

Why ecosystem restoration should be high on Arab region's agenda

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DUBAI: Even after the passage of some 30 years, Saudi Arabia's environment continues to suffer the effects of the Iraqi invasion and occupation of neighboring Kuwait and its subsequent liberation during the 1991 Gulf War.

The establishment of major encampments for hundreds of thousands of allied troops, military fortifications and roadways, together with the remnants of munitions, including depleted uranium, left over from combat operations, have left deep and lasting scars on the terrain.

But more devastating still was Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's deliberate policy of burning an estimated 700 Kuwaiti oil wells as his forces retreated and the spillage of an estimated 11 million barrels of crude into the Gulf – one of the worst oil spills in history.

Most of this gigantic oil slick came ashore on the Saudi coastline, killing wildlife and devastating fishing communities along an 800 km stretch from the Kuwaiti border to Abu Ali Island and Jubail Industrial City.



An abandoned Iraqi Soviet-made T-62 tank sits in Kuwaiti desert 02 April 1991 as an oil well at the Al-Ahmadi oil field is burning in the background.

(AFP/File Photo)

“Although they removed lots of the oil for reuse, much of it damaged marine fauna and there was air pollution,” Samira Omar, director of the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR), told a recent conference on ecosystem restoration.

“Nearly \$3 billion from the UN Compensation Commission has been invested for restoration and rehabilitation from destruction and burning of oil wells during the Kuwait war.”

Approximately \$1 billion of this was awarded to Saudi Arabia to undertake environmental remediation and restoration activities, overseen by the Kingdom’s General Authority of Meteorology and Environment.

Omar says other states in the region can learn a great deal from the experience of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. “We have great opportunities to collaborate together with the Kingdom in learning from our restoration program,” she told Arab News.

“Since we have a lot of similar environmental problems and conditions, it’s a very good opportunity for scientists from KISR and Saudi Arabia to work together in a regional project or program, whether in marine or land ecosystems.”



Clean-up workers pump oil from a man-made reservoir into waiting trucks 18 March 1991. Oil released by the Iraqi army during the Gulf War continues to drift south in the Arabian Gulf. (AFP/File Photo)

Indeed, with their shared shoreline, whatever happens in Kuwait affects the Kingdom also. Likewise, any environmental restoration program launched by Saudi Arabia would no doubt benefit neighboring countries, including Iraq, Kuwait and Jordan.

“Any policies issued by these governments to reduce the impact of overgrazing for example, or any demographic changes in land use, will be very useful for the region,” Omar added.

Along with other GCC countries, Saudi Arabia is accelerating action toward the goals of the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change ahead of the COP26 summit in Glasgow this November.

It has unveiled a National Renewable Energy Program – through which it aspires to meet 50 percent of its domestic energy needs from renewable sources by 2030 – and launched the Saudi Green Initiative, a project to plant 10 billion trees in the country to mitigate its CO2 emissions.

Riyadh has also initiated the Middle East Green Initiative to work with other Arab states to plant an additional 40 billion trees across the region – representing the world’s biggest reforestation program.

INNUMBERS

- * **700+** – Kuwaiti oil wells set on fire during the Gulf War.
- * **\$3bn** – War reparations used for Kuwait eco-restoration.
- * **50%+** – Saudi renewable energy generation by 2030.

The Kingdom has also pioneered the “circular carbon economy,” an integrated strategy for tackling emissions while enabling economic growth that was endorsed by G20 leaders under last year’s Saudi presidency.

Omar was among a host of experts taking part in a virtual session of SER2021, the 9th World Conference on Ecological Restoration, which took place in June. Participants warned that without a collaborative approach involving regional governments, businesses and civil society groups, environmental degradation would only continue.

The conference coincided with the launch of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. The decade runs from 2021 to 2030, which is also the deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals and the timeline scientists have identified as the last chance to prevent catastrophic climate change.

The UN General Assembly proclaimed the UN Decade following a proposal for action by over 70 countries from all latitudes. It is a rallying cry for the protection and revival of ecosystems all around the world, for the benefit of people and nature, and aims to halt the degradation of ecosystems, and restore them to achieve the global sustainability goals.



