

Speech by Mahmoud Ezzat (Egypt)

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Climate, Geopolitics, and Regional Stability

Excellencies, distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to address this important conference at a time when the Middle East and North Africa region is standing at the intersection of two accelerating crises: climate stress and geopolitical instability. My remarks today will focus on three closely linked dimensions: the impact of climate change on water scarcity and conflict risks, the reshaping of humanitarian access under geopolitical tensions, and the role of development cooperation in supporting stability and governance under these compounded pressures.

Let me begin with a clear statement: climate change in the MENA region is no longer a distant environmental problem—it is a direct driver of insecurity, displacement, social unrest, and geopolitical tension.

First: Climate Change, Water Scarcity, and the Risk of Conflict

The MENA region is today the most water-scarce region in the world. Over 60 percent of its population already lives under conditions of high or very high water stress. Climate change is accelerating this reality through rising temperatures, declining

rainfall, sea-level rise, and extreme weather events such as droughts and floods.

But water scarcity here is not only a technical or environmental challenge—it is a deeply geopolitical issue.

We see this clearly in:

- **The Nile Basin and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.**
- **The Tigris–Euphrates basin between Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.**
- **The Jordan River basin.**
- **Fragile aquifers across North Africa and the Gulf.**

In these contexts, climate stress multiplies existing political disputes, weak governance, and fragile state capacities. What was once manageable competition over resources becomes a source of existential anxiety for states and communities alike.

This leads to a critical question: What regional cooperation models do we need to reduce conflict risks and ensure sustainable development?

I believe three cooperation models are essential:

1. Basin-Level Water Governance Frameworks

We urgently need to move beyond unilateral dam construction and zero-sum water strategies toward basin-wide cooperative mechanisms. These should include:

- **Joint data sharing on hydrology and climate projections.**
- **Coordinated dam operations during drought and flooding.**
- **Dispute resolution mechanisms grounded in international water law.**
- **Without technical transparency and political trust, water will remain a latent conflict trigger.**

2. Climate Security Platforms at the Regional Level

Regional organizations—whether the Arab League, African Union, or sub-regional groupings—must move climate security from the margins to the core of their agendas. Climate risks must be integrated into:

- **Early warning systems.**
- **Conflict prevention strategies.**
- **Cross-border disaster response coordination.**

3. Regional Investment in Water-Energy-Food Nexus Solutions

Desalination powered by renewable energy, wastewater reuse, smart irrigation, and climate-resilient agriculture are not luxuries—they are strategic security investments. No single country can bear the cost alone. Regional financing

mechanisms and development banks must prioritize these sectors.

In short, water cooperation must be treated as a pillar of collective security, not merely a development issue.

Second: Geopolitics and the Reshaping of Humanitarian Access

Let me turn to the second issue: How have regional geopolitical tensions reshaped humanitarian access and the protection of vulnerable populations?

Across our region—whether in Gaza, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, Libya, or parts of Iraq—humanitarian crises are no longer only the result of natural disasters or internal conflicts. They are now deeply shaped by:

- **Proxy wars.**
- **Sanctions on some regimes.**
- **Blockades and border closures.**
- **Politicization of aid.**
- **Fragmentation of state authority.**

The result is what we might call “humanitarian fragility”—a condition where not only societies but also the systems meant to protect them become fragile.

To respond to this, I would emphasize three priorities:

1. Depoliticizing Humanitarian Access

- **Humanitarian corridors must be protected under international law regardless of political tensions. This requires:**
- **Stronger Security Council consensus.**
- **Clear separation between humanitarian assistance and political bargaining.**
- **Greater protection for humanitarian workers.**

2. Linking Climate Adaptation with Humanitarian Action

Too often, we treat emergency relief and climate adaptation as separate worlds. In reality, they must converge. Camps for displaced persons must be climate-resilient. Food assistance must support sustainable agriculture. Emergency water provision must transition into long-term water security.

3. Strengthening National and Local Protection Systems

External aid alone cannot substitute for resilient national institutions. Civil defense, health systems, social protection schemes, and local governance structures must be empowered to operate even under crisis conditions.

Third: The Role of Development Cooperation in Stability and Governance

This brings me to the third and perhaps most strategic question:

What role should development cooperation play in supporting stability and governance in regions facing both environmental and political crises?

Let me be very direct:

Development cooperation today is no longer only about growth—it is about crisis prevention, state resilience, and social cohesion.

In fragile and climate-stressed environments, traditional development models based solely on infrastructure or GDP growth are insufficient. What is needed is a new generation of development cooperation, built around three pillars:

1. Climate-Responsive Governance

Development cooperation must strengthen the ability of governments to manage climate risks transparently and inclusively. This includes:

- **Climate-sensitive national planning.**
- **Transparent management of water and energy resources.**
- **Fiscal systems that can absorb climate shocks.**
- **Anti-corruption frameworks to protect climate finance.**

Without accountable governance, climate finance becomes another source of instability rather than resilience.

2. Social Protection as a Stabilization Tool

In climate- and conflict-affected societies, social protection is not charity—it is a frontline tool of political stability. Cash transfers, health insurance, food subsidies, and employment programs:

- **Prevent mass protest and social collapse.**
- **Reduce recruitment into armed groups.**
- **Protect the political legitimacy of the state during crises.**
- **Development cooperation must therefore invest far more in adaptive social protection systems that expand automatically during climate shocks.**

3. Regional Public Goods and Cross-Border Cooperation

Many of the region’s most serious threats—water stress, pandemics, displacement, dust storms, energy insecurity—are fundamentally cross-border challenges. Yet our development cooperation architecture remains overwhelmingly national.

We must shift toward financing regional public goods, including:

- **Shared climate data and forecasting.**
- **Transboundary water infrastructure.**
- **Regional electricity grids based on renewables.**
- **Joint food security reserves.**

This is where development cooperation becomes not only a technical exercise, but a geopolitical stabilizer.

Allow me to summarize my key strategic message in one sentence:

In the MENA region, climate change, geopolitics, humanitarian access, and development cooperation are no longer separate policy files—they now form a single interconnected security-development nexus.

If we address one without the others, we will fail.

let me offer five practical recommendations for policymakers, donors, and regional institutions:

- 1. Institutionalize Climate Security Dialogues between water ministries, defense institutions, and foreign affairs at the regional level.**
- 2. Protect Humanitarian Space through binding regional agreements that guarantee access irrespective of political disputes.**
- 3. Reorient Development Finance toward climate-adaptation, fragile-state governance, and cross-border resilience.**
- 4. Invest in Youth and Green Jobs, especially in climate-affected rural and coastal zones, to prevent new cycles of instability.**
- 5. Anchor Cooperation in Knowledge and Research, through regional think tanks, universities, and data-sharing platforms—an area where institutions like the Bibliotheca Alexandrina can play a catalytic role.**

Ladies and gentlemen,

Environmental stress is becoming one of the most powerful geopolitical forces of the 21st century, especially in the Middle East and North Africa.

If managed through cooperation, it can become a driver of integration, shared resilience, and sustainable development.

If ignored or politicized, it will become a multiplier of conflict, displacement, and state fragility.

The choice before us is therefore not only technical or financial—it is profoundly political and strategic.

Thank you for your attention