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Sustainable Urban Development as a Driver for Environmental Diplomacy

Involving Central Asia for Dialogues between Iran and Saudi Arabia

by Desirée Custers and Jan Hanrath

Introduction

Iran and Saudi Arabia face a range of shared environmental challenges, many of which are particularly acute in their rapidly expanding urban centers. In Tehran, for example, the population has grown from 4 million in 1976 to over 9 million

Executive Summary

Iran and Saudi Arabia face shared environmental challenges, particularly in their rapidly expanding urban centers, where issues such as air pollution, water scarcity and urban planning complexities put increasing pressure on individual access to infrastructure, public health and overall quality of life. Addressing these challenges requires not only technical solutions but also regional cooperation, which can serve as a driver for environmental diplomacy. However, despite recent improvements in official relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia based on the resumption of diplomatic ties in March 2023 and a bilateral willingness to engage, trust remains limited at the civil society and expert levels. Thus, any sustained cross-border collaboration remains complicated.

This CARPO Brief explores opportunities for sustainable urban development and green urbanism as entry points for building trust and fostering regional dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It highlights the potential of third-party contexts, such as Uzbekistan, as neutral platforms for facilitating discussions, sharing expertise and reducing political sensitivities. By drawing on regional experiences in sustainable urban development, Iran and Saudi Arabia can engage in knowledge exchange and practical cooperation to address pressing environmental and urban challenges while fostering a broader culture of dialogue and mutual understanding.

today, with the wider metropolitan area reaching nearly 16 million. This rapid urban growth, along with a sharp increase in vehicle ownership and overburdened public transport infrastructure, has resulted in severe traffic congestion, environmental degradation and high levels of air pollution.[1] Similarly, Riyadh's population – currently over 8 million – is expected to rise to 9.6 million by 2030, intensifying already significant transportation challenges. Commuters lose an average of 52 hours annually in traffic, and rising car ownership continues to strain road infrastructure, contributing to noise, pollution and land use pressures.[2]

Major cities across Central Asia are grappling with similar issues. This common ground, in addition to their geographical proximity to Iran and Saudi Arabia, their shared cultural and historical heritage, and the recent intensification of geo-strategic and geo-economic ties between the two countries and the Central Asia region, presents an opportunity for environmental diplomacy. Furthermore, it allows for Iran and Saudi Arabia to engage in dialogue on sustainable urban development and green urbanism with the involvement of Central Asian countries. By identifying shared concerns, exchanging best practices, and recognizing both similarities and differences, the two nations can take meaningful steps toward cooperation in this critical field.

A key advantage of framing this discussion within a broader regional context is the inclusion of a country such as Uzbekistan, which has made environmental policy and climate diplomacy central pillars of its foreign and domestic agenda. As a nation heavily impacted by climate change – particularly due to water management issues and desertification – Uzbekistan has actively promoted regional cooperation on sustainability and green urbanism. By hosting and facilitating dialogues on urban environmental challenges, Uzbekistan provides a neutral and constructive space where Iran and Saudi Arabia can engage in discussions, reducing direct geopolitical sensitivities that might otherwise complicate bilateral exchanges. Arab Gulf states and Iran are increasingly looking to Uzbekistan for investment projects, such as in the green energy sector, IT, health, transport and interregional connectivity. Examples include ACWA Power, a private Saudi company, and the United Arab Emirates-owned Masdar, which co-developed Uzbekistan's first utility-scale photovoltaic power plant (solar power).

Bringing a third country into a structured exchange allows for the cross-fertilization of ideas, the identification of scalable solutions, and the establishment of a framework for long-term cooperation. At a time when Iran-Saudi relations, though improving, remain fragile (particularly in light of the recent

1 Talkhabi, Hamidrezam, Kamran Jafarpour Ghalehteimouri and Meysam Toulabi Nejad (30.04.2024): 'Integrating Tehran metropolitan air pollution into the current transport system and sprawl growth: an emphasis on urban performance and accessibility', in: *Discover Cities* 1. Available at *https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s44327-024-00008-4.pdf* (17.03.2025).

