From November 26 to December 7, 2012, Qatar hosts the 18th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and, simultaneously, the 8th Meeting of the Parties (MoP) to the Kyoto Protocol. The main issue on the Doha agenda: Adopting meaningful global emissions reduction commitments for a second implementation period (2012-2015) under the Kyoto Protocol (that is otherwise set to expire at the end of this year) and thus setting the stage for a new climate change regime starting in 2015. Developing countries are also pushing for the effective implementation of the 2007 Bali Action Plan – a set of agreements on long-term cooperative action on adaptation, mitigation, finance, technology transfer, and capacity building – in a manner that is coherent and integrated. As with many such global agreements, the South rightfully complains that the North has not fulfilled its numerous pledges in terms of financing and technology transfer.

Qatar spent two years fighting off the challenges of rival states from the Asia Group (the annual meetings rotate among five main regions), and in particular that of a determined South Korea which – unlike members of the energy exporting Gulf Cooperation Council – is considered to be relatively progressive in terms of its commitment to a low-carbon economy. One reason Qatar was selected – aside, of course, from its financial potential – was in keeping with the long-held demand by the Global South that the centers of international policy be located outside of traditional Northern bases such as New York and Geneva. Until recently, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) alone was based in the South, specifically in Nairobi, Kenya. But perhaps a more immediate reason Qatar was awarded the honor of hosting UNFCCC COP 18 was to try and drive a wedge between what are increasingly being labeled, somewhat patronizingly, “climate progressives” among the Gulf monarchies, UAE and now Qatar, and the so-called “rejectionists” represented by Saudi Arabia that have until now been hegemonic within official Arab negotiation circles. The idea, then, was to reward Qatari ambitions to take on Saudi Arabia and thus break the unity of the powerful energy more constructive player in the production, consumption, and underwriting of an emerging global “green” economy. They point to the 2009 UN General Assembly meeting, when the Qatari Emir first signaled a change in discourse away from climate change denial to acknowledging the threat of climate change as a “pressing challenge” to world civilization. Qatar points to its huge gas reserves, and to the potential of at least shifting dependence on the worst kind of fossil fuels – heavy oil and coal – towards the more emissions-friendly natural gas, which contains roughly 50 percent less emissions than fuel oil. Qatar also dangles the carrot of its potentially significant contribution towards some green funding agency and energy research as well as technology institutes that Arabs, and other members from the Global South could draw on in their quest to adapt to the realities of global warming.

Critics, meanwhile, dismiss the idea that the world’s richest country (in per capita terms), and one with the world’s largest environmental footprint and per capita carbon emissions rate (along with fellow Gulf countries the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait), is serious about...
addressing root causes of climate change. Rather they suggest that Qatar is up to its old image-management and marketing schemes: It desires to be buy the “climate change” brand, much as Abu Dhabi bought the “renewable energy” brand by defeating a bitter Germany in 2009 for hosting the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), the first such global agency in the Arab world. Indeed, the brand boasting in Doha continued immediately after signing the Host Country agreement with the UN, with the designated conference venue in Doha, the Qatar National Convention Center, swiftly labeled as the “greenest” building ever to host a COP. However, skeptics maintain that while Qatar will do its utmost to ensure an effective branding summit (that is, it needs a major political outcome or the launch of a major initiative that will associate “Doha” with “green” and “climate change progressive”), once the summit is over, any progress achieved will slow down, much as Abu Dhabi’s much heralded Masdar City (the first zero-carbon city, or eco-topia ever implemented) has done since its launch.

Progress? Qatari and Arab Climate Change Attitudes and Positions

Despite such skepticism about Qatar’s role and intentions behind hosting this global conference at such an important crossroads for the UN climate change regime and the fate of people and nature around the world, a basic Qatari and Arab claim generally holds true: There has been some progress in climate change attitudes and discourse in the region, at least measured in terms of the number and frequency of meetings, papers and change in official discourse. After two decades of generally ignoring the increasingly frenzied global debate on climate change, the Arab region has belatedly caught the climate change bug and movement is now afoot in both official circles and the globalized segments of Arab civil society.

