Middle East Council on Global Affairs

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Event Report:

Water Diplomacy and Governance in the MENA Region

April 2026
Doha, Qatar

DISCLAIMER:
The views expressed in this report reflect the opinions shared by participating experts during the September 2025 roundtable on water diplomacy and governance, and do not represent the positions of the participants' institutions or the organizing and co-publishing entities.

Image caption:
The High Dam, Egypt. (Shutterstock)

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Executive Summary

This report presents key takeaways from the roundtable entitled "Water Diplomacy and Governance in the MENA Region," held on September 28-29, 2025 at the headquarters of the Middle East Council on Global Affairs (ME Council) in Doha, Qatar. The roundtable was co-organized with the Geneva Water Hub and the Blue Peace Middle East Initiative, with support from the Embassy of Switzerland in Qatar. Participants included regional and international practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and diplomatic actors with experience in peacebuilding, technical research, and institutional reform in some of the world's most water-stressed regions. Against a backdrop of political instability and fragmented governance structures in the region, participants explored how water diplomacy can strengthen trust, support conflict prevention, and advance resilient, regionally owned governance frameworks.

The discussions produced the following key takeaways:

1. Using water for effective peacebuilding requires an understanding of the complex relationships between key stakeholders and their unique socio-economic conditions.
2. There is a need for a MENA-tailored normative framework that complements international law while reflecting regional realities and power asymmetries.
3. In the absence of binding mechanisms to protect water infrastructure during conflicts, regional stakeholders must make greater efforts to safeguard these vital facilities.
4. Science should be the foundation for water diplomacy. This can take the form of joint research, data sharing, and hydropolitical mapping.
5. Multinational technical cooperation over transboundary water resources can cultivate political trust, laying the groundwork for successful negotiations.
6. Indigenous capacity, knowledge, and regional ownership of diplomatic mechanisms are prerequisites for sustainable water diplomacy.
7. Questions of sovereignty are central to negotiations on transboundary water resources. They cannot be sidestepped, but they can be addressed through functional cooperation.
8. Integrated (horizontal) planning of water, energy, food, and the environment / ecosystem together (i.e. the Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystem or WEFE Nexus) is a prerequisite for scalable water governance.
9. Genuinely participatory (vertical) governance must go beyond "token" consultation to achieve institutionalized co-design and real accountability.
10. Technology alone will not drive reform. Instead, robust and adaptable governance structures are needed to ensure that innovative technologies support resilient systems.

Overall, the roundtable affirmed that despite the potential for rivalry over these precious assets, transboundary water resources can act as a lever for broader cooperation, institutional resilience, and regional stability. The dialogue laid the foundation for sustained coordination, future research collaboration, and the development of a community of practice that explores actionable pathways for advancing water diplomacy and governance in the MENA region.

Introduction

Water resources in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are experiencing the adverse impacts of politically induced challenges such as diplomatic disputes, armed conflict, and poor water governance. The impact of these factors is compounded by the transboundary nature of many of the region's water resources, which presents a significant challenge for regional water diplomacy and governance. Furthermore, states and policymakers in MENA often prioritize short-term national interests over regional diplomatic coordination, even though the latter is essential to ensuring long-term water sustainability.

Certain actors in the region have responded by cultivating regional cooperation to encourage knowledge-sharing. Some local and global stakeholders, including the Geneva Water Hub, Blue Peace Middle East Initiative, and the Middle East Council on Global Affairs, are also calling for increased support for coordination mechanisms and agreements that ensure the protection of water infrastructure and resources from armed conflicts. These collaborative approaches can improve water practices, revitalize diplomatic relations, and lay the groundwork for more comprehensive regional cooperation beyond water issues.

To deliberate on these challenges, the three organizations, with support from the embassy of Switzerland in Qatar, convened a roundtable on water governance and diplomacy in September 2025. It brought together experts and regional/global stakeholders to set a common agenda, identify shared policy priorities, and brainstorm ideas for result-oriented multi-sectoral engagements that aimed at improving regional relations and contributing to prosperity and stability.

The roundtable addressed three core themes: water for peacebuilding, water diplomacy, and water governance. With discussions held under the Chatham House rule, participants began the first session by contemplating how water can be leveraged for conflict management, resolution, and peacebuilding. During the second session, they assessed the performance of recent water diplomacy initiatives. The third session focused on how to fill the gaps in the region's water governance frameworks.

This report lays out the key insights that emerged from the roundtable discussion. It is addressed to policymakers, key regional organizations, and analysts focused on regional water politics. The three convening organizations agreed to build upon the takeaways of the roundtable with future events and convenings, which will aim to develop policy proposals to ensure the sustainability and viability of the MENA region's precious water resources for future generations.

