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Gaza: A litmus test for COP28

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As climate-fuelled disasters intensify worldwide, the latest outbreak of violence in the Gaza Strip serves as a sobering litmus test for global leadership at the pivotal COP28 summit. The besieged enclave epitomises the compounding threats vulnerable communities face when climate breakdown and conflict collide. The conflict jeopardises the opportunity to make progress on climate action by fracturing the foundations of cooperation while serving as an example of how regional conflicts can undermine climate action.

A prolonged Gaza conflict threatens to slow the pace of the global energy transition at this critical juncture. Sustained conflict could send oil prices skyrocketing to well over $150 a barrel, according to World Bank estimates. These increases, driven by the instability in the Middle East, may allow fossil fuel interests worldwide to justify expanding production rather than investing in clean alternatives. Conflict-fuelled energy security fears could trump commitments to accelerate decarbonisation.

For economies in the region that are deeply embedded in oil and gas exports, the turmoil and price hikes reinforce voices sceptical of ambitiously phasing down carbon-intensive hydrocarbons. Broader economic instability sparked by war and rising energy prices could also hamper climate action. As seen with the Ukraine war, conflicts often shift priorities away from climate. Instability could see climate efforts shelved in favour of security. Import-dependent nations may cite inflationary pressures and slower growth to renege on climate finance pledges.

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The war will also hinder climate cooperation between Israel and the Arab states. In recent years, Israel has been actively engaged in climate diplomacy with signatories to the Abraham Accords, as well as Egypt and Jordan. And it has created some partnerships on climate initiatives

Israeli ties.

related to water conservation, renewable energy and more. However, this cooperation could wither as the Palestinian cause galvanises Arab public opinion against Israel. The first causality of this was the cancellation of the Energy-for-Water deal between Israel, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates. While discreet technical meetings of experts may continue – as was reported during MENA Climate Week in Riyadh – high-profile diplomatic activity will likely be put on hold.

Israel had also hoped to use the 28th Conference of the Parties, COP28, in Dubai to showcase growing Arab-Israeli ties and was planning a one-thousand-strong delegation, including the prime minister, president and many government officials. However, with Gaza under siege and the Palestinian civilian death toll mounting daily, senior Israeli officials are unlikely to participate. This – together with the calling of 360 000 reservists in Israel – means that the size of the delegation is set to be scaled back.

Trapped in policy incoherence

In addition, the perception that the UN, the European Union and the United States have failed to protect the Palestinians, as well as the city's critical infrastructure, could reduce the weight of their voices in climate diplomacy and undermines their rhetoric about a just transition.

The lack of coherence between climate, diplomatic and aid policies in Western capitals towards the region only diminishes their credibility. As Gaza's civilian body count climbed over the past few weeks, another casualty was Western-funded water, health and food security infrastructure destroyed by Israeli strikes. For example, the 4MW solar panel array powering the Bureij wastewater plant was destroyed by Israeli strikes. The German government, which has rejected calls for a ceasefire in Gaza, has recently provided $92 million for the construction of the plant.

This policy incoherence reinforces distrust in the post-colonial world about the West's commitment to climate justice in practice versus rhetoric. For the developing world to accept the West's claims to believe in multilateralism in climate action, the West must demonstrate it believes in multilateralism in international relations, too.

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President Biden refused to call for ceasefire breaks with his party's progressive faction. Their disenchantment may undermine Democratic performance in the upcoming presidential elections, increasing the odds of a Trump resurgence. The former president's isolationism, dismissal of climate science and alliance with fossil fuel interests could unravel domestic progress achieved to date. This includes plans by a re-elected Trump administration to roll back Biden's flagship legislation, the Inflation Reduction Act, to maximise fossil fuel production. If Washington scales back its climate action, this will reverberate negatively in Beijing, which sees climate action through the lens of great power politics and strategic competition.

The crisis also has significant practical implications by side-tracking senior diplomats otherwise focused on advancing COP28 negotiations, rather than reacting to conflict. Their attention is fractured at the worst possible moment, as the weeks before summits are key for consensus-building and deal-making.

Not only could this result in watered-down commitments at the climate summit, but it could also fracture the global unity needed to adequately support vulnerable nations through finance and technology transfers. It's also possible that diplomats from certain countries may now be less willing to compromise with others because they stand on different sides of the conflict.

An unlikely positive opportunity

Finally, the war in Gaza has pushed the climate crisis out of the news cycle, a trend that is likely to continue until the end of the year. This means that, with the exception of the UAE, COP28 will be less able to engage and catalyse the region's public towards more ambitious climate action.

At its root, the Gaza conflict underscores the need to view climate and peace not as disconnected priorities but as two sides of the same coin. Climate change multiplies threats for vulnerable groups, inflaming tensions over dwindling resources from water to food to land, while conflict erodes resilience to environmental shocks. This reality demands policy creativity that injects climate perspectives into diplomatic and

security cooperation, rather than compartmentalised talks.

Investment and aid packages should couple emission reductions and adaptation with inclusive peace-building programmes designed collaboratively with locals. The road ahead promises obstacles, but progress must continue despite barriers.

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COP28 offers hope for progress if world leaders can summon the courage to bridge divides. Summits present opportunities to reinforce connections between peace and climate resilience, while investments in equitable green technology and adaptation projects can provide stability where resources are scarce. Agreements on sharing contested water resources could also ease tensions while increasing sustainability.

COP28 can confront Gaza's plight as a microcosm of climate injustice, linking the enclave's vulnerability to displaced communities worldwide. Funding must boost fragile states struggling with conflict, climate impacts and lack of resilience. Leaders must view climate solutions through a peace-building lens, turning potential flashpoints of contention into opportunities for cooperation.

No single summit can resolve today's interlinked challenges. Yet, COP28 gives the international community a chance to place cooperation, vulnerability and human security over politics. By addressing the root causes of instability while planning for shared futures, leaders can nurture both peace and environmental progress. If nations gather the courage to align policy with principles, COP28 may yet deliver hope to those who need it most. There are miles to go and promises to keep, before we can rest.



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