



MENA Think Tank Forum 2025:

ARAB PERSPECTIVES ON GLOBAL PUBLIC
GOODS AND THEIR GOVERNANCE

SEPTEMBER 15-16, 2025

CONFERENCE REPORT



ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC
POLICY & INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
معهد عصام فارس للسياسات العامة والشؤون الدولية
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT



Arab
Think Tank
Network
شبكة المراكز الفكرية العربية



Middle East Council
on Global Affairs

About



ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY & INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) was inaugurated in 2006 at the American University of Beirut to serve as an independent, research-based, and policy-oriented institute with the aim of initiating, developing, and communicating policy-relevant research from and about Lebanon and the region, contributing to the realms of both academia and policymaking. Treading the sensitive interface between research and “real” politics, the Institute navigates the often-arduous process of dialogue between experts and policymakers, integrating the constraints of real-time policymaking and the intricacies of governmental, inter-agency work. More importantly, it has made large and successful contributions to the shaping of research agendas and has introduced local and international stakeholders to novel and innovative ways of thinking and understanding the world’s problems.



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.

Acknowledgements

This summary report was prepared and coordinated by Maysa Baroud, Coordinator of the Secretariat for the Arab Think Tank Network.



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Background



Organized in Beirut from September 15-16, 2025, by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) and the Middle East Council on Global Affairs (ME Council), the second annual MENA Think Tank Forum on “Arab Perspectives on Global Public Goods and Their Governance” brought together representatives from Arab think tanks and regional and international experts to discuss global shifts affecting the region and how Arab actors can influence global debates on global public goods (GPGs).

The first day featured the first General Assembly of the Arab Think Tank Network (Arab TTN), and the second day focused on Arab perspectives on GPG governance in three areas: “Governance of the Movement of Goods and People,” “Development Finance and the Management of Capital Flows,” and “Climate Change.” Sessions included opening presentations and roundtable discussions, conducted in English and Arabic.

Opening Session

The opening session provided an overview of the geopolitical and geoeconomic context, focusing on challenges facing the region and divergences that make collective action on GPGs difficult. The region is facing drastic changes from the fall of the Assad regime to conflicts in Gaza and Sudan, in parallel to fragmentation, multipolarity, and weakening institutions at the global level, with shifting alignments among great powers. These shifts have geoeconomic fallout, affecting the movement of capital, people, and goods. “Multilateralism and multilateral institutions are being seriously questioned, and even champions like the U.S. are withdrawing.” A rise in protectionism and economic ultranationalism is also observed.

The region—particularly Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Iran—was described as facing “unfinished business [and] unleashed cycles of violence in quest of outcomes and security,” compounded by the dangers of Israel’s unpredictable behavior. The region is further characterized by a growing “divergence” between failed states and rising states, highlighting the importance of discussing this across all three focus areas.

Roundtable Framework

The day’s discussions were guided by an analytical framework across three lines: understanding the direction the world is going in, defining the Arab region’s aspirations for the new world, and exercising agency to influence global outcomes.

In this regard, three global scenarios for the day after Pax Americana were outlined. The first, a “pause” scenario, which envisions a return to pre-Trump structures, and a gradual move toward more inclusivity. The second scenario anticipates “chaos and confrontation” among geopolitical blocs and the ways Arab countries’ alignment across these blocs can impact the region. The third, a “multipolar multilateralism” scenario, envisions a rebalancing of multilateralism toward a democratic global arena.



Furthermore, the Arab region was described as divided into three subregions: the Gulf states, with a population of about 61.5 million, are economically dominant but remain highly dependent on oil and face geopolitical, economic, and social challenges as they pursue diversification; middle-income countries have substantial economic potential and a large labor force, but require strategic coordination to capitalize on labor and market opportunities; and fragile states, including Yemen, Sudan, and Syria, with a population of about 130-150 million people with significant humanitarian needs, present a growing security concern.

Overview of Arab World Subregions

Subregion	Population	% of Total	Economic Profile
Middle-Income Countries	~250-270 million	~73%	Substantial potential; requires coordination
Fragile States	~130-150 million	~18%	High humanitarian needs; security concerns
Gulf States	~61.5 million	~9%	Economically dominant; oil-dependent

* GCC-Stat (2024). *Gulf Statistical Atlas 2024*. Statistical Centre for the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf. <https://gccstat.org/en/statistic/publications/atlas-of-gcc-statistics>

* ESCWA (2025). *Demographic Trends in the Arab Region: 1950–2030*. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. E/ESCWA/CL4.SIT/2025/Policy Brief 1. <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/demographic-trends-arab-region-1950-2030-english.pdf>

Session 1:

Governance of the Movement of Goods and People

The first session sought to answer questions such as: “What is the impact of changes in trade and migration regimes on development, and on the Arab region? How can actors from the Arab region, including think tanks, contribute to shaping global and regional policies on trade and migration?” The discussion highlighted how structural divergence within the region, and global de-globalization trends influence regional coordination and agency.