Kuwaiti reporter Barak al-Hindi stands on charred ground 12 March 2003 in front of a destroyed oil tank during a visit to the al-Ahmadi oil complex outside Kuwait City, which was destroyed by retreating Iraqi troops as they left Kuwait at the end of the Gulf war in 1991. (AFP/File Photo)

Climate change, overfarming and a slew of other man-made disasters have already taken a devastating toll on Middle Eastern ecosystems, degrading soil quality, polluting waterways, destroying biodiversity and displacing rural and coastal communities.

Vast numbers of fish – one of the Gulf region’s main sources of food – have been killed off by chemical changes in the oceans caused by pollution, rising temperatures and nitrification from the excessive use of fertilizers.

“We need a collective effort at the regional level with rules and regulations on fishing, pollution and waste management,” Omar said.

Plus, with winter temperatures expected to exceed 2.5 degrees above the historical average by the middle of the century – and five degrees higher in the summer months – experts concur that collective action is needed to avert climate catastrophe.

“With sea levels rising, the many islands off the coast of countries like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are at risk because they have important resources that should be preserved for generations,” Omar said.

“This water rise can also impact the biodiversity of these islands, so a good restoration plan should be considered for them and the coastal zone.”



Boats anchored along the Red Sea coast, in Saudi Arabia, on January 5, 2020.
(AFP/File Photo)

Other challenges to regional ecosystems include urbanization, overgrazing, deforestation, soil erosion, desertification and pollution. These have been particularly pronounced in Jordan.

Moreover, ongoing conflict in the region and the influx of refugees in recent years, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, have placed tremendous strain on soil quality, grazing pastures and food systems.

The situation is similar in Lebanon, a country that has endured years of conflict and which has struggled to provide even the most basic waste collection services.

To address these strains on the environment, while also working to resolve intercommunal conflict, the Lebanon Reforestation Initiative (LRI) has created a raft of educational programs and youth groups that bring local Lebanese and Syrian refugees together to serve a common goal.

“The LRI’s continuum is a perfect tool for approaching restoration in the region,” Maya Nehme, LRI’s director, told the World Conference on Ecological Restoration.

“In a country with political issues like Lebanon, stability and continuity are rare, so getting the concept of repairing ecosystem function into the mindset of a population, such as in Beirut, that’s trying to repair their windows after the blast that devastated their capital, is not easy.”



The Lebanon Reforestation Initiative (LRI) has created a raft of educational programs and youth groups that bring local Lebanese and Syrian refugees together to serve a common goal. (Supplied)

One of its schemes, designed to help communities avoid overgrazing and to prevent pastures being reduced to dry scrub, works with local shepherds to map out areas where their animals can feed, while other fields are left fallow to recover. “New grazing approaches are assisting with fire protection and prevention,” Nehme said.

“Shepherds have become the guardians of the sites. LRI also implements important and highly successful community reforestation programs – working across a wide variety of ecosystems in Lebanon to preserve and restore biodiversity.”

It is activities like these at the local level that will help the Middle East restore its ecosystems. But, in the words of Princess Basma bint Ali of Jordan, founder of Jordan’s Royal Botanical Garden, it is a unified regional strategy that is urgently needed to help prevent further decay.

“Many of the issues we are facing can be addressed with restoration and it is a really vital tool that we can use. Our ecosystems have an intrinsic right to life and to exist,” she told the conference.

“As stewards of the earth, we have a duty to ensure that we manage it, not just for utilitarian purposes, but to hand it over to the next generation. We don’t own it.”

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Fri, 2021-07-30 19:18

BEIRUT: Lebanon is to limit entry to restaurants, cafes, pubs and beaches to people holding COVID-19 vaccine certificates or those who have taken antibodies tests, the tourism ministry said on Friday. Non-vaccinated employees of these establishments would be required to conduct

a PCR test every 72 hours, it added.

The move comes amidst a surge in infections with around 1,104 positive cases registered on Thursday compared to a few hundred a day in previous months. Lebanon's cases peaked when a total lockdown was enforced in January after hospitals became overwhelmed amid a crippling financial crisis, with medicines running low and frequent power cuts.

