New Partnerships to Sustain the Middle East and the World

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These are challenging and uncertain times in much of the Arab world. As governments stammer and populations suffer ever-greater deprivations, a burgeoning youth can see little hope for a stable and prosperous future. It seems that diplomacy has little to offer the people of the region, while science has no platform in the frenzy. Politics and ideology grab the headlines, yet the greatest challenges facing our region have yet to be addressed, and they have nothing to do with culture or creed.

The Middle East is at an advanced stage of debilitating exposure to the three interlinked and immutable challenges that define our age yet remain unacknowledged by the major diplomatic actors in our region—the combined and interlinked stresses on energy, food, and water pose unprecedented existential threats to all of our people. These are challenges that only science empowered by policy can solve. Yet there is no agenda for saving our future, as reactionary short-term thinking has dominated many decision-making processes. Until we accept that borders matter little in our region, or in the world at large, we will fail even to begin undoing the mistakes of wasteful generations.

It is in this starkly simple scenario that science diplomacy must fight for a voice. It is certainly not a new concept in the Middle East, but if science diplomacy is to succeed in helping to avert catastrophe, then we must acknowledge that
the framework in which it can operate has changed irreversibly in recent years. Crucially, the global nature of environmental and resource pressures, combined with the globalization of knowledge and ideas, have made self-interested statecraft a dangerous and deluded practice. The most casual objective assessment of our planet’s needs and our global population’s plight can only underline the myopia of those who fetishize borders, trade barriers, or cultural relativism. Rather, we must focus universally on the immediate threats to our shared future: the spiraling energy-related emissions from our growing cities, the changing weather patterns of our undivided atmosphere, the swirling conglomeration of waste and pollutants in our oceans, and the diminishing greenery of a unique planet under sustained attack.

In the midst of these realities, protecting the status quo of a broken regional polity or seeking to build new relationships in the vein of tried and failed ones is little more than arming ourselves to lose yesterday’s war. We must learn quickly that states are battling with ever more challenging threats in our changing world, and citizens are not always best represented by statesmen. But this is not necessarily a cause for concern. Already, leadership in science diplomacy is emerging from more appropriate power centers than departments of foreign relations.

The work of the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, for example, highlights the importance of municipal leadership in engaging with issues that affect our swiftly urbanizing global population. This innovative group represents some fifty-eight megacities around the world that account for a heavily consuming 8 percent of the global population. Together, these municipal leaders are taking action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to improve service efficiencies while the actors of interstate multilateralism mumble in the wings. Here in the Middle East, it seems so much more appropriate that both our new and ancient urban centers should engage with other concentrated population centers on issues of resource depletion and management, rather than bearing the mediation of often compromised state-sponsored mechanisms. Varieties of urban identity are real and comprehensible for diverse populations around the globe. The artificial construct of state and nationality often offers far less dynamism or shared relevance.

For many observers, this year’s United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) marked a watershed in how the interests of resource-challenged populations can best be represented. It also left unanswered the major question of how science and diplomacy can impact global problem solving. The sometimes-confused gathering showed that states are becoming weaker in the face of inexorable challenges to climate and security. As economic woes and political partisanship hobble the ability of many governments to plan for the long term, it is hardly controversial to say that old-style multilateral negotiations may be a thing of the past. Rio+20 and other stalled engagements, such as the interminable Doha Development Round trade negotiations, show that innovation in international engagement is needed and new leadership must emerge on the fringes. Groups like C40 have demonstrated that the future of cooperative action lies in new forms of
partnerships and collaborations between civil society, business, governments, and regional alliances. The C40 has already undertaken some fifty thousand projects of varying sizes in retrofitting, clean energy, lighting, and reforestation—initiatives that twenty years ago could only have come from concerted state-sponsored programs.

Of course, this new way of dealing with our shared critical challenges must be given a structure, or we are destined to fall short in providing the determined and innovative leadership that our global population desperately needs. As David Nabarro, the United Nations secretary general’s special representative on food security and nutrition, said of Rio+20, it has revealed a new, emerging patchwork of coalitions of the willing that will only cause confusion unless there is a stated consensus on the direction we must all share and the desired goals of cooperation. Perhaps only a committed, high-level partnership between diplomacy and science can suggest a new framework for progress.

It must be accepted that Rio+20 came at a difficult time for governments around the world. With economic and political instability affecting large swathes of both the East and West, it is easy to understand why major issues, such as resource management and climate change, have been put aside. However, it should not be easy to accept.

While there is no doubt that democracy is the best mechanism for ensuring fairness and productive opportunity in societies—its absence in the wider Middle East has caused untold suffering and stifling of potential—we must also acknowledge the current structural weaknesses of democratic systems and their impact on global science policy and development. Much of this has to do with the short-term mindset of career politicians and the funding mechanisms for getting them into power and keeping them there. This short-termism is one of the greatest threats to a sustainable future.