2 Ferrari, Marco (27.02.2025): 'How Saudi Arabia is using advanced automated systems to tackle traffic congestion', in: *Arab News*. Available at *https://arab.news/w4aq5* (17.03.2025).

war between Israel-Iran), environmental diplomacy presents an opportunity to build trust, foster dialogue and lay the groundwork for collaborative action on a shared and urgent challenge.

Against this backdrop, and with this rationale in mind, CARPO and the Central Asian University of Environmental Studies and Climate Change (Green University) co-organized a workshop in Tashkent in autumn 2024 to explore opportunities for collaboration on sustainable urban development between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The workshop also examined the role of third-country actors in facilitating dialogue and the potential of academic exchange and scientific cooperation in this sensitive context. This meeting was part of CARPO's 'Iran–Saudi Dialogue Initiative', which began in 2015. The workshop brought together distinguished academics and experts from Saudi Arabia, Iran, Europe, and Uzbekistan, fostering in-depth, interactive discussions on environmental challenges and sustainable urban development.

Setting the Scene: Approaches to Environmental Challenges and a Green Transition in Iran and Saudi Arabia

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has increasingly prioritized environmental challenges and sustainability, reflecting a broader commitment to integrating green policies into its development agenda. This transformation is largely driven by its Vision 2030, which seeks to diversify the country's economy away from oil dependency and promote sustainable development. As part of this vision, Saudi Arabia has committed to large-scale investments in renewable energy, particularly in solar, hydrogen and wind power, aiming to position itself as a leader in clean energy transition. A flagship initiative in this regard is NEOM, a futuristic mega-city project designed as a hub for green technology, smart urban development and hydrogen-based energy solutions. NEOM's ambitious goal is to integrate cutting-edge sustainability concepts, including carbon-free transportation, water desalination powered by renewable energy, and large-scale conservation projects.

On the international stage, Saudi Arabia has sought to position itself as a key player in global climate diplomacy, recognizing both the risks of climate change and the economic potential of green innovation. In 2021, the Kingdom launched the Saudi Green Initiative (SGI), a comprehensive program that includes tree planting, desert restoration and ambitious carbon reduction goals. The initiative commits to increasing the share of renewable energy in the national grid, cutting methane emissions and restoring vast tracts of degraded land to combat desertification. The Middle East Green Initiative (MGI), launched alongside the SGI, extends these commitments beyond Saudi Arabia's borders, fostering regional cooperation on climate action and environmental sustainability, with Uzbekistan being the first Central Asian country to join the initiative.[3]

As participants of the workshop highlighted, this new approach signals a strategic

3 Saudi & Middle East Green Initiatives (26.10.2022): *Middle East Green Initiative (MGI) – Ministers Communiqué.* Available at *https://www.sgi.gov.sa/knowledge-hub/middle-east-green-initiative-mgi-ministers-communique/?csrt=7805324894567566466* (17.03.2025).

realignment in Saudi environmental policy, motivated not only by ecological concerns but also by the economic and geopolitical benefits of being at the forefront of the global energy transition. These benefits include the creation of green jobs. One example is the NEOM Green Hydrogen Project, which is expected to start production in 2025 and generate 650 tons of green hydrogen per day. The project not only positions Saudi Arabia as a leader in the global hydrogen economy but also creates significant employment opportunities in the renewable energy sectors.[4] Additionally, the Kingdom aims to attract substantial foreign investment, exemplified by plans to invest over $200 billion in renewable energy by 2030, enhancing its role as a global clean energy powerhouse. Furthermore, partnerships with international entities, such as the collaboration between Saudi Arabia's ACWA Power and Uzbekistan on green hydrogen projects, facilitate knowledge transfer and technological advancement in sustainable energy.[5] While challenges remain – such as balancing sustainability efforts with continued fossil fuel exports and dependency – Saudi Arabia's recent initiatives reflect a growing recognition that addressing climate change and environmental sustainability is both a necessity and an opportunity for long-term economic stability and resilience.