Section 1: Water, Peacebuilding and Conflict in MENA

The first session of the roundtable focused on the potential role of water in supporting political processes aimed at conflict resolution and peacebuilding.[i] The discussions were conducted within the framework of the three-pillar "Water for Peace" approach adopted by the Geneva Water Hub globally, and in MENA specifically: international law, water sparing, and science diplomacy.

Three experts kicked off the discussions by sharing their experience and reflections on the implementation of the key pillars to ensure improved relations in the MENA region. More in-depth exchanges followed, with the participants in three dedicated breakout groups, to identify what practices work and what gaps remain, and to suggest practical recommendations for water sharing and sparing (protection, prevention and cooperation) to promote peace in the MENA region.

The discussions addressed these key questions:

- How can water induce peaceful relations throughout the region?
- How can we still rely on international law for the benefit of our region, in which water is increasingly weaponized and states' sovereignty violated?
- How can we collectively play a role in ensuring that water is spared from conflicts (inter- and intra-state), and how can water assist in fostering regional resilience and contribute to peacebuilding and reconciliation processes?
- In light of rapid political changes, how is water-related data and science diplomacy assisting in ensuring improved and sustainable cooperation among countries in our region?

Themes

Politicization of Water

There was a strong consensus among the participants that water itself is not a cause of conflict in the MENA region. Yet in recent conflicts, it has been increasingly weaponized, and therefore its geopolitical role in foreign relations must be addressed. Purely technical approaches to transboundary waters fall short of providing sustainable climate-resilient water and peace arrangements. Still, the participants identified data-sharing as one instrument that could potentially "depoliticize" water disputes. Empowering scientific expertise and knowledge beyond technical fields should be a priority, especially in policymaking and negotiation processes. This would contribute to de-politicizing and de-securitizing water.

i. Environmental peacebuilding is a process that seeks to create the conditions for lasting peace by integrating environmental considerations into governance, conflict management, and recovery efforts.

Limitations of International Law

The post-1945 international legal architecture has struggled to manage and resolve modern water disputes. In addition, recent regional conflicts have exposed duality and double standards in the enforcement of international law, fueling cynicism about the implementation and utility of its principles and norms. However, the participants identified key entry points that could make international law more effective in intra- and inter-state relations, provided there is sufficient political will. The key entry points are prevention; confidence-building; compulsory dispute settlement; stronger compliance and accountability mechanisms; inclusion of groundwater and wider basin approaches; and regular review and updating of flexible legal treaties and arrangements in response to changing hydrological conditions.

Data Exchange (Science Diplomacy)

There are good examples in the region that showcase how scientific exchange among partners can build trust and facilitate responses to natural hazards. Participants pointed to joint research studies as confidence-building measures and instruments for settling disagreements. Remote sensing, hydrological modelling, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) can help move water governance from assertion-based positions to evidence-based decision-making. Together, these tools can support the quantification of water usage, the monitoring of transboundary river basins, the verification of shared data, and the assessment of surface/groundwater flows, thereby strengthening the implementation and enforcement of water-sharing agreements. Hydropolitical mapping is a proven analysis tool in transboundary water cooperation and for broader relations among states. Given that most Arab countries are downstream from the water sources on which they rely, future regional diplomatic/governance models should reflect this geography and power asymmetry. All participants endorsed the important role of data and science diplomacy in bridging positions among riparian countries.

Protection of Water Infrastructure in Conflict

The deliberate destruction of water infrastructure in conflict zones has devastating, fully foreseeable long-term consequences for civilian populations. Participants noted a consistent pattern across contexts: water and power supply systems are often among the first targets in armed conflict. The classification of water infrastructure as a "dual-use" object in International Humanitarian Law (IHL) was identified as a critical loophole, frequently invoked to justify such attacks.

Participants further noted that existing legal and institutional frameworks, designed primarily for inter-state conflicts, remain poorly adapted to contemporary violations and lack effective monitoring and accountability mechanisms. Discussions therefore focused on local and national efforts to mitigate the impacts on access to safe drinking water, sanitation, and broader daily life. Participants emphasized the importance of consolidating best practices and lessons learned to strengthen future responses.

