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The Gulf: An Appeal for More Coordinated Action on Climate Change

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Abstract

This article seeks to provide the rationale behind Iraqi Prime Minister Al-Sudani's call at the United Nations for the formation of a negotiating group within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change process that brings together all member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Iraq, and Iran. This article argues that these countries would benefit doubly from such an arrangement, because it would help them better address the direct effects of climate change, on the one hand, and to better address the effects of the measures taken to address climate change, which will affect them as fossil fuel producers, on the other hand. The article cites the example of the Independent Alliance of Latin America and the Caribbean (AILAC), which could serve as a model for this prospective new grouping.

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A Negotiating Group for the Gulf

On September 20, 2023, in his speech at the United Nations General Assembly, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani of Iraq invoked the impact of climate change on the country and called on regional states, namely the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Iran, and Iraq to “form a negotiating bloc within the Climate Convention” and to establish a grouping that would address climate change, bolster environmental protection, and work together in leading action to confront the drought.¹

This was a timely appeal, given that the next Conference of the Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (the Convention) will be hosted by the United Arab Emirates in Dubai later this month. But for those who have followed the involvement of Iraq on climate change, it was a surprising, if welcome, development. Iraq had not joined the Convention until 2009, years, if not a decade, after its immediate neighbors. It did participate in all ensuing COPs, sending large delegations to attend, and signed and ratified the Paris Agreement. But it was hardly known for its activism in the negotiating process, and so the prime minister’s call was not aligned with business as usual. Why, then, did he make this appeal? There are two reasons and one supporting factor.

The first reason is that Iraq is facing a severe climate crisis, which has worsened this year, characterized by record temperatures, decreasing rainfall, and an increased frequency of extreme weather events like sandstorms and droughts that are leading to destruction of habitat and loss of biodiversity. These climate challenges have intensified existing problems like water scarcity, food insecurity, and displacement, to such a degree that a recent *New York Times* article by Alissa J. Rubin was aptly entitled, “A Climate Warning from the Cradle of Civilization.”²—Observant analysts have warned that Iraq needs an early warning system to better deal with climate induced social unrest, for example.³

The second reason is that this year, awareness of the need to address this issue has spiked at all levels of Iraqi society, from youth groups to professional associations, to universities, up to the uppermost echelons of government. Just over the last few months, several high-level conferences were held to discuss the effect of climate change on Iraq, covering subjects ranging from agriculture to water to migration to security, some of which were noted by the United Nations Security Council in its most recent resolution on Iraq.⁴ Line ministries that were previously little involved, but whose role is essential for adaptation or mitigation efforts, are expressing genuine interest and eagerness to attend the next COP and are committing to send sizable numbers of representatives, most notably the Ministry of Oil.

The supporting factor is the recent détente in the Gulf region and the role played by Iraq to help bring it about. For example, the agreement reached by Saudi Arabia and Iran earlier this year in Beijing to restore their diplomatic relations was preceded by a series of initially unadvertised meetings by the two parties in Baghdad organized by Iraqi authorities.⁵

The purpose of this article is to make the argument that Prime Minister Al-Sudani’s proposal to form a negotiating group that would include the member states of the GCC, Iran, and Iraq within the Convention process is, in itself, a worthwhile idea, whose outputs would be beneficial to the parties concerned individually and collectively, and to the international community as a whole. In this context, it will be helpful to describe the role of negotiating groups, mentioning one that could serve as a model.

Negotiating Groups and the Convention Process

Given the wide range of power, influence, and interests of the parties involved, multilateral negotiations are very seldom a level playing field, even less so when the stakes are high and the subjects under discussion are multidimensional, complex, and interrelated. Such is the case for the negotiations carried out under the Convention. Ideally, of course, it should not be so.

Negotiations under the Convention have been going on quasi annually since 1995. The high point of these negotiations is the COP. The first COP took place in Berlin and the twenty-eighth will be held November 30 to December 12, 2023 in Dubai. These conferences have increased in scope⁶ and in size⁷ to the point that they may well have become the largest and most organizationally challenging annual gatherings held under the United Nations flag.

Parties to the Convention and other Convention bodies are each represented at the COP by a national delegation consisting of one or more officials empowered to represent and negotiate on behalf of their national authorities. Given the importance of the stakes, countries that can afford it do send sizable delegations, often numbering in the hundreds of delegates. Attending these conferences is costly, both in terms of time and of resources, and many countries cannot afford to send delegates in sufficient numbers to ensure that they are represented to the fullest extent. There is therefore a wide disparity in terms of representation between the Parties attending the Conference. Often, it is the countries with most at stake that lack the resources to ensure that their interests are comprehensively defended.

