

Commentary

CLIMATE IN CONFLICT: RESILIENCE, SECURITY & GLOBAL COOPERATION

Sheikha Shamma bint Sultan bin Khalifa Al Nahyan

At the World Economic Forum in Davos in January of this year, environment-related risks fell in the global risk rankings, with geopolitical risks overtaking key climate ones. Many working in the climate sector chose to take the ranking with a pinch of salt. It was clear that, despite a number of ongoing hostilities across the world, the data used to determine the biggest risks facing us and the environment still does not take into consideration the emissions that the atmosphere absorbs through conflict. Conflict-related emissions are also often left out of multilateral negotiations and climate reports, as it is not yet mandatory to include them. Both emissions and conflict present significant risks to the world, yet the interconnected nature of these risks is not sufficiently reflected in global policy debates.

From the Gulf's perspective, the onset of the US-Iran war in February of this year brought the risks of conflict closer to home than ever before. And for those of us working in sustainability, an important question has surfaced: how do we ensure that climate stays on the agenda at times when the world's attention is consumed by conflict?

THE PLANET HAS NO CEASEFIRE

Firstly, we need to understand the impact that conflict has on the planet. The atmosphere absorbs wartime carbon emissions whether or not they appear in national climate reports, and in most cases they do not. As we look for adaptation and mitigation solutions, and work to find new technologies to decarbonize our industries, the explosion from a single missile has roughly the carbon equivalent of driving a car for 350 miles (over 560 kilometers). If you scale that to what we witnessed in the region over the course of the conflict since February 28, the degree to which war accelerates damage within an already-heating climate becomes very clear. Yet, military emissions remain largely excluded from the Paris Agreement national accounting by design. This omission does not change the outcome. The atmosphere and the oceans will record our emissions and our actions even if we choose not to document them.

With around 25% of the world's traded oil and a significant share of its liquified natural gas passing through the Strait of Hormuz before the war, disruption here does not merely inconvenience markets: it reverberates ecologically. The Gulf's waterways are thriving natural habitats for marine life. They are home to dugongs, whale sharks, hawksbill turtles, and some of the world's most resilient coral reefs. Naval activity such as the use of sea mines and sonar can greatly disrupt migration routes and poison these unique and essential ecosystems.

It is therefore safe to say that our seas and oceans absorb the impact of conflict in the same way the atmosphere does. While the cost of this may not appear on a balance sheet, it is felt in very real ways for the natural environment and for societies

that depend on the sea. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, around 600 million people rely on the ocean economy globally. For many people in conflict and climate vulnerable countries around the world, the blue economy – be it fishing, coastal trade, or marine life – is a matter of survival and not merely another economic sector.

THE HARSH LOOP

Notably, the countries most devastated by conflict receive the least amount of climate funding. This leaves them unable to adapt or build resilience, which in turn deepens the resource pressures that drive further conflict. A study published in 2024 stated that across the world, 1.6 billion people live within five kilometers of an active armed conflict. Households located in conflict-prone areas are six times more likely to be in climate-vulnerable areas. Conflict and climate vulnerability are not parallel crises unfolding; in many cases, it is the same communities that are forced to bear the consequences of both.

An example is the prolonged drought in Syria from 2006 to 2011 that led to the collapse of agricultural livelihoods, forcing families to migrate into cities. This, in turn, strained resources and created social unrest that contributed to the outbreak of conflict. Climate change was a threat multiplier that set off a chain of events starting with drought and leading to internal migration, urban strain on resources, and, ultimately, a war that displaced millions of Syrians.

ENSURING CLIMATE REMAINS A TOP PRIORITY

Institutions must enable climate finance to flow to the stakeholders that require it the most. A study published in April 2026 showed that the more climate finance that flows to recipient countries – for example, through investments in flood defenses, waste management, and climate resilient agriculture – the lower the frequency of resource-related conflict. Such investments need to be treated as a single expenditure that serves both climate and stability. Climate finance is not charity, it is conflict prevention.

Science does not pause when governments disagree, and sea levels do not wait for ceasefires. This is why conflict must not become a justification for neglecting the ecological systems upon which societies depend.

About the Author



Sheikha Shamma bint Sultan bin Khalifa Al Nahyan, President & CEO of Frontier25 and The Climate Tribe.

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Author: Sheikha Shamma
bint Sultan bin Khalifa Al Nahyan
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