Key Findings

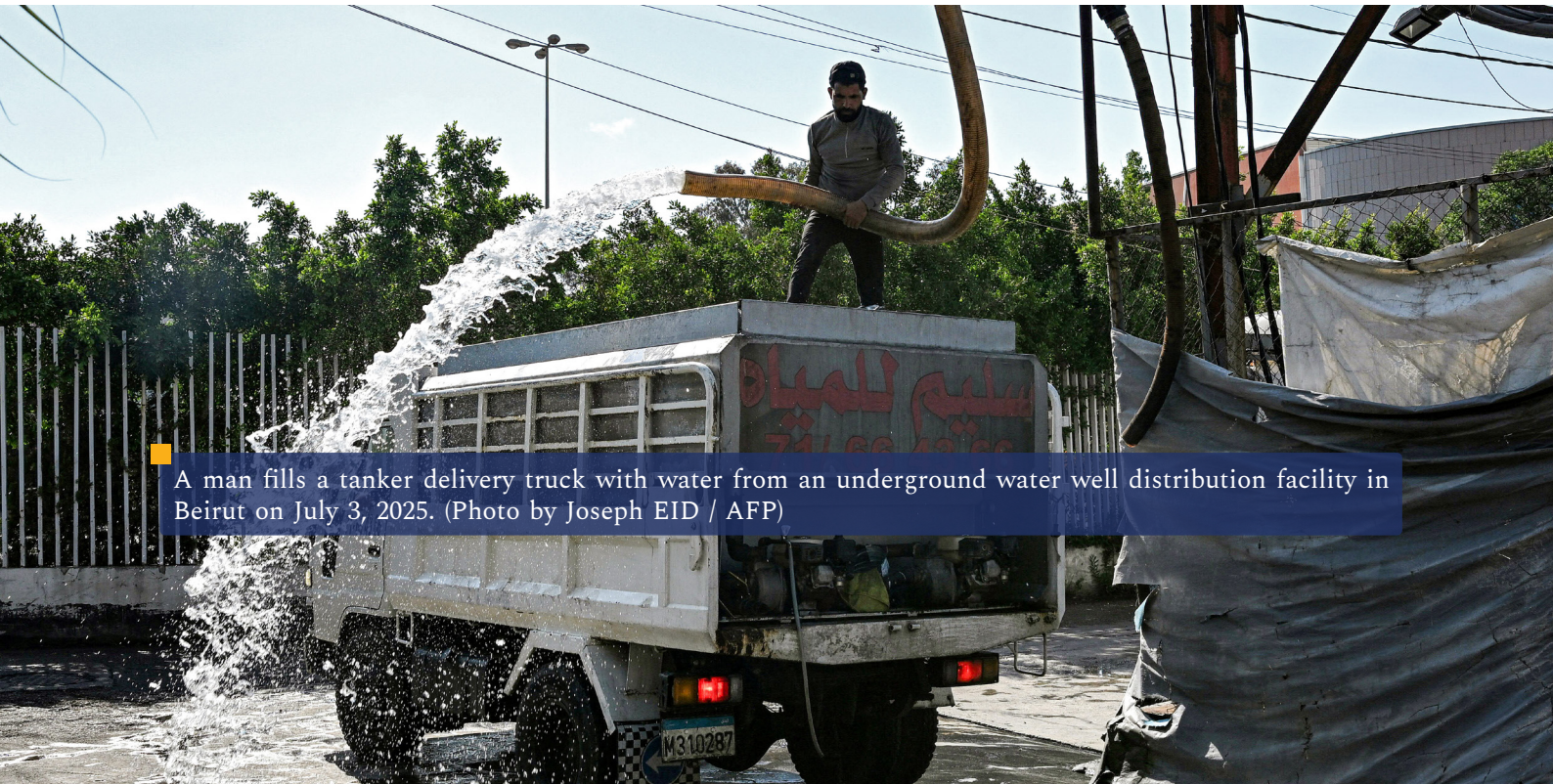
Water is Political

No aspect of water governance is apolitical. Whether the focus is on local water access or transboundary cooperation, political considerations are always at play. Conflict is political, complex, and non-linear. When considering water and its potential for peacebuilding, we must therefore recognize the centrality of politics and its role in shaping access, allocation, and dispute resolution. Effectively utilizing water for peacebuilding requires recognition and understanding of the complex relationships between various stakeholders and the wider socio-economic context, to identify the dynamics that ultimately enable either cooperation or conflict.

Recognizing water as a political issue is not a normative stance, but an operational necessity. Ignoring political economy, power asymmetries, and conflict dynamics has repeatedly undermined technically sound water agreements in the region. Any water-for-peace intervention must therefore be designed as a political process informed by science, not a purely technical exercise.

MENA Needs a Tailored Normative Framework

Compliance with international law is eroding, yet it remains a necessary foundation. Accordingly, the shortcomings of the international system necessitate a MENA-tailored normative framework that clarifies principles relevant to the region, bans the weaponization of water, prioritizes pre-emptive prevention, and recognizes the specificities of the region, like Sharia and other sources of law. There is a need to pivot from a top-down imposition of international law to a bottom-up approach whereby riparian states collaboratively develop their own normative frameworks. These frameworks should be grounded in principles of "parity of esteem, equality, and joint ownership," forming genuine partnerships rather than perpetuating power imbalances.