The Convention Secretariat itself and the host country, whose fiduciary responsibility it is to organize the Conferences in alignment with the principles of the United Nations, do what they can to help. For example, some donor agencies provide travel funding to delegates from many countries, and webcasting, which the Secretariat pioneered from early on,⁸ along with teleconferencing, which became standard practice since the COVID-19 pandemic, can act as resource multipliers, allowing delegations to bring in colleagues not present in situ. While they are helpful contributions, such fixes remain marginal. They do alleviate the lack of physical presence, but hardly address disparities in bargaining or negotiating power between parties. This concept in the context of multilateral negotiations has been looked at from a theoretical perspective by several authors,⁹ but from a practical perspective, the best concept introduced into the process in an attempt to level the negotiating field, is negotiating groups.¹⁰

Negotiating groups are alliances between Parties enabling them to pool their resources, share information, align their votes, unify their voices, and consolidate their political influence in order to further their views during the negotiations.

At the United Nations, Parties are traditionally organized geographically into five regional groups, namely African States, Asian States, Eastern European States, Latin American and Caribbean States (GRULAC), and Western European and Other States,¹¹ an arrangement that is mostly used for procedural purposes such as electing the Conference officers. But negotiations are essentially about substantive interests, and these may differ widely between members of a geographic group.

With the exception of African countries, parties do not rely on their regional group to represent their substantive interests. Several other groupings are more important for climate negotiations, and these groupings have emerged in different ways, may predate the Convention, and are often, in such cases, relied upon by their members in other negotiations. The Convention itself differentiates between economically developed countries,¹² labeled Annex I Parties, and all other countries, including all countries bordering the Gulf, are labeled Non-Annex I Parties.

Negotiating groups arise through diverse means, encompassing both official UN classifications and issue-specific coalitions. These groups range from formalized institutions, such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), to informal ad hoc alliances such as the Umbrella Group. Predominantly, negotiating coalitions represent political alliances anchored in shared interests or cultural, economic, or geographic ties. Their degree of cohesion, structure, function, and objectives are determined entirely by their member states. While no formal legal requirements govern their establishment, some groups, such as the European Union and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), opt for legally binding governance frameworks. Parties may simultaneously join any number of negotiating groups.¹³

Yet Another Group?

What groups are the Gulf countries, namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, and Iran, members of? To begin with, all have acceded to the Convention; all have acceded to the Paris Agreement, except Iran.¹⁴ All are members of the Group of 77 (the largest negotiating grouping, which includes more than 130 member states, and which predates the Convention) and of the OIC (the second largest, with 57 member states). All, except Iran, are members of the League of Arab States (which has 22 member states). All are oil producers, but only Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are members of OPEC (13 member states).

Would it make sense for the eight Gulf countries to set up yet another negotiating group on top of their existing memberships? Here, countries from Latin America and the Caribbean provide a very helpful example clearly indicating that this is the case, and that there is value added in joining a smaller negotiating group, especially if there are commonalities of interests and/or circumstances. Consider, specifically, the Independent Alliance of Latin America and the Caribbean known as AILAC, its Spanish language acronym.

AILAC is a coalition of countries that collaborate on specific issues as a bloc during international climate negotiations. Established in Doha, Qatar, at COP18, AILAC comprises Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, and Peru. The group emerged from the Group of 77, diverging on certain matters, particularly the level of commitments expected of developing nations. AILAC positions itself as a “middle ground” in the North-South, rich-poor divide in climate change negotiations. AILAC membership is not exclusive: some members participate in or collaborate with multiple negotiating groups, including the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), the Central American Integration System (SICA), the Coalition for Rainforest Nations, and the Climate Vulnerable Forum.

As noted by scholars who have studied it, “AILAC represents a unique example of a group of small and medium-sized countries that succeeded in having an impact upon the pivotal 2015 Paris negotiations.”¹⁵ Further, it has been able to maintain its influence on the negotiations. For example, one author noted, referring to the approval of the Loss and Damage Fund at COP27, that “much of this achievement has to do with the united front presented by the countries of the Global South, with the G77, the Small Island States (AOSIS) and the Independent Association of Latin America and the Caribbean (AILAC) leading the way.”¹⁶

One feature of AILAC is that it arose from the negotiating trenches. As noted by the scholars above, “rather than originating from national leaders, the formation of the group was orchestrated organically by country negotiators, as they looked to increase their countries’ visibility and influence at the negotiations.”¹⁷ Doubtless, the many commonalities shared by the member states of AILAC facilitated this process.

