

CLIMATE CHANGE AND SECURITY: REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON A GLOBAL ISSUE



Introduction

Examining climate change as a global phenomenon is imperative, given its various impacts on security worldwide. Understanding regional perspectives becomes crucial in unraveling the nuanced ways in which these effects unfold. It is essential to recognize that while there will be region-specific manifestations, common security issues stemming from climate change will underscore the necessity of a global discourse.

Funded by the Columbia [President's Global Innovation Fund](#) and building on the expertise of Columbia University's Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies, this project aims to build a global community of interdisciplinary scholars and experts from diverse backgrounds to understand the regional security challenges posed by climate change. Commencing in Chile in March 2023, the project proceeded

with its second leg that took place in Istanbul on December 13-14, 2023.

Organized in collaboration with Columbia Global Centers | Istanbul and [the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia](#), the roundtable in Istanbul featured presentations by experts from local and regional institutions, delving into the ways in which unprecedented changes to climate – or alternatively, the economic transitions required to stave off the worst effects of these changes – will affect regional and international security dynamics.

The discussions, moderated by [Page Fortna](#) and [Jack Snyder](#), highlighted the necessity of moving beyond traditional energy models and the importance of incorporating local realities and community-centric approaches in the shift to sustainable energy sources. Other key topics featured the role of major powers in shaping

the new landscape, the impact of climate change on conflicts and migration, and the significance of transboundary water cooperation.

Experts collectively underscored the need for holistic, inclusive strategies, underscoring the interconnectedness of environmental, political, and social dimensions in addressing the climate crisis. As the world grapples with these challenges, the insights from this roundtable provide valuable perspectives for policymakers, academics, and practitioners in the pursuit of sustainable, secure futures.

Charting a New Energy Course in the Middle East: Global Demands and Local Realities

The first panels of the roundtable focused on green transition and decarbonization in the region. The first presentation of the roundtable by [Clemens Hoffman](#), Senior Lecturer of International Politics, University of Stirling, explored the dynamics shaping the Middle East's energy landscape amid a pressing need for transformation. Prof. Hoffman focused on the complexities of transitioning from fossil fuels to renewables, emphasizing the urgency of rethinking energy demand.



Hoffman argued that prioritizing the mere export-driven value of fossil fuels is outdated and excessively costly for a sustainable future. Referring to the East Med pipeline concept,

which aims to transport gas from Israel and Egypt through Cyprus to Europe, Hoffman raised doubts about whether this model truly represents the future of East Mediterranean geopolitics. He noted that despite the eagerness to extract and utilize these gas reserves, burning them will only exacerbate the impending environmental catastrophe.

Reflecting on diverse sectors and weighing their complexities in transitioning to decarbonized alternatives, Hoffman explored the socio-economic costs, the need for retraining, and the political will necessary to drive this transformation. With a more optimistic example, Hoffman suggested that “many of the multinational oil companies themselves are taking their fate into their own hands” and are becoming major investors in renewable infrastructure. Notably, Algeria is establishing a renewable sector managed by its oil company, aiming to sidestep a shift in power dynamics during this transition phase.

In his presentation, Hoffman also covered hydrogen production projects and large-scale electricity exportation, and critiqued centralized energy models, advocating for a more decentralized and sustainable approach. Overall, his analysis sketched a nuanced picture of the Middle East's energy transformation and emphasized the need for a holistic approach, encompassing socio-political and environmental aspects.

[Evrin Görmüş](#), Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Relations, MEF University, continued with the implications of decarbonization in the Southern Mediterranean region. Highlighting the alarming state of the region because of climate change, Prof. Görmüş emphasized the increased risks like sea level rise, droughts, and wildfires. Despite these challenges, the region is diverse in terms

of social, economic, and geopolitical interests, complicating unified climate policy.

On the one hand, key deals, such as the EU-Israel-Egypt energy deal and Israel-Lebanon maritime agreements were downgraded in terms of sustainability targets. But on the other hand, Görmüş zoomed in on Egypt as a good example of a country in the region moving toward decarbonization targets and increasing renewable energy capacities. Underlining Egypt's remarkable 73% increase in its renewable energy capacity from 2011 through 2020, Görmüş said countries like Egypt are surging their green energy capacities.