A man fills a tanker delivery truck with water from an underground water well distribution facility in Beirut on July 3, 2025. (Photo by Joseph EID / AFP)

Practically, participants suggested revisiting previous efforts to develop frameworks tailored to the context and needs of the region. Revisiting earlier regional initiatives—such as basin-level agreements, Arab League instruments, and faith-based legal traditions—can provide a pragmatic foundation for renewed normative convergence.

Protect Water Infrastructure

In the absence of binding mechanisms to protect water infrastructure from destruction and weaponization in conflicts, two primary actions are needed: first, the building of a comprehensive, irrefutable evidence base to document the destruction of water infrastructure and support accountability efforts; and second, the development and promotion of a "no-target list" for civilian infrastructure and objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, which should be recognized under IL. The protection of water resources should also be integrated into military standard operating procedures (SOPs) and legal reviews.

Prioritize Science Diplomacy

Participants highlighted several successful examples of joint research projects showcasing the role of science diplomacy in building trust and laying the foundations for neighborly relations. One example mentioned was a recent remote sensing project that examined the flow of water through the Yarmouk river basin. Participants also noted that the MENA region has indigenous knowledge, which when coupled with local practice, hydropolitical mapping, and use of technology can be scaled up to national and regional level. There are opportunities to support and establish regional organizations, and to leverage these platforms for collaborative problem-solving and resource management among neighboring countries. These measures should be supported by independent monitoring mechanisms, including satellite-based damage assessment and open-source verification, to reduce the contestation of facts and strengthen pathways for accountability.

Looking Forward

In the MENA region, the principal challenge in leveraging water as an entry point for peacebuilding is not the absence of legal, technical, or scientific tools, but the difficulty of managing water as a political issue without allowing it to become securitized. This requires keeping water high on the political agenda, while avoiding existential security framings that harden positions and foreclose cooperation. Addressing this challenge calls for a shift from reactive and fragmented responses toward anticipatory, evidence-based governance, grounded in regional realities, power asymmetries, and downstream vulnerabilities. In this context, the Water for Peace approach—through its pillars of international law, water sparing, and science diplomacy—provides a pragmatic and adaptable framework to support trust-building, reduce conflict risks, and enable more sustainable and cooperative water relations across the region.

Section 2: Water as a Diplomatic Instrument

The second session of the roundtable examined prospects for water diplomacy in the MENA region, drawing on the experience and institutional framework of the Blue Peace Middle East Initiative. Convened under the title "Enhancing Water Diplomacy: The Blue Peace Middle East Experience and Vision for Transboundary Cooperation," the session provided a platform for the roundtable's diverse participants to assess how regionally owned platforms can advance transboundary water cooperation where conventional diplomatic channels have proven insufficient. The discussion moved deliberately beyond diagnosing regional water challenges, seeking to identify mechanisms that have demonstrated resilience across political transitions and funding cycles, engaging with fundamental questions about what makes cooperation sustainable, how trust can be cultivated amid persistent mistrust, and how bilateral successes can scale to basin-wide frameworks.

The session featured high-level participation from the initiative's Regional Mechanism and opened with a presentation tracing Blue Peace Middle East›s journey from its inception in 2011 through its progressive institutionalization. Two subsequent interventions provoked a substantive discussion on the gap between technical excellence and diplomatic impact, and on the role of research and education as diplomatic infrastructure. Participants were subsequently divided into three parallel working groups for thematic discussions.

Themes

The session focused on three interlinked dimensions of water diplomacy.

Building Trust

Participants addressed trust-building mechanisms and the practical approaches through which Track 1.5 hybrid diplomatic platforms can overcome entrenched state-level mistrust where traditional diplomacy has reached an impasse. They examined confidence-building measures that have worked in the MENA context and considered how such approaches might be systematically replicated across different basins and political configurations.

Building Durable Governance Structures

This discussion examined institutional architecture; specifically, which governance structures can sustain long-term water diplomacy beyond political and funding cycles. It examined how bilateral cooperation successes might scale to basin-wide multilateral frameworks, drawing on regional examples where technical cooperation has persisted even when political processes were suspended.

Addressing Constraints

Participants explored structural constraints, particularly how functional water cooperation can navigate sovereignty concerns and political boundaries. Rather than assuming that cooperation must transcend such constraints, participants debated whether integration within existing political frameworks offers more durable pathways than attempts to bypass them. The role of the Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystem (WEFE) Nexus in broadening political buy-in also received considerable attention.

Key Findings

Technical Cooperation is a Foundation for Political Trust

A consistent finding across the discussion groups was that technical collaboration can sustain cooperation even when political processes are blocked, provided such platforms are designed appropriately. Joint technical studies on accepted facts—water quality monitoring, shared hydrological assessments, coordinated measurement stations—can provide neutral starting points that build habits of cooperation without immediately confronting sovereignty concerns.