The first speaker elaborated on the economic context underpinning the structural divergence across Arab subregions. They described how development in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) resulted in citizens enjoying much higher standards of living, state capacity, and financial systems than in other countries in the region, many of which remain burdened by instability and conflict. This gap is likely to widen over the next decade, compounded by a move toward transactional global politics now largely “about who brings what to the table.”

The speaker highlighted fragmentation in regional policy discussions, priorities, and coordination. At the global level, there has been a rise of the nation-state, state capitalism, state intervention, and industrial policies alongside targeted attacks on globalization, whether through tariffs, the weaponization of the dollar, or other aspects of the global economic system. Still, this move toward de-globalization and dismantling of the global order presents an opportunity for Arab think tanks to bring fresh ideas to reconfigure the system while accounting for regional divergence.

The second speaker called for the region to unify its resources and approaches in international negotiations in order to strengthen Arab engagement at global forums, arguing that each actor brings a unique perspective, and efforts should be combined to encourage collaborative investment rather than competition. They emphasized the absence of Arab actors from decision-making tables, such as at the World Trade Organization (WTO), and that Arab actors are often recipients rather than participants in decisions.

“
NO SINGLE COUNTRY OR ENTITY CAN ACT
AS A REGIONAL POWER, REINFORCING CALLS
FOR GREATER REGIONAL COOPERATION
”

Migration was framed as a strategic opportunity, emphasizing the importance of policies that are data-driven and account for push and pull factors. The speaker highlighted the region’s demographic advantage given aging populations in destination countries, and stressed the need for collective (regional) negotiation with destination countries based on (global) skills mapping and labor market needs. They also discussed the role of AI in labor market analysis. Finally, they called for approaching challenges through an economic lens prioritizing development over short-term political or security considerations.

Several participants noted that although the Arab region is highly fragmented, its subregions remain interconnected through shared challenges such as conflict spillovers, displacement, weakened borders, and eroded state capacity. At the same time, a lack of effective leadership and institutions hinders regional cooperation. Some argued that no single country or entity can act as a regional power, reinforcing calls for greater regional cooperation, collective thinking, and regional agency. There was a call to support the stabilization and recovery of fragile states, and to introduce new regional- and national-level institutions and investment vehicles to support cooperation.

Participants agreed that global shifts, such as de-globalization, are better understood through a geoeconomic lens, given the role of connectivity, trade, investment, and labor mobility in shaping regional relations. Some challenged simplified portrayals of Gulf economies as oil-dependent, while others emphasized leveraging regional complementarities, particularly around labor markets and population dynamics. One participant cited Saudi Arabia’s shift toward economic engagement in Yemen as a practical example of geoeconomic cooperation.

Technology was highlighted as a key factor shaping global power and future development prospects, with implications for labor markets, security, and competitiveness. Other issues to integrate into regional policy debates alongside socioeconomic, political, and geopolitical considerations include climate change, resource scarcity, and the economic and environmental costs of militarization. As one participant noted, “this is a highly integrated region,” as countries share water, energy, and environmental challenges.

Session 2:

Development Finance and the Management of Capital Flows

The second session explored how regional and global actors, including Arab think tanks, can help shape fairer development finance frameworks, improve the governance of capital flows, and ensure financing mechanisms reflect regional needs and vulnerabilities, such as the ability to absorb liquidity shocks and enable effective debt restructuring.

The opening remarks highlighted the transition from public and foreign aid to private philanthropy, underscoring a fundamental shift in global development finance which is changing policy development processes. It was argued that aid can build shock resilience through funding civil society, but that the development sector requires new approaches to mitigate risk. Reflecting on past aid, it was noted that funding disbursed by international financial institutions to countries in the region often lacked effective mechanisms to deal with debt accumulation. A key question was raised around how debt can be managed sustainably and how civil society can strategize to use funding impactfully.