According to Görmüş, hydrogen also plays a pivotal role in the region's renewable energy strategy, which also aligns with the EU's hydrogen strategy. But its development poses challenges, she suggested, including impeding local green transitions, "because green hydrogen is exported [to EU] while fossil fuels are used domestically." Additionally, she emphasized how large-scale renewable projects impose costs on locals, leading to suffering of indigenous populations and resistances to green transition. Görmüş's presentation continued to stress the importance of engaging local actors in renewable energy projects to ensure just transitions and mitigate adverse social and economic effects. She advocated for viewing renewable energy as a social relation, emphasizing the need to consider power dynamics to fully transform energy systems.

Emel Akçalı, Associate Professor of International Relations, Kadir Has University, was the next presenter, who critically examined the prevalent approach of framing energy issues solely within security contexts. Prof. Akçalı emphasized that academia often explores energy challenges within this framework and urged a shift toward perceiving

the natural world as global commons rather than mere commodities. "How we can rescue the energy issue from the point of security, I think, is a primary issue we need to look at," Akçalı suggested.



Supporting Görmüş's conclusion, Akçalı mentioned how her research on the European Union's green energy transition revealed top-down approaches causing local resistance due to lack of community engagement. As an example, she referred to the concerns on Greek islands in constructing inefficient wind turbines, which impacts tourism and causes environmental issues. Lack of community dialogue leads to clashes. Investigating similar issues in Türkiye, an ongoing project Akçalı works on aims to delve deeper into these dynamics, hoping to shed more light on these challenges.

Akçalı also highlighted the potential of environmental peacemaking to unite communities facing shared issues. Inspired by peace parks fostering cooperation between conflicting regions in Africa, a research project in Cyprus showcased the willingness of ordinary people to engage, despite being hindered by institutional and political barriers. This project led to a regional Mediterranean study, aiming to shift the narrative from perceiving the region as solely conflict-ridden to exploring its potential as a space for

cooperation amidst prevalent tensions.

A paradigm shift in perceiving energy issues as global commons is vital, according to Akçalı. She underlined in her presentation the need for more inclusive, community-involved approaches to renewable energy, foreseeing both challenges and opportunities in achieving this transition.

The Quandary of Climate Security

Başar Baysal, Associate Professor of International Relations, Ankara Science University, and Mercator-IPC Fellow, looked into Türkiye's perceptions of climate security, aiming to decipher public views and the complexities of securitizing climate change. Prof. Baysal scrutinized the securitization of fossil fuels, which refers to framing energy resources, particularly fossil fuels, as critical elements not just for economic development but also as matters of security. This approach involves treating these resources as vital for national security, which can lead to their protection through various means, including military, diplomatic, and policy actions.

According to research Baysal conducted, there were a variety of perceptions in Türkiye when it comes to climate change: some experts view it as a critical issue deserving prioritization, while others question its urgency and categorization as a security concern. Highlighting the issue of over-technicalization in climate change discourse, Baysal argued that this problem restricts broader public engagement and understanding. He said, “A limited group of people can produce and understand the knowledge most of the time, which results in less-informed public perceptions,” underlining the importance of climate issues being re-politicized and re-socialized.

According to Baysal, “just securitization” may be useful in prompting action and awareness without escalating tensions or compromising broader societal well-being, which refers to the ethical and balanced approach to securitizing climate change while avoiding militarization, limiting public discourse, or overshadowing other critical societal issues.

Continuing to his presentation by exploring how different reference points—state, planet, or individuals—affect priorities in addressing climate change, Baysal referred to the risk of militarization when prioritizing states, and the abstract nature of an eco-centric approach. He underscored why an approach that prioritizes human beings over state-centric or eco-centric approaches may avoid potential drawbacks like militarization or abstractness. Nevertheless, he called for further research and open dialogue to determine the most viable and ethical path forward, urging a shift from technical jargon to more accessible discussions.

Collaboration Amidst Competition

Türkiye's renewable energy landscape with a backdrop of EU-China competition and collaboration nexus was the topic of the next presentation by Ceren Ergenç, Visiting Researcher, East Asian Studies and Research Centre, Autonomous University of Barcelona. In recent years, through a combination of subsidies, policy targets and manufacturing incentives, China has spent more on cleaning up its energy system than America and the EU combined. Now, it is utilizing its capacities to dominate green technology and finance markets in the region.

Focusing on the Turkish case, Prof. Ergenç said more than 50% of China's investments in Türkiye in general are in the energy sector,

particularly in solar and wind energy. Ergenç noted that China is inclined to make large-scale investments in the country, but recently started to face challenges due to state-business relations and political uncertainties. Currently, China is shifting to smaller-scale enterprises in Türkiye's renewable energy retail market. However, obstacles like anti-dumping measures imposed by larger companies continue to impact their involvement. Similar challenges emerge in the electric vehicle sector, indicating a struggle between state decisions and market dynamics in Türkiye.