An aerial photo taken on November 20, 2025 shows the reconstruction of the riverfront overlooking the Tigris River in Mosul, which was completely destroyed during the 2016-2017 battle between Iraqi forces to retake the city from the Islamic State group (IS), and is now being rebuilt by the Nineveh Governorate. (Photo by Zaid AL-OBEIDI / AFP)

Participants noted examples from North Africa where informal technical cooperation was maintained through periods of political suspension, drawing on previously established institutional relationships—notably, the cases of Tunisia and Libya. Such experiences suggest that well-designed technical frameworks can preserve working relationships even when formal diplomatic channels are constrained. Participants emphasized that technical platforms cannot replace diplomacy, but can maintain relationships and generate shared data that becomes invaluable when political conditions eventually permit more substantive negotiations. Participants drew the distinction between technical excellence and diplomatic impact: brilliant engineering solutions consistently fail without institutional frameworks designed for political sustainability. Trust requires not merely rational models but sustained engagement, incremental confidence-building, and joint problem-solving on urgent issues such as wastewater treatment and prevention of water-borne diseases.

Indigenous Capacity and Regional Ownership are Prerequisites for Sustainability

Participants questioned whether regional water cooperation can be sustainable when it remains dependent on external funding, expertise, and institutional frameworks that do not reflect local priorities. The discussion emphasized that resilient cooperation develops from within, rather than being imposed from outside. The Blue Peace Middle East model was presented as an example of progressive localization—from an initiative launched by development partners in 2011 to a regionally-governed mechanism with representation from four member countries and two operational pillars in policy dialogue, research, and education. The Water Diplomacy Center at the Jordan University of Science and Technology was presented as an institutional response to the dependency problem: building indigenous research capacity means training up regional experts who understand both technical complexities and local political dynamics. When the region produces its own hydrologists, trains its own negotiators, and develops its own policy frameworks, it reduces cycles of dependency that undermine long-term cooperation. Academic and science diplomacy were identified as mechanisms that can prepare the ground for negotiation where traditional diplomacy has failed, with joint research programs and youth engagement creating what one participant termed "new cooperation DNA for the next generation."

Cooperation Should Integrate into Political Frameworks Rather than Transcending Sovereignty

A notable consensus emerged around the framing of sovereignty in transboundary water cooperation. Several participants challenged the premise that water cooperation should seek to transcend boundaries and sovereignty concerns, arguing instead that it should be integrated within them. Historical attempts to sidestep sovereignty, such as the Red Sea-Dead Sea Water Conveyance project (Red-Dead), were cited as cautionary examples. The Sava and Senegal river basins were offered as cases where scientists first developed master plans that were subsequently adopted by governments, leading to joint ownership of projects that resolved sovereignty questions through inclusion rather than avoidance. Power imbalances between upstream and downstream countries must be addressed directly, with political, economic, and other benefits serving as incentives for cooperation. The Wehda Dam on the Jordan-Syria border has illustrated how benefit-

sharing arrangements—with one country gaining water and another electricity—can align interests across boundaries. Punitive measures were judged largely ineffective in the MENA context; participants instead advocated for incentive-based approaches, including business opportunities and economic integration, that can make cooperation attractive rather than merely obligatory.

Looking Forward

The participants emphasized that progress in regional water cooperation is never linear. Political instability, fragmented national agendas, and economic constraints continue to slow collective action, while the absence of key actors leaves gaps in the regional fabric. Even when cooperation emerges, it often remains fragile and overshadowed by competing priorities, or lost in cycles of crisis. The deeper challenge lies in moving beyond short-term responses toward durable cross-border governance structures, sustainable funding, and innovation that is not only adopted but maintained locally. What stands in the way is not a lack of ideas, but the persistence of fragmentation and whether the region is prepared to confront it.

The Blue Peace Middle East experience suggests that regionally owned platforms, anchored in indigenous capacity, cooperative political will and technical collaboration, offer viable pathways towards sustainable peace and cooperation. The question now is whether these mechanisms can scale from bilateral successes to basin-wide frameworks while retaining the flexibility and agility to navigate political transitions and funding uncertainties.

Section 3: Water Governance in MENA

The third session of the roundtable explored the obstacles to integrated transboundary water governance in the MENA region. The discussion focused on the key components of (and approaches to) effective governance of water resources. Participants also explored the distinction between governance (the regulatory ecosystem) and management (operational delivery), and debated how local-level solutions can be scaled to the basin level. They highlighted the WEFE Nexus as a framing device for integrated planning, and set the stage for the thematic deep-dives and actionable takeaways that follow.

The session addressed these key questions:

- How can cross-sectoral collaboration enhance resource sustainability?
- What are the most effective strategies to involve communities in water governance?
- How do we overcome the sovereignty question to achieve collaborative governance for transboundary water resources?