The country gradually re-opened over the spring.

Lebanon's vaccination drive has been slow with only around 18 percent of the population fully vaccinated.



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[President El-Sisi, Lebanese army chief discuss relations, cooperation](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-07-29 23:16

CAIRO: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has affirmed his pride in the deep-rooted relations between Egypt and Lebanon and Egypt's interest in the safety, security and stability of Lebanon.

During his meeting with Joseph Aoun, commander of the Lebanese Army, President El-Sisi praised the primary role played by the army in maintaining stability in Lebanon, according to the official spokesperson's Facebook page.

The national armies represent the backbone of the cohesion and stability of countries, the president pointed out.

Aoun affirmed Lebanon's keenness to strengthen the strong historical relations between the two countries and expressed his country's appreciation for the Egyptian effort to support Lebanon, an extension of Egypt's pivotal role in maintaining stability in the entire Arab region.

Defense Minister Mohammed Zaki received Aoun to discuss the latest developments. The two officials discussed issues of common interest in light of current regional and international developments and ways of increasing military cooperation, according to a statement from the Egyptian Armed Forces.

Aoun also expressed his pride in the strong relations between the Egyptian and Lebanese armed forces, voicing his aspiration that the future would witness more cooperation and praising Egypt for developing its combat capabilities to maintain national security.

Aoun also met with Mohammed Farid, chief of staff of the Egyptian Armed Forces, to discuss similar issues.



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Thu, 2021-07-29 23:08

CAIRO: Egyptian Electricity and Renewable Energy Minister Mohammed Shaker headed to Russia to attend a joint celebration ceremony to begin manufacturing the first long-term equipment for the Dabaa nuclear power plant.

A high-level technical delegation is accompanying the minister.

According to a statement, Shaker and Rosatom Director-General Alexey Likhachev are set to discuss the progress of the Dabaa nuclear power plant and its future work.

Russia's Rosatom is leading the Dabaa construction work.

The minister will also visit a group of Russian companies responsible for manufacturing long-term equipment for the nuclear plant.

The tour will cover Atomenergomash, which is responsible for manufacturing the compressor vessel, and Tagmash, which is responsible for manufacturing the reactor's core catcher.

The past period witnessed intense technical meetings at the Nuclear Power Plants Authority.

The talks resulted in agreements regarding the quality assurance program for

the manufacturer and quality plans for the equipment, as part of preparations to start manufacturing the plant's long-term components.

The reactor's core catcher is distinctive for its advanced third-generation reactors, to which the reactors of the Dabaa nuclear plant belong.

All the technical stages of its manufacture are carried out within the Russian Federation.

Logistical executive measures will then be taken to transfer it to the Dabaa site.

The manufacture of the reactor core catcher is a major milestone in the implementation of the Dabaa nuclear plant and comes as part of a series of continuous achievements that the project has been witnessing recently as a result of the concerted efforts of the Egyptian and Russian technical teams.



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Egypt completes initial design phase of MisrSat-2 satellite

Egypt completes initial design phase of MisrSat-2 satellite

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Thu, 2021-07-29 22:49

CAIRO: Egypt's new satellite, MisrSat-2, is scheduled to launch in December 2022, just three months behind schedule despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the CEO of the Egyptian Space Agency (EgSA) said on Thursday.

Mohammed ElKoosy said the "first phase of the initial designs" had been completed and that the "engineering model" was currently being manufactured "with Chinese support."

The satellite was initially set to launch in September next year, but the timeline has been slightly altered because of the COVID-19 pandemic, he explained.

The EgSA CEO also revealed that the satellite assembly center – located in Egyptian Space City near the New Administrative Capital – is close to completion. Egyptian Space City is due to open in March or April, he said.

Once the center is complete, assembly of MisrSat-2 will begin almost immediately, he said.

ElKoosy said Egypt's ambitious plans for its space industry are in line with the country's strategy for sustainable development. He cited the African Development Satellite – currently being manufactured by five African countries, with Egypt taking the lead – as an example. That satellite is designed to "measure the climate considerations of African countries, reducing their danger and controlling emissions rates."



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