It is perhaps indicative of our increasing abhorrence of planning for the future that the average share-holding period in the United States has fallen from eight years in 1960 to just four months today. Politicians and policy makers, along with corporate executives, are increasingly distracted by the demands of quarterly reporting, and the interests of shareholders who are generally far removed from the business or context of corporations. The links between politics and big business are obvious in the United States, but, of course, they exist everywhere. It is no wonder then that so many of the world’s most powerful leaders are distracted. Whether they are gripped by interim financial reports or fixated by quickly revolving electoral cycles, they have all failed to deal with larger threats to humanity.

It is in this context that the Middle East is trumpeted as an exceptional case of social and political dysfunction. Of course, there is some truth to this, but the overarching issues of resource pressure remain paramount, even if many chose to ignore them. Like the West, our part of the world is choking as a result of mismanagement and irreparable depletion of our key resources. The pace of
environmental degradation is increasing rapidly, while the social and political imbalances caused by a portion of the region’s rentier oil economy have dampened hopes for sustainable, regional socio-political development. In the midst of this, our scientists and diplomats have been limited in what they can do for our region’s current and future stability. Even when they have attempted to address our key challenges, they have, by necessity, focused on immediate, small-scale problems, examining individual natural processes rather than regional systems. Of course, this has given us a considerable base of knowledge, but it is no more than a beginning to solving problems with far more traction than comprehension.

Water scarcity is perhaps our region’s most pressing challenge, yet it gets little diplomatic attention. Jordan holds the dubious distinction of being the fourth most water-deprived country in the world. Our population is growing steadily and we host an increasing number of regionally displaced persons. Yet, as freshwater demand continues to outstrip availability, there is no doubt that we are heading for a disaster that will ignore borders unless we act immediately. But we can only succeed if we act in conjunction with our neighbors and with the support of the international community. We can only avert catastrophe if we overcome the short-termism that stifles our growth and limits the development of responsive polices.

The high-level Re|Source 2012 sustainability conference, which was held in July at Oxford University’s Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment, examined the issue of sustainability and policy with input from politicians, business leaders, and civil society representatives. Speakers and panelists looked at new ways to manage resources and to mitigate the risks of scarcity. Despite positivity from some quarters, the outlook was generally grim when it came to identifying concerted global action to avert crises. As David Miliband, former United Kingdom foreign secretary, pointed out, the costs of responding to sustainability in Western democracies are upfront and visible, yet the benefits are long term, dispersed, and largely invisible. It is no wonder that electorates and politicians are avoiding those tough decisions.

Unfortunately, we cannot expect real solutions to emerge from distracted national governments. Instead, we must develop new ways of defining and managing responsibility and look at changing global systems in order to achieve workable planetary solutions.

Our current systems need to be reconsidered. For example, illogically, fossil fuels, which are damaging from both environmental and political perspectives, currently receive annual global subsidies worth some $400 billion. This outlay finances inefficiencies, protects vested interests, and largely benefits the rich, even in developing economies. Meanwhile, subsidies for renewable energy are generally small-scale and often politically precarious. Of course, energy is just one component of that resource nexus that requires unprecedented diplomatic and scientific attention.
Today we are well along in our first decade of using non-sustainable water, yet this fundamental global inefficiency goes largely unmarked by politicians and scientists alike. We are now borrowing what cannot be repaid. As Peter Brabeck-Letmathe, chairman of Nestlé, pointed out at Re|Source 2012, we are deliberately creating a future in which we will not have the water to produce the energy or the food we need. And this future is imminent.

These challenges to our stability and prosperity are not ideological or cultural, they are existential and diplomatic. We must facilitate global science in order to find the solutions that we urgently need. Global science must aid the deployment of creative ingenuity to ease crises and to unite us all in a common search for a better, more prosperous future. Diplomats must challenge their short-term political paymasters and create a dialogue that reaches beyond the borders of states and ideologies. Similarly, scientists must acknowledge their responsibility to convey scientific discourse to the policy arena.

There is no doubt that diplomats and scientists are cut from a different cloth; caution and circumspection are considered virtues in the former, while the latter must often break rules and disavow convention in order to forge a new and better reality. But our current predicament requires that both groups work together as a unified and uncompromised force. We must insist that diplomats and scientists treat each other as partners in a desperate bid to avert catastrophe.

The Middle East is facing existential challenges that may be more apparent in certain places than others, but are universal in our age. We must acknowledge the real issues that we all face, and we must encourage the historic refusal of scientists to accept the status quo. It is this dogged approach that has spurred progress through the ages. Today, diplomats must think in the same way, for only scientific ingenuity, with the support of diplomatic creativity and drive, can respond to the defining challenges of our twenty-first century—in the Middle East and around the world. We must be ever-mindful of how we go about facilitating science cooperation, for all of us come to the table with realized and unrealized cultural baggage. For this reason, we should be very clear from the outset about our objectives and our understanding of scientific universality. Scientists and diplomats alike must agree that standards should prevail over values, and we must acknowledge where we are before we can hope to plan a future in which want allows ideologues to seize a platform.

The spheres of science and diplomacy must interact to form a coalition of common interests driven by honest and urgent incentives. We must create a movement of individuals, nongovernmental organizations, businesses, and governments that can withstand challenges from the realms of realpolitik and short-term vested interests. We must acknowledge publicly that our mutual aim is to respond to shared global challenges by marshaling the ingenuity of our global scientific community.