Iran has a comparatively long tradition of engaging with environmental issues, particularly in areas such as water resource management, reforestation and wildlife conservation. However, in recent years, Iran has intensified its focus on transitioning from fossil fuels toward more sustainable energy solutions, driven by both environmental concerns and the economic necessity of diversifying its energy mix. With its vast solar potential due to its geography, Iran has set ambitious targets to expand renewable energy capacity, particularly in solar and wind power. The country has also implemented several energy efficiency programs, focused on improving energy consumption in the residential and industrial sectors.[6] Additionally, Iran views nuclear energy as a key component of its green transition strategy, aiming to reduce domestic reliance on fossil fuels while maintaining energy security. Iran´s nuclear program, however, remains heavily contested internationally: The ongoing doubts about its peaceful intentions and concerns about weaponization are causes for its diplomatic and economic isolation on the international arena.

As such, and unlike Saudi Arabia, Iran faces significant structural and geopolitical barriers in implementing its green transition. Participants coming from Iran stressed that international sanctions have severely restricted its ability to access advanced technology, foreign investment and international partnerships, all which are crucial for scaling up renewable energy projects and modernizing its infrastructure. While Iran has made strides

4 H2-diplo (2023): 'Saudi Arabia's potential to enhance its position as a key goods' provider for the energy transition and the upcoming hydrogen economy', in: *Global Hydrogen Diplomacy*, p. 29. Available at *https://h2diplo.de/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Study-H2-industry-KSA_2024_final-1-1.pdf* (17.03.2025).

5 Sons, Sebastian (24.01.2024): *COP28, the Gulf States and the Clean Energy Transition: No Zero-Sum Game*, Brussels International Center. Available at *https://www.bic-rhr.com/research/cop28-gulf-states-and-clean-energy-transition-no-zero-sum-game* (17.03.2025).

6 Shokri, Umud (23.10.2024): 'Iran's renewable energy – prospects and challenges', in: *Stimson Commentary Middle East & North Africa*. Available at *https://www.stimson.org/2024/irans-renewable-energy-prospects-and-challenges/* (17.03.2025).

in developing domestic expertise in renewable energy, its limited integration into global markets hinders progress, making it challenging to procure cutting-edge equipment, secure financing and participate in global sustainability initiatives.

Despite these challenges, participants argued, Iran has demonstrated a strong commitment to environmental action, particularly in areas such as water resource management, pollution control and reforestation efforts. It has also sought to engage in regional cooperation on environmental issues, recognizing that challenges such as desertification, air pollution and water scarcity are transnational in nature – in particular in urban contexts. Participants noted that Iran was the first country in the Eastern Mediterranean region to establish a network of healthy cities.[7]

During the workshop, participants also discussed how the green transition unfolds at the societal level, particularly in relation to non-governmental actors such as businesses, civil society organizations and international investors. Green transition, as defined by workshop participants, includes a move away from fossil fuels towards renewable energy sources such as solar and wind energy.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030 has created numerous opportunities in the field of green transition for the private sector, encouraging businesses to invest in renewable energy and sustainable infrastructure projects. Participants provided several examples of public-private partnerships (PPPs), where the Saudi government collaborates with businesses to implement large-scale sustainability initiatives. Non-governmental organizations are also playing an increasingly active role in raising awareness on environmental issues and promoting sustainable development, often in cooperation with the government.

The young Saudi generation is also showing a growing interest in environmentalism, climate protection and careers in the non-oil energy sector. Their competition for "green jobs" is increasingly promoted by the Saudi government by investing in educational programs, training courses and capacity development.[8] Saudi universities are expanding their offerings in this field, including courses related to renewable energy and hydrogen technology. Additionally, local communities are working on green urban spaces and sustainable urban development, contributing to broader environmental efforts across the country.[9]

Iran, despite being under international sanctions, has seen the emergence of many local businesses and entrepreneurial ventures focused on sustainability and environmental protection. In particular, small and medium-sized enterprises have increasingly engaged in developing renewable energy

7 World Health Organization – Eastern Mediterranean Region (10.08.2021): 'Sahand in Islamic Republic of Iran receives healthy city award', in: *WHO News*. Available at *https://www.emro.who.int/iran/news/sahand-in-islamic-republic-of-iran-receives-healthy-city-award.html* (17.03.2025).