There are two main drivers for this apparent change in attitudes. On the one hand, there has been the realization – increasingly backed up by clear scientific evidence and rigorous forecasting – that while the Arab region contributes only modestly (less than 5 percent) of global greenhouse gas (GhG) emissions, it is
arguably the most highly vulnerable region to the impact of climate change. As the 2012 World Bank flagship report on climate change in the Arab Region reaffirmed, the vast majority of the roughly 350 million citizens of the Arab world, and in particular the 100 million classified by the UN as “poor” and thus most vulnerable, will feel this impact directly. Credible models suggest that the region faces surface temperature increases of 2 to 5.5 degrees centigrade by the end of the 21st century, with already 2010 tying 2005 as the hottest average temperatures since records began to be kept in the late 19th century. Moreover, forecasted sea level rise will have a devastating impact in the region. In the Gulf, for instance, recent man-made islands will simply disappear and the small island state of Bahrain will lose up to 15 km of its coastline. In Egypt, forecasts of a one-meter sea level rise will affect around 6 million, mostly poor, people living in the Nile delta basin. Forecasts published in a major regional study produced by the Arab Development and Environment Forum contribute further to the alarming statistics. It suggests that increasingly scarce water resources will be further reduced by between 15-50 percent in countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine; that the Nile River’s flow will decrease by 40-60 percent; and that increased frequency and intensity of drought particularly in North African and Mashriq (Levant) countries will become a major socio-economic and political problem for the region.

Thus, given the Arab region’s historically low contribution to global GHG emissions and its high vulnerability, Arab governments and businesses have understood that there is much to gain in terms of attracting donor financing for mitigation and adaptation measures (3rd p), participating in carbon market schemes, as well as benefiting from the potential transfer of climate-friendly technologies and energy efficiency schemes that fit nicely into on-going technical reform packages throughout the region. As a result, the official focus of most non-oil producing Arab states such as Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon in the global negotiations has thus been on lending support to the G77 position aiming to ensure that the principles of equity, common-but-differentiated responsibility, poverty alleviation, and sustainable development are enshrined in any post-Kyoto regime. To be sure, their primary interest in advocating such important and necessary international principles is not so much a commitment to human survival, or a pledge to restructure their respective socio-economic and political systems, but rather to benefit from additional donor funds and market opportunities likely to flow from any global deal reached while at the same time cater to the sharp rise in domestic demand for electricity, water and energy. Another interest of such countries is to avoid ruffling the feathers of Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, which is a major donor and political influence in the region’s non-oil economies.

A second major driver for the change in discourse in regard to climate change in the Arab region comes from the fact that the oil-exporting countries of the GCC and particularly Saudi Arabia perceive the recent wave of climate change negotiations (following the ratification of Kyoto in 2005) and discussions regarding a low-carbon global economy as a direct threat to their national interests and security. As such Saudi Arabia, which greatly influences the position of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the Arab League, has until recently dominated the Arab position and even been a genuine global player in influencing (albeit negatively) the climate change regime since at least the Bali round of negotiations. Saudi Arabia’s active participation...
in global negotiations has basically served to limit the aspirations of a post-Kyoto climate change deal vis-à-vis developing countries and tried to incorporate a mechanism to compensate oil-producing countries for any losses to the oil trade resulting from climate change.

Qatari strategic policy has become more complex over the past several years, and its attempts to assert itself politically (and since the Arab Uprisings, militarily as well) in the region complement its attempt to become a global brand by hosting the UNFCCC and the World Cup.

Qatar has, until recently, followed Saudi Arabia’s lead in this. Qatari official submissions to the UNFCCC starting in the immediate post-Bali period supported Saudi Arabia’s, and G77’s, formal position regarding long term action: That developing countries (“Non-Annex I countries”), including the GCC members, should take up “nationally appropriate mitigation actions” only in line with “their special national circumstances and sustainable development imperatives,” and “contingent on the effective implementation” by developed countries of their obligations to provide technical and financial support. In other words, national climate change policy should be voluntary rather than internationally mandated as with developed countries (“Annex I countries”) under the Kyoto Protocol. Qatar supported the Saudi line that warned that any nefarious attempts by the North to introduce socio-economic or per capita criteria to differentiate among non-Annex I countries with a view to “imposing” mitigation and other commitments on richer countries within the global South based on “relative degree of development and capabilities” are “unacceptable.” When it became clear that some European countries and civil society groups wanted to impose an international carbon tax, particularly on the aviation and shipping sectors that have so far not been included in the negotiations, Qatar again responded vocally in tandem with Saudi Arabia that its oil export and revenues would be seriously undermined, and that would in turn curtail development plans contrary to the provisions of the Kyoto Protocol that calls on Annex I countries to implement policies that minimize adverse social, trade, economic and environmental impacts on other states. Thus while actively working to inhibit positive action on carbon tax (and similar policies designed to punish carbon exporters for the sins of carbon consumers, largely in the North), Qatar and other GCC states have instead heavily promoted “market and economic potentials for mitigation” through energy conservation and efficiency, carbon capture and storage, and in Qatar’s case, fossil fuel switching to lower carbon fuels (such as natural gas).