Themes

Horizontal vs. Vertical Coordination

Horizontal coordination refers to cross-sectoral links (e.g., wastewater-agriculture integration), which are currently fragmented in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the wider MENA region. Breaking these horizontal silos through WEFE-aligned "soft" structures (such as Bahrain's Water Council) can unlock new synergies and innovations. On the other hand, vertical coordination stresses stakeholder inclusion throughout bureaucratic hierarchies and beyond, from ministries to civil society. Successful vertical coordination transcends "token consultation" and strives toward genuinely participatory governance.

Governance Structures (Soft vs. Hard)

Soft regional institutions (councils and committees such as the Arab Water Council) provide for flexible exchanges of information without demanding concessions on sovereignty. They can foster a collaborative atmosphere, but cannot enforce treaties or agreements. On the other hand, hard structures (ministries and agencies such as the Saudi Water Authority) are able to deliver enforceable mandates, but at higher capital and bureaucratic costs. The participants debated when each model is appropriate, and how hybrid arrangements can leverage the strengths of both types of structures.

Post-2011 Evolution of MENA Water Policy

The 2011 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report and the WEFE Nexus conference sparked a wave of technological uptake, from desalination expansion and water-hydrogen pilots to AI-driven monitoring. Yet policy reforms lagged. MENA became the global leader in desalination (at one point possessing more than 70% of global capacity), yet regional institutional frameworks governing the MENA region's shared water resources were stunted due to political instability. This, in turn, limited regional

integration. The growing gap between rich and poor Arab countries and the erasure of indigenous water conservation practices has further exacerbated the situation.

Water as an Entry Point for Wider Governance Reforms

Many policy instruments used in the water sector are transferable to other policy contexts. For example, pricing reforms, behavioral economics, and subsidy redesign were identified as levers to curb wasteful water use and over-consumption. At the same time, financing mechanisms and new technologies risk becoming costly dependencies rather than boosting resilience in the water sector. Participants asked whether the successes of the water sector could lead to positive reforms elsewhere (such as the food and energy sectors). They also referred to a plethora of frameworks that set criteria to measure progress in the sector, such as:

- The EMPOWERS approach to water governance
- The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Water Governance Indicator Framework
- The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)'s Arab Governance Program for Groundwater
- The Arab Water Council's "State of the Water" report, which contains 30-40 water governance indicators

Key Findings

Integrated (Horizontal) Planning is Essential for Scalable Water Governance

The GCC's experience shows that sectoral fragmentation and "siloing" prevents coherent water budgeting and inhibits effective governance. By adopting the WEFE Nexus, countries can align water, energy, food, and environmental objectives within a single planning horizon. Soft structures enable rapid information-sharing without eroding national sovereignty, while hard structures provide the "enforcement muscle" needed for large-scale projects. The practical takeaway is this: first dismantle horizontal silos, then layer vertical stakeholder engagement. Pilot projects that demonstrate joint planning at the national level can be replicated regionally, turning localized successes into basin-wide governance models.

Genuine Participatory (Vertical) Governance Must Transcend "Token" Consultation

Participants identified vertical integration as the missing link in MENA water policy. Current mechanisms such as water-users' associations and community forums are either absent or limited to advisory roles. However, there are signs of improvement on the national level. For example, the new Saudi Water Law exemplifies a comprehensive legal framework on paper, although its impact hinges on implementation, compliance, and stakeholder empowerment. This requires the institutionalization of real participation through co-design of policies, shared budgeting, and transparent monitoring. Education campaigns targeting the youth can shift the entrenched perception of water abundance toward a scarcity-aware mindset, fostering long-term behavioral change.

Technology Alone Will Not Drive Reform

Since 2011, MENA has witnessed a surge in desalination capacity, AI-enabled monitoring, and water-hydrogen pilot projects. At the same time, it witnessed the erasure of indigenous water conservation practices, growing inequality within and between countries, and the sidelining of regional governance institutions. The absence of policy updates to address such drawbacks means technological innovations often operate in isolation, creating new dependencies (e.g., costly desalination feedwater for green hydrogen). Effective governance must embed economic sustainability criteria: who funds integration and technological adoption, how price reforms affect vulnerable groups, and which incentives guide private-sector investment. Moreover, behavioral economics tools can nudge users toward conservation without drastic lifestyle shifts. Aligning technology deployment with robust, adaptable governance structures ensures that innovation translates into resilient systems rather than temporary fixes.

This picture taken on March 30, 2023 shows a view of the Ras al-Khair water desalination plant, owned by the Saudi government's Saline Water Conversion Corporation, along the Gulf coast in eastern Saudi Arabia. (Photo by Fayez Nureldine / AFP)

Looking Forward

Session 3 underscored that improved water governance in the MENA region will hinge on two intertwined pillars: breaking horizontal silos through integrated WEFE planning, and building vertical bridges that give all stakeholders a genuine voice. Soft institutions can catalyze information flows, while hard structures can provide the enforcement needed for large-scale change. Technological advances—desalination, AI, and green hydrogen—must be paired with policy reforms that secure financing, promote equitable pricing, and foster behavioral shifts. Furthermore, technology should not be seen as a panacea, but instead should serve to complement existing good practices. By scaling locally proven solutions up to the basin level, the region can transform water scarcity from a perpetual crisis into a catalyst for cooperation, peace, and sustainable development.