8 Mulligan, Cian (11.08.2024): *Measuring Green Jobs in Saudi Arabia: Saudis in Green Occupations*, KAPSARC Discussion Paper. Available at *https://www.kapsarc.org/research/publications/measuring-green-jobs-in-saudi-arabia-saudis-in-green-occupations/* (17.03.2025).

9 Van Veen, Erwin and Sebastian Sons (23.09.2024): *Drivers and Strategic Puzzles of Saudi Modernization*, Clingendael and CARPO Report, p. 10. Available at *https://carpo-bonn.org/publikationen/weitere/drivers-and-strategic-puzzles-of-saudi-modernization* (17.03.2025).

projects, reflecting a growing trend of green entrepreneurship. Participants also noted that non-governmental organizations are actively involved in raising awareness, providing education and advocating for environmental protection and sustainability, particularly on issues such as air pollution, water scarcity and deforestation.

Green Urbanism and Urban Resilience

Cities, as described by the workshop participants, serve as the central hubs where many of these environmental and social processes take place. Participants defined 'Green Urbanism' as a model that is both sustainable and eco-friendly while also being socially and economically inclusive – for example, through affordable housing and accessible public spaces.

In Iran, participants emphasized that each city has its own unique characteristics; thus, local cultural, historical and traditional customs must be taken into account when planning urban spaces. However, in many cities the balance between urban capacity and demand is strained, placing significant pressure on infrastructure, resources and ultimately also on municipal authorities. Despite these challenges, certain participatory elements exist within Iran's urban development process. Participants noted that social impact assessments are conducted, though their integration into government decision-making processes remains limited. Additionally, Iran has a strong culture of citizen engagement at both the city and neighborhood levels, where local communities actively contribute to urban life.

In Saudi Arabia, participants noted that cities are becoming increasingly green through large-scale planting campaigns. Riyadh, for example, is expanding green, mixed-use spaces by holistically integrating environmental planning – with King Salman Park cited as a flagship project. One key concept being implemented is the 15-minute city, where citizens can reach essential services – such as schools, pharmacies and grocery stores – within a 15-minute walk. Another giga-initiative, a smart linear city named The Line, has announced that it will run only on renewable energy. Another approach mentioned was the sponge city concept, which focuses on water conservation in urban areas and enhancing urban resilience by improving water absorption and flood management. While such initiatives provide interesting insights into future urban development in terms of innovation and people-to-people connectivity, concrete outcomes still remain uncertain.[10]

Tourism was also highlighted as a key driver in making cities greener and more sustainable. Participants discussed the role of green tourism in promoting eco-friendly urban development. However, a central question raised was whether new legislation on green infrastructure and water conservation should be developed at the city level rather than at the national level, to allow for more localized and effective policymaking.

10 Winkel, Sina and Sebastian Sons (04.09.2024): *Urbanism in Flux. Smart and Sustainable Cities as Spaces for Regional Cooperation in West Asia and the Arabian Peninsula*, CARPO Report 13, p. 13. Available at *https://carpo-bonn.org/publikationen/carpo-reports/urbanism-in-flux* (17.03.2025).

Smart Cities, Green Urbanism and Local Engagement

Workshop participants also touched upon the concept of smart cities,[11] emphasizing that green and sustainable urban development extends beyond technological advancements. It also involves making cities more livable by addressing social issues such as affordable housing, social inclusion and access to green spaces.[12] The question is not only whether a city is green but also whether it meets local needs and allows for meaningful community and stakeholder engagement. This became particularly evident after the COVID-19 pandemic, which heightened awareness of the importance of community and infrastructure resilience as well as the role of public spaces in urban life.