It thus becomes clearer why Qatar was selected to host the UNFCCC. On the one hand, of course, there is the hope that by leveraging the increased pressure felt by Qatar and other GCC states to persuade them to unleash their financial potential to fund both poorer nations in the global South and northern-based companies, firms and researchers, there will be a “win-win” situation in terms of the global economy and sustainable development. On the other hand, there is the importance attached to somehow breaking the OPEC and GCC blocs resistance, and through that split the G77 and China group of developing countries, as one of the political priorities of both the more progressive states of the North and the northern-led environmental movements. As Connie Hedegaard, currently the European commissioner leading the climate change portfolio, recently made clear in an interview to one Gulf newspaper, the Doha meeting could make Qatar an “interesting leader in this field in the whole region” if it switches away from fossil fuel dependence. The “leadership” role she is dangling in front of the Qatariis, of course, is intended as a contrast to Saudi Arabia and other OPEC member states. The EU, to this
end, has funded some Arab NGOs that have been critical of Saudi Arabia’s position in order to point to indigenous criticisms and avoid (legitimate) charges of Northern interference. Time will tell if Qatar will move further away from Saudi Arabia’s position and fulfill yet another “leadership” role in the region, a role that has become increasingly controversial since the start of the Arab uprisings. Qatar strategic policy has become more complex over the past several years, and its attempts to assert itself politically (and since the Arab Uprisings, militarily as well) in the region complement its attempt to become a global brand by hosting the UNFCCC and the World Cup. Qatar is, in short, trying to make itself indispensible not just to in security terms to key western states (like the United States of America) but in financial terms to northern-based multinational companies and institutions. Their hope is that such deep institutional, economic, and security linkages with the West (and, in parallel, China) will protect them from regional hegemons such as Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Conclusion: Contradictions of Doha

Perhaps most interestingly, it is worth pointing out an obvious contradiction that will be at play as Qatar hosts the UNFCCC this year. On the one hand, there is Doha as a site for the UNFCCC negotiations that effectively aim to correct two hundred years of adverse impact on environmental and social relations unleashed by the European industrialization and colonial processes and ensuing consumerist ideology that accompanied this capitalist expansion via neoliberal globalization. It is this historical process that underlies the basic, legitimate claim by the global South that the North has a basic and historic responsibility to clean up (and pay for) the mess it has caused without compromising the South’s ability to develop. There are also increasingly frenetic debates about the need for a new form of environmentalism based on an altered economic and social model that needs to be constructed if planet Earth is to survive the next century given the continued rise in global population rates and consumption patterns.

On the other hand, there is Doha as site of, and model for, rampant consumerism and consumption, one whose political, economic and social forms of governance – to say nothing of its energy-intensive construction boom and mall culture – is the antithesis of imagined new forms of environmentalism. In per capita terms Qatar and its GCC neighbors have the world’s largest emissions consumption rates, and the largest environmental footprint. According to one report, Saudi Arabia is responsible for roughly 28 percent of the region’s emissions though its population is only 7 percent of the region’s total; and it produces more carbon emissions than countries like France, which has more than double Saudi’s population, and Brazil which has nearly eight times the population. It further reinforces these patterns on the more oil-dependent countries in the region via exporting rentierism, with the result that the carbon emissions of the average Arab person will soon exceed the global average (with Qatar at roughly 12 times the average). The consumption of energy within Arab states has more than doubled since the end of the Cold War, and this trend is set to continue as the forecasted primary energy demand grows by nearly 3 percent in the period 2005-2030, more than any other region other than China and India. This contradiction between Doha as a site for climate change salvation and new environmentalism, and that of Doha as the poster child for consumption and consumerism becomes even starker with the observation that Qatari citizens represent under 13 percent of Qatar’s total population, with much of the rest extremely poor and disenfranchised workers from south Asia.

Ultimately, as various scholars such as Pacific University’s Ahmad Kanna have pointed out, Qatar, the GCC and the Arab region more generally, must be viewed today within the context of an historical struggle between hegemonic social and political formations (reinforced by colonial and neo-colonial structures) and various reform movements within the region that aim for better forms of governance and more equitable societies. The Arab uprisings unleashed the latest
wave of reform movement across the region, one based (at least in part) on the revolutionary potential of genuine democratic change and social equity. This potential has largely been crushed, for now, as powerful reactionary forces across the region move to limit meaningful social change. With time, as social movements in the region regroup to consider longer-term strategies, a new form of environmentalism can take root, one that can genuinely challenge the existing socio-economic and political order in line with other such movements across the region and world. Until then, the Qatar brand can be greatly enhanced if it somehow coaxes COP-18 member states to commit to concrete short and longer-term targets to substantially cut global carbon emissions, and paves the way for a meaningful post-Kyoto climate change regime.