Nevertheless, China's inclination to invest in green technologies in Türkiye implies collaboration between the EU and China according to Ergenç, because of the European Green Deal's regulations on a global scale. "China was among the very first who adapted to the EU's green deal propositions," she said. Emphasizing that China's proactive response to the EU's [carbon burden adjustment mechanism](#) (CBAM) contrasts Türkiye's lack of readiness, Ergenç highlighted Türkiye's need to align its industries with EU standards to avoid creating concerns for Turkish industries.

Safeguarding Global Stability and Paths for Mediterranean Collaboration

The second day of the roundtable included a variety of topics, starting with a discussion on possibilities of armed conflict. According to [Triantafyllos Karatrantos](#), Senior Research Fellow in Radicalization, Terrorism, Policing Models, Security and Foreign Policy, Hellenic

Institute for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), climate change may contribute to violent conflicts, state fragility, radicalization, posing threats to human security and livelihoods.

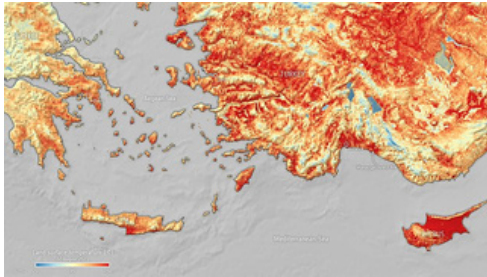
Karatrantos inquired into the three primary approaches regarding climate change's connection to conflicts. Climate change can directly influence conflicts; it may serve as a multiplier, escalating existing conflicts or creating instability; and on the contrary, climate-induced natural disasters may present opportunities for cooperation among conflicting nations.

Karatrantos's presentation underscored the need for integrating security assessments, proactive measures, and comprehensive strategies into global cooperation against climate change to safeguard against heightened vulnerabilities. Efforts to address climate change and conflict involve various strategies, such as prediction, prevention, conflict management, and post-conflict recovery. According to Karatrantos, "a range of policy instruments and measures intended to avoid increasing pressures translating into growing tensions and conflicts" should be utilized.

[Dimitrios Triantaphyllou](#), Professor of International Politics, Panteion University of Social and Political Studies, also addressed the relationship between armed conflict and climate change. Prof. Triantaphyllou emphasized socioeconomic indicators as major drivers of conflicts and mentioned how climate change mostly acts as a risk multiplier across the Mediterranean region.

Climate-related stressors weaken societies and states, making them less adaptable to changing environments and potentially "allowing the rise of other groups to fill in the vacuum."

According to Triantaphyllou, climate change's effects on agriculture, fisheries, and tourism through water scarcity, coastal risks, and wildfires, can pose significant challenges. Hence, he suggested, the correlation between climate vulnerability and conflict, though deemed modest by many, is non-negligible.



Triantaphyllou then broadened his discourse to examine recent geopolitical narratives, drawing attention to the divisions between developed and developing nations or the “reemergence of neo-colonialist language that describes the situation as West against the Rest.” He suggested that there might be a bloc of like-minded countries forming an international coalition to accuse developed countries of polluting more and stressing the unfairness of historical pollution.

Against such “visceral circles,” Triantaphyllou proposed collaborative efforts for “working together for early detection and prevention of dealing with climate change.” Referring to initiatives like the Greek-Turkish Forum, which recently discussed joint measures for addressing wildfires and environmental pollution. Triantaphyllou said such partnerships have great potential for trust building on working to address future calamities.

Shared Waters, Shared Futures

The roundtable continued with the complexities of transboundary waters and water security, with [Tuğba Evrim Maden](#),

Policy Development Coordinator, SUEN Turkish Water Institute. Shared aquifers, lakes, and rivers among multiple countries constitute 60% of the Earth's water potential. Combined with increasing scarcity in some regions, Maden underlined how dynamics of water usage are evolving and how water has become a geopolitical tool.

Directing her attention to Türkiye, Maden explained how the country navigates five transboundary basins to foster cooperation and negotiation among [riparian](#) nations. Key examples she touched upon included Türkiye's role as an upstream and downstream country in various basins, like the Euphrates and Tigris. She covered historical progression of agreements, joint committees, and cooperation between Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq as riparian nations. Maden notably underscored the challenges these countries faced and attempts at diplomatic resolutions. Water efficiency, responsible usage, and equitable allocation emerges as crucial solutions, according to Maden.