For both Iran and Saudi Arabia, several challenges were highlighted in this regard. First, while data collection and analysis are essential for addressing urban challenges and improving community and infrastructure resilience, data sharing between both countries remains highly sensitive. Institutions are often reluctant to share information for national security concerns, let alone collaborate on bilateral or regional data exchange. As a result, urban initiatives lack coordination, and citizens do not have transparent access to developments affecting their own neighborhoods.

Second, citizen participation in sustainable urban development presents challenges in both countries. Participants from Iran and Saudi Arabia noted that public engagement in decision-making processes can be complex. In Iran, while community engagement initiatives exist, incorporating public input into municipal planning processes remains limited. Additionally, technological constraints and restricted access to foreign direct investment present further challenges to advancing modern urban development.

In Saudi Arabia, public assessment processes are in place – such as those conducted through PPPs, where companies evaluate citizen perspectives on projects. However, participants noted that there is quite some potential for enhancement in how these assessments influence final policy decisions, highlighting the potential for stronger integration of public feedback into urban planning efforts. That said, cities are not monolithic, and participants also shared positive examples of successful public participation. In Medina, for example, local authorities have actively involved citizens in the development of green spaces, demonstrating how public engagement can be integrated into sustainable urban planning.

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11 On the concept of smart cities, also see: Belaïd, Fateh and Anvita Arora (eds.) (2024): *Smart Cities – Social and Environmental Challenges and Opportunities for Local Authorities*. Available at *https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-35664-3* (17.03.2025).

12 Petrucci, Anna Laura (07.09.2021): *Smart Cities, Changes for a New Model from the Gulf States?*, Policy Report, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, p. 1. Available at *https://www.kas.de/documents/286298/8668222/Policy+Report+No36.+21-08-31+Smart+cities+chances+for+a+new+model+from+the+Gulf+States.pdf/cd5fc8d8-1704-3c74-23e7-28ad8106195d?version=1.0&t=1631042886703* (17.03.2025).

Central Asia and Iran-Saudi cooperation

Beyond serving as a neutral platform for fostering dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Central Asia also offers a rich foundation for substantive cooperation on environmental and urban planning challenges. The region shares deep cultural and historical ties with both countries, rooted in centuries of architectural traditions, water management techniques and urban planning strategies adapted to arid and semi-arid environments. This common heritage creates a unique space for mutual learning and collaboration, where best practices can be exchanged without relying solely on external models from other world regions. Both Central Asia and the Middle East possess a wealth of indigenous knowledge and homegrown sustainability solutions, making regional cooperation not only practical but also culturally and contextually relevant.

Integrating Traditional Knowledge into Sustainable Urban Planning

In this regard, an approach to strengthening community and infrastructure resilience discussed during the workshop was integrating traditional cultural practices into sustainable urban design. While historical architecture may not always be explicitly categorized as 'green', it offers valuable sustainability lessons by incorporating low-energy, climate-adaptive techniques developed over centuries. Participants referred to this as 'passive knowledge', highlighting how time-tested architectural solutions not only enhance environmental sustainability but also provide a shared cultural foundation for cooperation between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan.

For centuries, Uzbekistan's historical architecture has successfully integrated passive cooling techniques to regulate indoor temperatures in extreme heat, demonstrating an effective, low-tech approach to urban climate resilience. Similar strategies are found across Iran and Saudi Arabia, where traditional design elements have long provided energy-efficient solutions for harsh climatic conditions. Some key examples include:

- Windcatchers (*badgir*s) – Prominent in Persian and Arabian architecture, these structures naturally ventilate buildings by capturing wind and directing it into interior spaces, reducing reliance on artificial cooling.
- Thick adobe and stone walls – Used extensively in Central Asian, Iranian and Arabian architecture, such materials provide thermal mass, absorbing heat during the day and slowly releasing it at night, helping to stabilize indoor temperatures.
- Shaded courtyards and narrow alleyways – Designed to reduce heat buildup and enhance airflow, these urban planning techniques create cooler microclimates, making cities more livable in extreme heat.
- *Qanat*s and other underground water channels – Ancient Persian irrigation systems that efficiently transport water with minimal evaporation, while also contributing to passive cooling in surrounding urban areas.