Investment flows are heavily concentrated in countries that need them least, mostly Gulf states, with investment following geopolitical interests rather than developmental needs. This creates harmful competition between countries that should cooperate. The discussion called for rethinking how sovereign wealth funds operate at national and regional levels, noting that Morocco and the GCC often use them opportunistically rather than as transformative development tools. It was also noted that Gulf sovereign wealth funds primarily acquire foreign assets to grow portfolios rather than regional economies.

It was explained that the global development finance model that enabled convergence for decades has collapsed, leaving developing countries in debt crisis, with attention drawn to the lack of a global financial safety net. Three pillars for recovery were outlined: national efforts to strengthen the state and raise resources, increasing flows from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, and creditor restraint, noting that IFIs attempt to help countries, but incoming funds immediately flow out to cover debt service.

Opportunities were also identified for think tanks to influence global agendas through Saudi Arabia's G20 membership and France's upcoming G7 presidency, with a recommendation

that regional think tanks submit a unified civil society position on international financial architecture reform. Reference was made to the third international conference on financing for development and the Sevilla Agreement, noting that a pragmatic approach should involve simultaneous action on all three pillars. On regional development banks, it was argued that they represent the future, though a critical challenge was stressed: these institutions need senior creditor status, which comes from transparency, discipline, and enforceable commitments, not political favoritism.

Roundtable participants raised several critical issues. One stressed that Arab funds, particularly those controlled by Gulf oil-producing states, should form the foundation of joint regional work, supporting countries most in need and shifting priorities from reconstruction to primary development needs. Participants also criticized current funding trends and donor priorities, noting that the projects being financed are not resulting in development.

Participants also noted that donor influence on research and policy priorities is likely to divert attention from actual local needs: “There’s a need to scrutinize what sort of funding comes, even at the price of not accepting the funds.” Sharing insights from work with the African Development Bank on international financing, another participant argued that the priority should be to mobilize domestic savings before seeking external financing.

Participants called for the establishment of a working committee of Arab think tanks to develop a unified position on international financial architecture reform, conduct research, advise on strategic funding, reform sovereign wealth funds to prioritize regional development, and create credible Arab regional development banks with transparent governance and enforceable conditionality mechanisms.

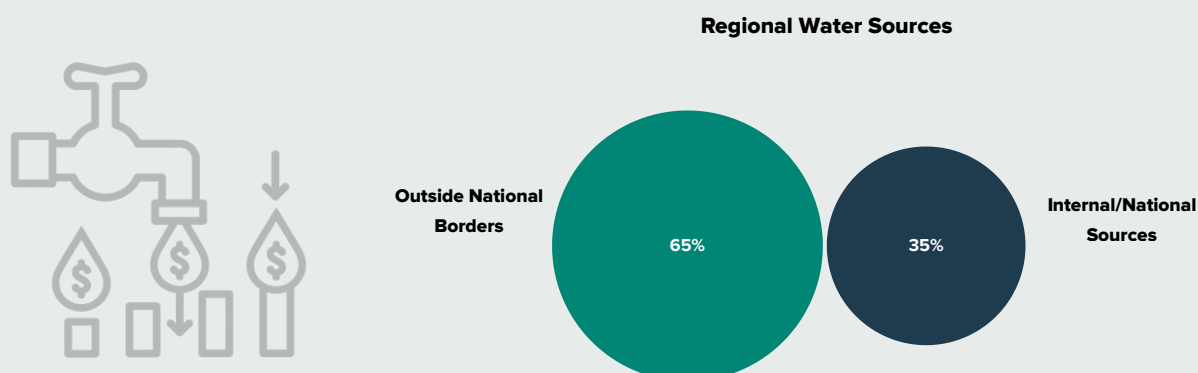


Session 3:

Climate Change

Session 3 explored how Arab actors, including think tanks, can contribute to global climate action and shape governance frameworks that reflect regional climate priorities and vulnerabilities. The moderator set the context, noting that climate change in the region changed significantly after the onset of the genocide in Gaza. Describing the term “ecocide,” they highlighted that the war generated a carbon footprint equivalent to 100 countries, with reconstruction adding over 31 million tons of CO₂ emissions, noting that its impact is likely to be felt across the region.

The first speaker agreed that climate discussions cannot be separated from conflict, which exacerbates environmental degradation and diverts budgets from development to humanitarian relief and defense. They identified water scarcity as a major challenge, with more than 13 countries¹ in the region falling below 500 cubic meters per capita per year. Several countries share their water resources and over 65%² of regional water originates outside national borders, making access dependent on regional stability and transboundary cooperation. Climate-induced temperature rise is also linked to agricultural collapse with severe implications for food security, particularly in countries also facing conflict. Even moderate warming is likely to cause catastrophic losses, significantly expanding arid zones and exacerbating land degradation.