Conclusion

The "Water Diplomacy and Governance in the MENA Region" roundtable underscored that water issues are not only technical, but also political. Hence, they can serve as a powerful entry point for broader trust-building, peace, and stability across borders and communities. Durable progress on water issues will require moving beyond rigid, top-down diplomatic and governance models toward flexible, adaptive, and context-specific approaches. Participants identified soft cooperation mechanisms, including joint research initiatives, regional observatories, data-sharing platforms, and informal technical networks as critical tools for strengthening collaboration while remaining responsive to diverse political and environmental contexts. At the same time, the dialogue reaffirmed the value of building on the achievements of existing regional institutions, reducing duplication, and fostering continuity across initiatives.

A recurrent theme throughout all the sessions was the need to integrate indigenous knowledge and social science perspectives alongside technological innovation and engineering expertise, in order to achieve resource resilience. Success also depends on bridging political and technical divides, empowering practitioners and technicians, and cultivating multidisciplinary cooperation. Dependence on external (non-MENA) financing can pose another long-term challenge to resilience; this necessitates the development of locally grounded, mixed funding models, including responsible private-sector engagement.

Looking ahead, the roundtable participants called for sustained coordination among regional actors, increased utilization of shared knowledge platforms (such as those created by ESCWA, the inter-Islamic water network INWRDAM, and the Arab Water Council), and the exploration of pilot models for transboundary cooperation and science diplomacy that can be adapted across different basins. The Blue Peace ME-led "Regional Mechanism," which brings together Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Türkiye, Iran, and Syria to coordinate on transboundary water issues, is a promising model to emulate in other parts of MENA. The Geneva Water Hub's discreet diplomatic facilitation, science diplomacy and use of international law showcases how discreet discussions between key stakeholders can depoliticize water, build trust, and protect essential water infrastructure during conflict.

Participants also highlighted the important role of non-governmental organizations such as ME Council, whose convening power enabled the emergence of new communities of practice. They endorsed the idea of creating a "MENA water consortium" to give regional water-focused organizations a stronger and united voice. With an eye toward future milestones, including regional engagement at upcoming international water fora, the roundtable concluded with a shared commitment to advancing collaborative, context-sensitive, and governance-aware approaches to water diplomacy in the MENA region.

Annex 1: List of Participants

Ahmed Haj Asaad, Director, Geo Expertise.
Ahmet Mete Saatçı, Founder and Former President, Turkish Water Institute; Managing Committee Member, Blue Peace Middle East Initiative.
Aseel Al-Mkhaimer, Head of the Coordination Office, Blue Peace Middle East Initiative.
Aymen Lazrak, Senior Groundwater Engineer, Qatar General Electricity and Groundwater Corporation (Kahramaa).
Carol Cherfane, Director, Arab Centre for Climate Change Policies at UNESCWA.
Caroline Pellaton, Operations Director, Geneva Water Hub.
Chadi Abdalla, Secretary General, National Council for Scientific Research, Lebanon.
Ciarán Ó Cuinn, Director, MEDRC, Oman.
H.E. Florence Tinguely Mattli, Ambassador of Switzerland to the State of Qatar.
Hussam Hussein, Research Associate, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford.
Janina Gauder, Counselor for Climate, Press, and Politics, Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in the State of Qatar.
Jasmine Moussa, Legal Advisor, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Arab Republic of Egypt.
Karma Ekmekji, Mediation Advisor, UN Women; Senior Policy Fellow, Issam Faris Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs.
Khaled Abu-Zeid, Regional Director for Technical Programs, Arab Water Council.
Marwan Alraggad, Executive Director, Inter-Islamic Network on Water Resources Development and Management.
Mohammad Abu Hawash, Senior Research Assistant, Middle East Council on Global Affairs.
Mohammad Al-Saidi, Associate Professor, College of Public Policy, Hamad Bin Khalifa University.
H.E. Mohammed Amin Fares Amin, Advisor to the President of the Republic of Iraq; Managing Committee Chair, Blue Peace Middle East Initiative.
Muez Ali, Senior Research and Policy Associate, Earthna, Qatar Foundation.
Mufleh Al Alaween, Regional Water Cooperation Advisor, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.
Mutawakil Obeidat, Director, Water Diplomacy Center, Jordan University of Science and Technology, Jordan.
Nader Kabbani, Director, Governance & Development Program, Middle East Council on Global Affairs.
Natasha Carmi, Program Lead, "Building Peace through Water," Geneva Water Hub.
Sa'd Shannak, Scientist and Distinguished Researcher, Qatar Environment and Energy Research Institute, Hamad Bin Khalifa University.
Talha Mirza, Program Manager, Earthna, Qatar Foundation.
Waleed Al-Zubari, Vice President, Water Sciences and Technologies Association; Dean, College of Education, Administrative and Technical Sciences, Arabian Gulf University, Bahrain.
Yara Solenthaler, Political Officer, Embassy of Switzerland to Qatar.