By reviving and adapting these passive, low-energy strategies, modern urban planning can reduce energy consumption, enhance urban resilience and preserve cultural identity. Participants emphasized that recognizing and integrating passive knowledge into contemporary urban policies could bridge the gap between historical wisdom and modern sustainability efforts. As they mentioned, this approach not only

offers practical, climate-adaptive solutions but also fosters a shared cultural perspective on sustainability, strengthening regional collaboration between Iran, Saudi Arabia and Central Asia.

Options for Cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia

Participants noted that while the resumption of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2023 has led to notable improvements in government-to-government relations, progress at the societal level remains limited. There is still no clear pathway for people-to-people engagement and hopes in Iran for Saudi investments have remained unmet, largely due to the ongoing international sanctions regime. Moreover, the fragility of regional security, especially in light of the recent '12-day war' between Israel and Iran, the wars in Gaza and Yemen, the unrest in Syria, as well as the broader geopolitical competition, continues to cast a shadow over the normalization process and could negatively impact bilateral cooperation.[13]

Furthermore, despite the diplomatic normalization at the governmental level, reinstated diplomatic ties have not trickled down to broader societal engagement. This is partially due to unclarity on what the possibilities are, particularly given the sanctions regime placed on Iran. Additionally, decades of geopolitical rivalry, mutual stereotyping and ideological differences have left deep-rooted mistrust among their populations.

Against this backdrop, participants emphasized the need to identify concrete pathways for regional collaboration – particularly in areas like environmental protection and sustainable urban development – that can foster trust-building, mutual understanding and knowledge exchange, even amid political uncertainty.

Multidisciplinary Engagement

As mentioned during the workshop, passive knowledge related to cultural and architectural practices represents a shared tradition not only between Iran and Saudi Arabia but also among many Central Asian countries. Participants suggested that future regional cooperation initiatives could build on these common traditions by approaching environmental challenges and sustainable urban development from a cultural perspective. This approach would necessitate a multidisciplinary engagement that includes experts from various fields – such as artists, architects, city planners and historians – who can highlight the value of integrating traditional knowledge into modern sustainability strategies.

Engaging Third-Party Countries

In times of growing regional tensions, enhanced regional cooperation mechanisms are necessary to promote conflict mitigation. Participants discussed how engaging third-party countries in collaborative efforts could reduce the competitive dynamic between Iranian and Saudi experts. Central

13 Alghashian, Aziz (18.01.2025): 'GCC-Iran rapprochement: Challenges and opportunities in 2025', in: *ORF Commentaries*. Available at *https://www.orfonline.org/research/gcc-iran-rapprochement-challenges-and-opportunities-in-2025* (15.04.2025).

Asia, in particular, was suggested as a neutral middle ground, as it faces similar environmental challenges and shares historical and cultural ties with both Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Uzbekistan was recognized as a leading example for its national sustainability strategy. Participants suggested that Saudi Arabia and Iran could develop similar flagship projects, incorporating design-thinking methodologies that integrate native strategies to address urban challenges such as rapid urbanization. Participants also highlighted successful environmental initiatives in Uzbekistan, which could serve as a model for further exchange. For example, Uzbekistan's experience in mitigating the evaporation of the Aral Sea could provide valuable insights for Iran's efforts to address the decline of Lake Urmia. Facilitating knowledge-sharing on water resource management between Saudi and Iranian experts could serve as an entry point for broader environmental cooperation. Given the shared challenges both countries face in managing scarce water resources, exchanging expertise and best practices could foster trust and collaboration in a field of mutual interest.

Beyond water management, Uzbekistan's environmental initiatives offer valuable lessons that could serve as a framework for Iran–Saudi knowledge exchange. One key area is the development of environmental policies at the city level rather than the national level, allowing for more localized and context-specific solutions that address urban sustainability challenges effectively. Additionally, Uzbekistan has introduced transparency mechanisms to assess and monitor how cities perform in sustainability efforts, ensuring that progress is measurable and publicly accessible. Adopting similar approaches in Iran and Saudi Arabia could help strengthen accountability, public engagement and data-driven decision-making in urban environmental policies.