¹ CEDARE Team. (2025). *Water in the Arab Region -- Challenges and Opportunities for a Sustainable Future*. <https://2025.cedare.org/water-in-the-arab-region-challenges-and-opportunities-for-a-sustainable-future/>

² CEDARE Team. (2025). *Water in the Arab Region -- Challenges and Opportunities for a Sustainable Future*. <https://2025.cedare.org/water-in-the-arab-region-challenges-and-opportunities-for-a-sustainable-future/>

The misalignment between regional needs and global climate financing priorities was highlighted. Funding often goes to mitigation projects, particularly private sector funding, despite the region's low emissions. Adaptation is often framed as a local, technically complex issue and hard to fund, so large-scale, capital-intensive mitigation projects dominate, while adaptive interventions remain underfunded. Private actors also play a significant role in defining funding priorities, raising questions about whose priorities are served and emphasizing the need for regional research and evidence-based proposals. Yet, Arab institutions struggle to influence global climate agendas, including IPCC assessments, due to data gaps, fragmented research, and limited capacity to translate regional evidence into globally legible formats.

The session also addressed structural barriers to accessing climate finance. Complex accreditation procedures, risk aversion toward conflict-affected countries, and reliance on international implementing agencies have limited the ability of many Arab states to directly access funds such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF). Funding in the region is highly concentrated: Morocco and Egypt received 48% and 28% of GCF finance respectively since 2015, while other countries which are also affected and in severe crisis receive little to no support.³

In their intervention, the second speaker urged participants to move away from the language of “climate change” altogether, arguing that it should be treated as “an issue of environmental justice” linked to occupation, genocide, social inequality, and unequal resource access. Without this lens, environmental issues in Gaza, Sudan, or Yemen risk being reduced to technical problems, particularly as donors continue to push for research initiatives on climate-induced migration.

The second speaker described the Arab region as three different regions with regard to environmental policy. The Gulf states, who are major oil and gas producers, are invested in shaping mitigation debates through technology-driven solutions led by consultants and global firms. North African countries such as Morocco and Egypt position themselves as clean energy exporters, aligning their strategies with industrial policy and European trade. The rest of the region experiences climate change as “crisis after crisis” affecting agriculture, livelihoods, and migration, while largely lacking the capacity to negotiate. In these countries, climate change often drives mass rural-to-urban migration, particularly among young men, contributing to social and political instability in peri-urban areas. These countries need local adaptive projects, and think tanks can learn from community-led

³ *Climate Funds Update (2025). Climate Finance Regional Briefing: Middle East and North Africa.* ODI/Heinrich Böll Stiftung.
<https://climatefundsupdate.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/CFF9-2024-ENG-MENA-DIGITAL.pdf>

solutions already being developed out of necessity and in response to climate-related challenges.

The importance of research methodologies centered on people and communities was underscored. The second speaker called for environmental impact assessments documenting how climate and environmental degradation affect communities, including farmers, fishermen, gender dynamics, youth aspirations, and food security. It is also crucial to understand the short-, medium-, and long-term impacts of war, including pollution, soil degradation, water contamination, and governance collapse. Ukraine was referenced as a model for quantifying environmental damage for compensation claims, noting that the region has suffered extensive environmental harm but lacks data and coordinated strategies to pursue accountability.

Roundtable participants expanded on the presentations, including by proposing concrete entry points for think tanks. One participant pointed to the possibility of leveraging the EU's carbon tax (adjustment mechanism) to challenge Israeli imports into the union, citing emissions linked to the war on Gaza. Others highlighted the tension between climate goals and the rapid expansion of energy-intensive AI and data infrastructures, warning that global demand for energy and water is likely to increase rather than decline.

Water diplomacy, transboundary governance, and the food–water–energy nexus were emphasized as priority areas for regional collaboration. Participants from conflict-affected countries underscored that climate finance often arrives as debt rather than grants, exacerbating fiscal pressures. Many countries in the region lack the proper accreditation mechanisms, or local entities with the capacity to access or manage these funds. The need to translate complex global mechanisms into locally usable frameworks was stressed by several participants.

Nevertheless, participants agreed that adaptation must be prioritized over mitigation, that community-level solutions must be studied and supported, and that Arab think tanks play a critical role in generating evidence to inform policymakers and advance accountability.