Annex 2: Roundtable Agenda

Day 1: Water Diplomacy in the MENA Region

Opening Session

- Opening Remarks (10 minutes).
- Introductions (10 minutes).
- Overview of roundtable and session breakdown (10-15 minutes).
- Q&A opportunity (10-15 minutes)

Session 1: Water, Peacebuilding, and Conflict in MENA

This session focused on the potential role of water in supporting political processes aimed at conflict resolution and peacebuilding: How can water induce peaceful relations throughout the region? How can water be shared and spared for peace? How has water been leveraged for the purposes of regional stability and what are the lessons learned for the adoption of a similar approach in the region?

Moderator:
Natasha Carmi, Senior Water-Peace Programme Manager, Geneva Water Hub.

Speakers:
Dr. Jasmine Moussa, Advisor, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Egypt.
Dr. Caroline Pellaton, Operations Director, Geneva Water Hub.
Dr. Chadi Abdallah, Secretary General, National Council for Scientific Research, Lebanon.

- **Note:** this session featured breakout groups

Session 2: Prospects for Water Diplomacy in MENA

This session focused on developments in water diplomacy throughout the region: What are the key drivers of positive outcomes in water diplomacy? How do we address chronic mistrust between state actors on water issues? How do we transcend colonial boundaries that have increased tensions over water?

Moderator:
Aseel Al-Mkhaimer, Head of the Coordination Office, Blue Peace ME Initiative.

Speakers:
Mufleh Al Alaween, Regional Water Advisor, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.
Ahmet Mete Saatçı, Founder and Former President, Turkish Water. Institute; Managing Committee Member, Blue Peace ME Initiative.
Mutawakil Obeidat, Director, Water Diplomacy Center.

- **Note:** this session will feature breakout groups

Day 2: The Water Governance Challenge in the MENA Region

Session 3: Governance Case Studies from the MENA Region

This session focused on the unique contexts of river basins in the region, recent efforts to establish governance frameworks, and solutions to improve multilateral coordination on the basin level: How can cross-sectoral collaboration (e.g.: agriculture, energy, and urban planning) enhance water resources' sustainability? What are the most effective strategies to involve communities in water governance? How do we overcome the sovereignty question to achieve collaborative water governance for transboundary water resources?

Moderator:
Mohammad Abu Hawash, Senior Research Assistant, Governance & Development Program, Middle East Council.

Speakers:
Waleed Al-Zubari, Vice President, Water Sciences and Technologies Association; Dean, **College of Education,** Administrative and Technical Sciences, Arabian Gulf University.
Mohammad Al-Saidi, Associate Professor, Hamad Bin Khalifa University.

Session 4: Next Steps and Policy Propositions

This sessions offered an open floor for participants to share their concluding remarks and reflections on the topics and issues discussed, propose next steps for the group, and point out any gaps that they noticed in the discussion.

Moderator:
Nader Kabbani, Director, Governance & Development Program, Middle East Council.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZERS

THE MIDDLE EAST COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

The Middle East Council on Global Affairs (ME Council) is an independent, non-profit policy research institution based in Doha, Qatar. The ME Council produces policy-relevant research, convenes meetings and dialogues, and engages policy actors on geopolitical and socioeconomic issues facing the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The ME Council serves as a bridge between the MENA region and the rest of the world, providing a regional perspective on global policy issues and establishing partnerships with other leading research centers and development organizations across the MENA region and the world.

BLUE PEACE MIDDLE EAST INITIATIVE

Blue Peace Middle East Initiative (BPME): The first and only regionally owned, non-governmental initiative of its kind in the Middle East that aims to strengthen cross-sectoral cooperation over water through dialogue, research, education, and innovative conflict-prevention mechanisms.

GENEVA WATER HUB

Geneva Water Hub (GWH): A joint center of excellence of the University of Geneva and the Geneva Graduate Institute with the mission of advancing the use of water for peace in humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts. GWH achieves its mission at the interface of science and policy, ensuring that water is shared and spared for Peace.

The organizers express their gratitude and appreciation to the Embassy of Switzerland in Qatar and Her Excellency Ambassador Florence Tinguely Mattli for the generous support provided to make this roundtable possible.