Can the countries of the Gulf emulate the member states of AILAC and form a negotiating group that can influence the negotiations as successfully? More to the point, would they be willing to follow up positively on Prime Minister Al-Sudani's appeal in his speech at the United Nations General Assembly?

Objectively stated, they should do so. Here is why.¹⁸

The Gulf Countries and the Response to Climate Change

To begin with, Iraq is not the only country bordering the Gulf affected by climate change. The whole Gulf region is feeling it: twice the average global temperature increase, more extreme heat waves, frequent and severe dust storms, and more acute water shortages that are already forcing local governments to impose adaptation measures. It has been widely reported that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have banned mid-day work outdoors during summer months. Climate change may also, in the not-too-distant future, make it impossible to perform outdoor religious rituals of global importance, such as the Hajj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia¹⁹ and the Arba'een visits in Iraq.²⁰ Indeed, some studies caution of the possibility of conditions that would tax human adaptability.²¹

But what is specific about the eight countries considered here is that, in addition to being subject to the impact of global climate change, they are "countries whose economies are highly dependent on income generated from the production, processing and export, and/or on consumption of fossil fuels and associated energy-intensive products." This a direct quote of subparagraph h, paragraph 8, Article 4 of the Convention entitled "Commitments."²² As such, the Gulf countries will be at the core of what many expect to be the key subject of the negotiations at COP28, namely fossil fuels.²³

But that is not all. Several of these countries are also countries with "arid and semi-arid areas, forested areas and areas liable to forest decay" (subparagraph c), "areas prone to natural disasters" (subparagraph d), "areas liable to drought and desertification" (subparagraph e), and/or "areas with fragile ecosystems, including mountainous ecosystems" (subparagraph g).²⁴ Indeed, some of these countries can be covered simultaneously by several of these subparagraphs. In turn, the Paris Agreement recognizes these circumstances from the outset, in its preamble, and provides for mechanisms to support climate action in these countries in many of its substantive articles.

This means that all eight countries will be aligned on most if not all the key points during the negotiations, and that will ease the lining up into a collaborative negotiating group. For example, the severity of climate change in the Gulf region will force all bordering countries to focus heavily on adaptation. On finance, given the differences in their GDP per capita,²⁵ Gulf countries could acquire a more comprehensive view of the issues together than separately. But the process will have to be initiated in some way, ideally by a party with good relations with all the other parties. Recall here the role played by the Latin American and Caribbean negotiators in the formation of AILAC. Gulf negotiators taking the initiative could, for example, start by canvassing other delegates from the group to map out their individual positions and from that, work out strategies to strengthen their hand.

What may be even more important than the group, is what the joint work as a negotiating group could lead to. Recall the words of Prime Minister Al-Sudani. He appealed to the eight Gulf countries for two things, and the formation of a unified bloc in the climate negotiations was only one of them. The second was to establish a grouping that would address climate change and issues like water scarcity in the region. There are so many areas of potential cooperation. Working together, the Gulf countries can take advantage of economies of scale in the use of infrastructure based on new technologies, such as carbon capture, use, and storage (CCUS) that some countries

are promoting and developing, including Saudi Arabia.²⁶ The Gulf countries would mutually benefit from each other's reforestation projects, such as those included in Saudi Arabia's Middle East Green Initiative. Ultimately, it is by each working in their own region that we can make the greatest difference. It is there, in our own neighborhoods, that the focus should be, and the Prime Minister's appeal should be seen as a reminder that climate negotiations are only an instrument whose objective is to help preserve the planet and make people's lives better and more secure.

Notes

¹ See Prime Minister Al-Sudani's speech at the UN General Assembly; his mention of environmental issues begins at time 12:30; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vit6YRbVXgo>.

² Alissa J. Rubin, "Mesopotamia, Once Verdant, Is Running Dry," *The New York Times*, July 30, 2023, p. A1 (print version); multimedia web version at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/29/world/middleeast/iraq-water-crisis-desertification.html>.

³ Nussaibah Younis, "Early Warning: How Iraq Can Adapt to Climate Change," European Council on Foreign Relations, July 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/early-warning-how-iraq-can-adapt-to-climate-change/>.

⁴ Resolution 2682 (2023), adopted by the UN Security Council at its 9331st meeting, on May 30, 2023.

⁵ See, e.g., Ali Mamouri, "How Iraq Planted the Seeds for China's Saudi-Iran Deal," *Al-Monitor*, March 18, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/03/explainer-how-iraq-planted-seeds-chinas-saudi-iran-deal>.

⁶ The COP now also meets as the Conference of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol, or CMP, since 2005, and as the Conference of the Parties to the Paris Agreement, or CMA, since 2016.