Conclusion

Discussions at the second annual MENA Think Tank Forum highlighted both the challenges the Arab region is facing and the potential for countries to coordinate on GPGs through regional institutions. Arab subregions remain interconnected through shared resources, demographic pressures, migration dynamics, and security challenges, particularly conflicts and their spillover. Participants suggested that cooperation should move beyond romantic notions of Arab unity and instead focus on interest-based arrangements that reflect existing economic and political realities.

There was broad agreement that Arab actors play a limited role in global decision-making forums, and that significant gaps remain between global frameworks and regional realities. Participants recognized that the current moment of global fragmentation presents an opportunity for Arab engagement. Saudi Arabia's G20 membership, France's upcoming G7 presidency and emerging coalitions in the Global South present opportunities for greater regional participation. Actors must take advantage of these opportunities through strategic coordination, preparation, and identifying shared priorities. Regional think tanks can and should produce research to inform national and regional policy relevant to GPGs, while working toward strengthening a collective regional voice. The challenge is whether think tanks and civil society can move away from theory and analysis toward collective action and regional agency in global forums.



Appendix 1: Agenda

Day 1: General Assembly

Time	Session
9:30 – 10:00	Registration
10:00 – 10:15	Welcome by the Secretariat
10:15 – 12:15	Review & Approval of Network Guidelines
12:15 – 12:30	Coffee Break
12:30 – 13:30	Strategy & Priorities for 2025-2026
13:30 – 13:40	Closing

Day 2: Roundtable

“Arab Perspectives on Global Public Goods and their Governance”

Time	Session
9:00 – 9:30	Coffee Break
9:30 – 10:00	Opening: The Moment and Our Challenge • Geopolitical insights and overview of the current context • What role can and should actors, including think tanks, in the Arab region play? • Framework for the day
10:00 – 11:30	Panel Session 1: Governance of the Movement of Goods and People The discussion will explore the impact of recent changes in trade and migration regimes on ongoing de-globalization. With geo-political divergence, global value chains are getting regionalized. What is the impact on development, and on the Arab region? How can actors from the Arab region, including think tanks, contribute to shaping global and regional policies on trade and migration, while addressing pressing challenges such as the need to develop new technologies, deal with climate change, and diversify away from oil revenues?
11:30 – 13:00	Panel Session 2: Development Finance and the Management of Capital Flows The discussion will explore how regional and global actors, including Arab think tanks, can contribute to shaping fairer development finance frameworks, improving the governance of capital flows, and ensuring that financing mechanisms reflect regional needs and vulnerabilities, such as the ability to absorb liquidity shocks, and the possibility of effective debt restructuring when needed. The discussion will also cover rules for managing foreign direct investment, dealing with speculative flows, and thinking about global taxation on the global agenda.

Time	Session
13:00 – 14:00	Lunch
14:00 – 15:30	Panel Session 3: Climate Change The discussion will explore how actors from the Arab region, including think tanks, can contribute to global climate action, such as mitigation, adaptation, and climate finance, while shaping global governance frameworks and relevant policies that reflect regional priorities and address local climate change vulnerabilities (including water scarcity and food security).
15:30 – 15:45	Closing & Next Steps
15:45 – 17:00	Coffee break
17:00 – 18:30	Public Event: Building an Arab Voice on the Governance of Global Public Goods

Appendix 2: Institutions Participating in the Forum

- Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), Lebanon & Tunisia
- b'huth — Dubai Public Policy Research Centre
- Center for Arab Unity Studies (CAUS), Lebanon
- Center for Strategic Studies, Professor of International Relations & Regional Studies, University of Jordan
- Centre de Recherche en Économie Appliquée pour le Développement (CREAD), Algeria
- Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut (IFI) – Secretariat
- Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS)
- Middle East Council on Global Affairs, Qatar
- Middle East Research Institute (MERI), Kurdistan Region of Iraq
- Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (MIPA)
- Muscat Policy Council (MPC)
- Policy Center for the New South (PCNS), Morocco
- Middle East Studies Program, School of Global Affairs & Public Policy (GAPP), American University in Cairo
- Politics and Society Institute (PSI), Jordan
- Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, Yemen
- Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR)
- Tawasul, Oman
- Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network
- Centre d'Études Méditerranéennes et Internationales (CEMI)
- Derasat — Bahrain Center for Strategic, International & Energy Studies
- Economic Research Forum
- Egyptian Center for Economic Studies



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