[İbrahim Mazlum](#), Assistant Professor of Political Science, Marmara University, also highlighted critical concerns regarding the intersection of climate change, water scarcity, and regional security. Underlining that climate change has become a catalyst for water-related tensions, particularly in vulnerable regions like the Middle East and the Mediterranean,

Mazlum said climatic shifts intensified the pressure on already strained water resources.

To better explicate the contentious nature of transboundary water resources, Mazlum talked about the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and how the shared nature of these rivers between Türkiye, Syria, and Iraq has led to complex geopolitical dynamics.

According to Mazlum, adaptation policies such as improving agricultural resilience and efficient water use should be a high priority in the region. “I am aware from my own community that the recent droughts have made them change their crop patterns. They are adopting more efficient irrigation techniques rather than traditional methods,” he said, urging policymakers to support farmers.

However, Mazlum warned against aligning solely with an anthropocentric approach, aimed at supporting the communities dependent on these ecosystems. Equally crucial is implementing measures to safeguard river ecosystems from an eco-centric perspective since numerous other species inhabiting these ecosystems are also of great value and significance for the region and the world.

Climate’s Footprint on Migration Paths

The last speaker of the roundtable was [Fabien Cottier](#), Postdoctoral Research Scientist, Ocean and Climate Physics, Columbia University, who focused on the correlation between climate change and migration. Cottier explained that the current research in the field suggests the influence of climate change on migration is moderate at present. Traditional migration drivers such as economic opportunities and social networks still play a dominant role. However, Cottier underlined that a key point is to realize the domestic

effects of most climate-induced migrations, with people moving within their own countries rather than across borders.



Regarding the direction of climate change’s impact, Cottier highlighted that the effect is not uniformly towards an increase in migration. While adverse climatic conditions can indeed lead to migration by negatively impacting livelihoods, especially in agriculture-dependent areas, the relationship is complex. Financial barriers to migration play a critical role, according to Cottier. In scenarios where climate change impoverishes populations, it might reduce their ability to migrate, leading to “trapped populations.” This is supported by studies indicating that in some agriculture-dependent countries, severe droughts have correlated with decreased migration due to reduced financial capabilities for funding migration.

Cottier finally touched on the specific context of climate change and migration in the Middle East and Türkiye, noting a lack of extensive quantitative research in the area. A study in Türkiye found that droughts influenced migration, but primarily through their impact on the broader rural economy rather than solely on agriculture.

Cottier underlined throughout his presentation the moderate but significant impact of climate change on migration, the complex and varied

directions of this impact influenced by economic, social, and political factors, and the critical role of local contexts in understanding these dynamics.

Conclusion

The 2-day roundtable highlighted the crucial need for a multidimensional strategy in tackling the security implications of climate change. The insights of this PGIF-supported workshop offer valuable perspectives that can guide policymakers, academics, and practitioners in shaping a future that is both sustainable and secure.

Participants

Başar Baysal, Associate Professor, International Relations, Ankara Science University, and Mercator-IPC Fellow

Ceren Ergenç, Visiting Researcher, East Asian Studies and Research Centre, Autonomous University of Barcelona

Clemens Hoffman, Senior Lecturer, International Politics, University of Stirling

Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, Professor, International Politics, Panteion University of Social and Political Studies

Emel Akçalı, Associate Professor, International Relations, Kadir Has University

Evrin Görmüş, Assistant Professor, Political Science and International Relations, MEF University

Fabien Cottier, Postdoctoral Research Scientist, Ocean and Climate Physics, Columbia University

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İnan Rüma, Associate Professor, International Relations, Bilgi University

Jack L. Snyder, Robert and Renée Belfer Professor of International Relations, Columbia University

Mustafa Özgür Berke, Manager, European Climate Foundation

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Page Fortna, Harold Brown Professor of US Foreign and Security Policy; Director, Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies Columbia University

Triantafyllos Karatrantos, Senior Research Fellow in Radicalization, Terrorism, Policing Models, Security and Foreign Policy, Hellenic Institute for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)

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Columbia Global Centers | Istanbul was established in 2011 and is directed by Ipek Cem Taha, a Turkish journalist and businesswoman, and a graduate of Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs and Graduate School of Business. A hub for students and scholars from Columbia and universities in the region, the Istanbul Center has embarked on a wide range of programs since its inception, including key issues of our times: from refugee health to gender equality; entrepreneurship to arts and culture; politics of memory to archaeology, civil society to sustainability.

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