

# Give Peace (and the climate) a Chance

## An IISD Commentary

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New York had the world's attention in late September. A record number of Heads of State gathered for the 64<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the United Nations. Two items dominated the agenda: the urgent need for a global deal on climate change, and the equally-pressing need to open peace talks in the Middle East. These discussions might have happened at different times and behind different doors, but there should be no mistaking that they are linked.

The Middle East peace process is at a critical juncture. On the Tuesday before the General Assembly, U.S. President Barack Obama hosted Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, in an attempt open a dialogue between the two parties. Hands were reluctantly shaken and proclamations made, though no freeze on Israeli settlement expansion in the West Bank was offered.

Curiously, it is political stability in the Middle East that provides one more reason why we need to reach a deal at the climate talks in Copenhagen in December. Climate change is about water: where and when rain falls, and where that water flows. The countries of the Jordan River basin—Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan and the occupied Palestinian territory—are already desperately short of water. Israel, Jordan and Palestine have less than a quarter as much water as the common definition of a water-scarce country.

Regional climate models predict that unless drastic action is taken to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions, rising temperatures will reduce agricultural productivity and make water even harder to come by in this already-dry region. At the same time, population growth is increasing demand for water, food and jobs at a tremendous rate. The population of the region is expected to grow to 71 million by 2050, from 42 million in 2008—an increase of more than 70 per cent.

The combined impacts of climate change and population growth mean that more people will have to share fewer resources. And while we have to be careful not to overstate the challenge, it is clear that a hotter, drier climate coupled with a population boom could make progress on a peace deal increasingly difficult.

The sharing of water has been an essential element of nearly every peace negotiation in the region. In 2000, for example, peace talks between Israel and Syria broke down over the issue of Syria's access to the Sea of Galilee. With less water to go around, the negotiation of future agreements will become more contentious.

Climate change also threatens to upset domestic food production in a region where food security is already very politically sensitive. A decrease in the availability of water needed to feed the Middle East's growing population could raise the stakes for the return or the retention of occupied land. Thus, greater food pressures could change Syria's negotiating position on the fertile and relatively

well-watered Golan Heights, or alter Israel's calculation of when and how to withdraw from the West Bank.

Against this backdrop, it is the responsibility of the world leaders to prove they are ready to take decisive steps to prevent a dangerous warming of the climate.

Without action, rising temperatures will likely exacerbate tensions across the Middle East.

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