



EVENT REPORT

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MULTINATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT POLICY
DIALOGUE

JOHANNES HÜGEL

Environment, Security and Migration in the Middle East & Africa: Looking to the Future

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On April 19, the EastWest Institute (EWI), together with the Multinational Development Policy Dialogue of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) Brussels office, convened a workshop concerning the nexus between migration, environment and security in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The dialogue brought together experts, policy makers, journalists, and academics from the individual countries across the MENA region to discuss a range of interrelated issues pertaining to the region's future energy, water and food security, and how the outlooks of these respective domains may affect future migratory flows.

The Dialogue was split into three sections with each panel consisting of three or more participants representing their respective countries according to geographical proximity. The first panel consisted of Iraq, Syria and Turkey; the second focused more on the Levantine countries of Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine, and finally the third panel concentrated on North Africa and the Maghreb, specifically, Libya, Morocco and Algeria.

Why?

In 2016, between 10 and 24 million people had to flee their land of origin because of environmentally related issues. In contrast, 6.9 million fled their country for violent conflict in the same year. The expected future increase of the former begs the question of how

these people will be integrated into other countries. Underlying the justification for the dialogue, therefore, was a need to address how governments, institutions and the international community can assist states to identify possible avenues for cooperation to offset the negative effects of climate change and possibly mitigate against the potential for irregular migratory flows in the future.

Furthermore, the reasons and consequences of Europe's so called "migration crisis" are well documented, and with migratory pressure projected to increase in the forthcoming decades as a result of climate change, both EWI and KAS considered it necessary to establish a platform to analyze the relatively new conception of "environmental refugees" given they are set to reach into the hundreds of millions, according to some estimates, in the not too distant future.

Terminology

With these issues in mind, the dialogue started by drawing attention to the term "environmental refugee," its recent entry into the academic vernacular, its inherent ambiguity and the lack of consensus regarding its exact meaning. Particularly, the absence of a concrete definition was noted to be one of the root problems in attempting to discuss the issue of environmental refugees and the inability of governments to shape a viable policy around them. Good, efficient policy requires that it be grounded in strong analytical data. To generate this data, requires

terms to be fully operational and explicit.

Iraq, Syria and Turkey

Human interest stories dominated the first panel and were used as a reference point to advocate the need for political agreements to combat the effects of climate change, predominantly with regards to water. Two of the panelists during this panel situated their arguments, for better water management and increased multilateral cooperation, within personal stories of how the particular region of their country had changed for the worse over the course of the past twenty years. One participant spoke of a need to overcome a culture of finger-pointing in achieving this aim, given change is already occurring, and blaming only creates further problems rather than solutions. In the same vein, another participant highlighted the fact that there are agreements and memorandums of understanding between the various states of the region but that the reluctance of governments to exchange information was a major obstacle to their implantation. The same participant therefore stressed the need for trust building exercises to foster a culture of cooperation.

The Levant

During the second panel, the motif of water arose once again, as hydro-diplomacy dominated the discussion. The concept was shown to possess several facets within the context of the MENA region, including food security and stability. Emphasis was placed on how large number of refugees in the region could lead to the unsustainable management of the region's few water resources. They also warned the region risked replicating the man-made disaster of what was once the Aral Sea in Central Asia, if it does not reform its management of the Jordan River. In

terms of policy, the panel stressed the need to reform current irrigation and agricultural practices in the region, in order to securitize and meet future food demands. Of course, participants also admitted local conflicts in the region seriously impede the feasibility of implementing such structural changes to current agricultural methods. Yet, it was pointed out that states have little choice but to cooperate at some point if they are to avoid deepening current conflicts or create the conditions for the onset of new ones.

The Maghreb

The final panel concerning the Maghreb in North Africa differed from the previous two panels in its breadth of subject matter and the diversity by which the confluence of climate change, security and migration is viewed in the three represented countries. In Morocco, it was said that climate change is affecting the country in two major ways: Rural populations migrating to the larger cities in search of economic opportunities and the influx of large numbers of Sub-Saharan Africans en route to Europe. Both these phenomena have pushed the government to outline a water strategy to cope with the pressures these entail. In contrast, in Libya it was noted that migration is primarily seen through a security lens. Despite initiatives which have arguably led to the decrease in the number of migrants using Libya as a transit country to Europe, the pull factors which draw people to the country are still in place; ultimately, economic disparity and severe climate change. Finally, in Algeria, participants considered how climate change, as a process, was changing the country's status from an emigration country to an immigration country. As a result, this metamorphosis was forcing the state to consider existential questions regarding its crisis, migration and integration policies.

Takeaways

It appears to be a cruel twist of fate that a region beset by a multitude of complexities and defined by its conflicts must also now juggle the serious challenge of climate change. Nevertheless, given the magnitude the challenge of climate change poses, it is ironic that it simultaneously offers the most potential for nurturing the kind of relations necessary to locate avenues of cooperation in the region. There is no doubt that the road ahead is immense. But, this road will seem a little less daunting if countries continue to engage with each other and tackle the issue as a collective. The issue cannot and will not be solved by a single state but will require an appropriate international response.

(Charles Elkins, East West Institute)