and the Oman Sustainability Centre for this purpose. Qatar has not set a date for achieving net zero, but it aims to achieve its renewable energy targets by 2030 and the National Climate Change Committee supervises this. Saudi Arabia aims to achieve net zero by year 2060 and has initiated a number of initiatives in this aspect, some of which include the Saudi Green Building Forum (2010), among others. The UAE also aims to achieve net zero by 2050 and is actively pursuing its goals by working under the Dubai Integrated Energy Strategy 2030.

The chart below summarizes climate-related strategies, policies, targets and initiatives in the six Gulf Arab states:

Country	Net-zero target	Renewable Energy targets	Emissions reduction target	National Climate Strategy	Other climate initiatives/governance entities
Bahrain	Yes, by 2060	5% by 2025 10% by 2035	N/A	No	• Joint National Committee on Climate Change (2007)
Kuwait	Yes, by 2060	15% by 2030	N/A	No	• Kuwait National Committee on Climate Change
Oman	Yes, by 2050	10% by 2025 30% by 2030	Reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 7% relative to a business-as-usual (BAU) scenario by 2030	• National Strategy for Adaptation and Mitigation to Climate Change, 2020-2040) • National Carbon Neutral Strategy	• Regulations for the management of climate affairs (2016) • National Climate Strategy • Oman Sustainability Centre
Qatar	No	20% by 2030	Reduce 25% of GHG emissions by the year 2030	Yes	• National Climate Change Committee (chaired by the Ministry of Environment)
Saudi Arabia	Yes, by 2060	50% by 2030	Reduce, avoid and remove GHG emissions by 278 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (MtCO2e) annually by 2030	Yes (National Circular Carbon Economy Program)	• National Committee for the Clean Development Mechanism/Designated National Authority(2009) • Saudi Green Building Forum (2010) • Saudi Energy Efficiency Center (2012) • **PIF Regional Voluntary Carbon Market Company**
UAE	Yes, by 2050	Clean energy 50% (44% RE, 6% Nuclear) by 2050	31% reduction compared to the business-as-usual scenario for the year 2030	Yes (2017: Green Growth Strategy/UAE Green Agenda 2015-2030)	• Dubai Integrated Energy Strategy 2030 • **Abu Dhabi Carbon trading exchange and carbon clearing**

Source: Dr. Aisha Al Sarihi, Understanding the GCC's Post-COP27 National Climate Change Commitments, https://gulfif.org/understanding-the-gccs-post-cop27-national-climate-change-commitments/

Conclusion

The realization of the GCC countries' ambitions for a net-zero future hinges on their committed and methodical implementation efforts to bridge the disparity between the present state and scale of technological, financial, and institutional endeavors and the desired target. Timely execution of climate policies supporting net-zero objectives, though challenging, is indispensable in bolstering

[8] https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/BAHRAIN_cop26cmp16cma3_HLS_EN.pdf

economic diversification endeavors and mitigating potential repercussions arising from global climate policies that may jeopardize their hydrocarbon reserves.

The GCC states should further ensure systematic and dedicated efforts to bridge the gap and transform their ambitious goals into reality, guaranteeing a sustainable future for the region and contributing to global climate action. By embracing comprehensive climate policies and fostering collaboration, the GCC can not only protect their economic interests but also safeguard the environment for generations to come. The Middle East Green Initiative, led by Saudi Arabia, exemplifies the potential for regional collaboration in addressing climate change, offering a significant contribution to global greenhouse gas reduction efforts. As one of the hottest and driest regions in the world, the Middle East is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, underscoring the importance of collective action and innovative solutions. By leveraging their vast renewable energy resources and financial capacities, the Gulf States can play a pivotal role in supporting the global transition towards a net-zero future.