At the diplomatic level, there has been a growing exchange between Uzbekistan's Ministry of Ecology and counterparts in Iran and Saudi Arabia. Central Asia's geographical position gives it an advantage in facilitating regional dialogue and connectivity. Furthermore, participants pointed out that Central Asia itself serves as an example of de-escalation – a decade ago, tensions among Central Asian countries were high. Yet today, regional cooperation on various issues, including environmental issues and climate change mitigation, has significantly improved.

City-to-City Cooperation and Research

City-to-city cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia could focus on comparative urban studies, identifying differences and commonalities in urban planning and sustainability strategies. This could lead to the development of more effective, localized solutions. Participants suggested that cities, either in the form of academic institutions, local authorities or civil society active in the field of urban sustainable development, could integrate into global urban networks to collaborate directly, especially when direct national-level cooperation remains difficult. In this way, cities could act as diplomatic agents of change and foster long-term environmental collaboration.

A potential trilateral cooperation could also be explored between cities in Iran, Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan, promoting

knowledge exchange on sustainable urban development. One concrete idea proposed was the establishment of 'sister-city partnerships' between historically significant urban centers, to exchange knowledge and best practices on traditional architecture and sustainable building materials. A potential example would be a partnership between al-'Ula (Saudi Arabia) and Yazd (Iran) – two cities with centuries-old traditions of using local materials and passive cooling techniques in their architecture. This collaboration could be expanded through collaboration with Uzbek and other Central Asian cities, which share similar architectural and climatic adaptation strategies. Such initiatives could strengthen environmental diplomacy, promote regional collaboration and provide practical solutions for sustainable urban development in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Academic Exchange

Participants identified academic exchange as a promising area for strengthening cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the field of environmental issues and urban sustainability. While such exchanges already exist to a certain degree, they could be further expanded and institutionalized. Collaboration could take place through universities in both countries or via neutral third-country institutions. This very workshop served as a concrete example – bringing together Saudi and Iranian academics and experts at the Green University of Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Such initiatives illustrate the potential for meaningful knowledge-sharing in a neutral setting and underscore how academic collaboration can provide a solid foundation for broader environmental cooperation.

Conclusion

Although there is optimism regarding environmental cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, participants emphasized that a trust gap remains at the sub-national and societal levels. While official diplomatic ties have resumed, this has not yet translated into significant cooperation in the areas of people-to-people exchange, academia or entrepreneurship – particularly in addressing environmental and urban sustainability challenges.

Thus, according to participants, initiatives that build trust and mutual understanding remain crucial. Key suggestions from the workshop included:

- Promoting shared (passive) knowledge on comprehensive urban sustainability.
- Developing city-to-city partnerships for knowledge exchange and cooperation.
- Expanding academic exchanges between Iranian and Saudi universities.

Given the shared cultural and historical ties between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Central Asia – particularly Uzbekistan – participants suggested that these initiatives could take place in a neutral third-party country or involve Central Asian universities, experts and cities.

Policy Recommendations

- **Build Trust Through In-Person Dialogue and Societal-Level Engagement**
  While modern technology facilitates ongoing exchanges, face-to-face meetings remain essential for building trust and fostering cooperation. Policymakers and experts from Iran, Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan should meet regularly, with

digital communication in between to maintain momentum. At the same time, people-to-people initiatives – such as cultural exchanges, youth forums and joint environmental projects – should be supported to deepen societal-level engagement. These efforts humanize bilateral relations and help lay the groundwork for long-term cooperation.

- **Start Small, Then Scale Up: From Workshops to Conferences to Joint Programs**
  Regional cooperation should begin with targeted, small-scale workshops that focus on specific topics, gradually expanding into regional conferences and, eventually, formalized joint programs. A step-by-step approach will allow trust to develop, while also ensuring that projects are realistic, scalable and aligned with the interests of all stakeholders.