⁷ These numbers, sourced from United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Secretariat publications, bear this out. COP3 in Kyoto in 1997 had just over 2,200 registered delegates from 155 parties, and close to 3,900 observers from 278 organizations. COP15 in Paris in 2015 had 19,600 delegates from 196 parties and 8,300 observers from 1,200 organizations. COP21 in Glasgow in 2021, held under strict pandemic rules, had almost 21,700 delegates from 197 parties and 14,000 observers from almost 2,000 organizations. The expectation is that participation at COP28 will exceed these numbers by a wide margin.

⁸ That was made possible through the contributions of the Cyber Kansai Project, a group of Japanese academics under the leadership of the late Professor Suguru Yamaguchi, who volunteered their services at COP3, organizing what was at the time the largest internet streaming event to date.

⁹ See, e.g., Gerald Schneider, "Capacity and Concessions: Bargaining Power in Multilateral Negotiations," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (June 2005): 665–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298050330031901>.

¹⁰ See the entry on negotiating groupings on the UNFCCC Secretariat website: <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/parties-non-party-stakeholders/parties/party-groupings>.

¹¹ Here, "Other States" include Australia, Canada, Iceland, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, and the United States of America.

¹² Annex I comprises the fifty-two member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in 1992, when the Convention was put up for signature.

¹³ There are several studies looking at political groups or negotiating coalitions and their impact on the negotiations, see, e.g., Bryndís Arndal Woods and Daði Már Kristófersson, "The State of Coalitions in International Climate Change Negotiations and Implications for Global Climate Policy," *International Journal of Environmental Policy and Decision Making* 2, no. 1 (2016): 41–68, <https://doi.org/10.1504/ijepdm.2016.10001370>.

¹⁴ Iran invoked the sanctions it is subjected to as a reason for not signing the Paris Accord and has said it would do so when sanctions are lifted.

¹⁵ See Guy Edwards, Isabel Cavalier Adarve, María Camila Bustos, and J. Timmons Roberts, "Small Group, Big Impact: How AILAC Helped Shape the Paris Agreement." *Climate Policy* 17, no. 1 (2017): 71–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2016.1240655>.

¹⁶ Fermín Koop, "COP27 Closes with Historic Agreement on Loss and Damage Funds," *Diálogo Chino*, November 21, 2022, <https://dialogochino.net/en/climate-energy/60820-cop27-closes-with-historic-agreement-on-loss-and-damage-funds/>.

¹⁷ Edwards et al., "Small Group, Big Impact."

¹⁸ Several think tanks have published studies arguing for greater environmental cooperation between the GCC, Iran, and Iraq. Let me mention one: Will Todman, Lubna Yousef, and Mennah Abdelwahab, “The Unique Promise of Environmental Cooperation in the Gulf,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/unique-promise-environmental-cooperation-gulf>.

¹⁹ Suchul Kang, Jeremy S. Pal, and Elfatih A. B. Eltahir, “Future Heat Stress During Muslim Pilgrimage (Hajj) Projected to Exceed ‘Extreme Danger’ Levels,” *Geophysical Research Letters* 46 (2019): 10094–100. <https://doi.org/10.1029/2019GL083686>.

²⁰ Yeon-Woo Choi and Elfatih A. B. Eltahir, “Heat Stress During Arba’een Foot-Pilgrimage (World’s Largest Gathering) Projected to Reach ‘Dangerous’ Levels Due to Climate Change,” *Geophysical Research Letters* 49 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1029/2022GL099755>.

²¹ Jeremy S. Pal and Elfatih A. B. Eltahir, “Future Temperature in Southwest Asia Projected to Exceed a Threshold for Human Adaptability,” *Nature Climate Change* 6 (2016): 197–200, <https://doi.org/10.1038/NCLIMATE2833>.

²² UNFCCC, Article 4, “Commitments,” <https://unfccc.int/resource/ccsites/zimbab/conven/text/art04.htm>.

²³ Attracta Mooney and Aime Williams, “Future of Fossil Fuels Leaves Nations at Odds ahead of Climate Summit,” *Financial Times*, November 1, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/6428fe5a-33ef-4094-8859-227bed4b545d>.

²⁴ UNFCCC, Article 4.

²⁵ The highest GDP per capita in the region (Qatar) is more than twenty times the lowest (Iran). Interestingly, AILAC also has a wide spread in its GDP per capita, though not as wide as that of the Gulf states.

²⁶ Camilla Hodgson and Attracta Mooney, “Saudis Lead Push to Elevate Carbon Removal in UN Climate Science Report,” *Financial Times*, March 21, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/4a8610a7-d929-4989-a2da-9014412e23c2>.