- **Expand Academic Exchange on Urban Sustainability in Neutral Venues**
  Academic institutions from Iran and Saudi Arabia should expand collaborative research on sustainable urban planning, utilizing neutral academic platforms in Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries. Funding from European partners could support joint fellowships, research grants and cross-border conferences to promote long-term knowledge-sharing and capacity-building.

- **Foster Collaboration on Joint Projects as Models for Regional Cooperation**
  Iran, Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan should develop concrete joint projects, such as a common garden project, to promote climate-adaptive and culturally rooted landscape architecture. As a collaborative effort between academic institutions and civil society actors, working together on a shared garden space could serve as a practical and symbolic approach to regional cooperation. Such an initiative would provide a tangible platform for documenting and applying traditional, eco-friendly urban planning techniques. By integrating sustainability principles and cultural heritage, the project could enhance ecological resilience, strengthen regional ties and facilitate long-term knowledge exchange.

- **Support Home-Grown, Culturally Anchored Environmental Initiatives**
  Environmental cooperation should be grounded in locally anchored values, cultural heritage and community ownership. Organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation or the Islamic Development Bank could play a key role in facilitating joint initiatives through an Islamic environmental framework, especially in areas like food waste reduction, sustainable practices during pilgrimage, and eco-conscious urban design. Greater focus should be placed on supporting home-grown solutions – guided by local stakeholders rather than external consultants – to ensure that funding priorities align with regional needs. New collaborative fields such as ethnoecology, which leverages culture, music, and festivals, can help build trust, foster curiosity and promote long-term mutual understanding.

- **Address Policymakers' Needs and Create a Shared Language for Cooperation**
  Effective collaboration depends on acknowledging the needs, interests and constraints of policymakers in each country. Stakeholders must work towards a shared policy

framework that translates environmental cooperation into win-win scenarios, where economic, political and social incentives align. Facilitating high-level policy dialogues will ensure that policy goals and regional cooperation efforts are mutually beneficial.

- **Encourage City-Level Environmental Policy-Making and Regional Cooperation** Saudi Arabia and Iran should decentralize environmental policymaking by encouraging municipal-level green initiatives and strengthen participatory processes in local urban planning. Drawing from Uzbekistan's approach, cities should introduce transparency mechanisms to track progress in urban sustainability and environmental performance. A regional network of cities could be established to promote policy exchange, joint projects, and best practice sharing.

- **Develop Trilateral 'Sister City Partnerships' for Sustainable Urban Development** Iran and Saudi Arabia should strengthen direct city-to-city cooperation, using Central Asian cities as a bridge for regional collaboration. One concrete initiative could be a sister-city partnership between al-'Ula (Saudi Arabia) and Yazd (Iran) to exchange knowledge on traditional architecture and sustainable building materials. This model could later be expanded to include a city in Uzbekistan, such as Bukhara, to foster historically and environmentally informed urban development.

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About the Authors

Desirée Custers is Project Manager at CARPO and its Brussels Representative. She has worked in CARPO's Iran-Saudi Dialogue Initiative and is currently involved in their West-Asia and Sub-Saharan African Partnerships in flux program (WASSAP). She has several years of experience in the field of international relations, including environmental peacebuilding and track 2 and 1.5 diplomacy. Desirée has previously worked for the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) programs at the Stimson Center and the EastWest Institute. She holds an MA in Conflict Studies and Human Rights from Utrecht University in the Netherlands and graduated from the KU Leuven University in Belgium with an MA in Arabic and Islamic Studies.

Contact: custers@carpo-bonn.org

Jan Hanrath, Dipl.-Soz.-Wiss., studied Political Science, European Law and Psychology (focusing on intercultural communication) at the University of Duisburg-Essen. As co-founder and CEO of CARPO, he is involved in various projects and oversees daily operations at CARPO's headquarters. In recent years, he has worked as a researcher and coordinator on projects covering Iran–Saudi dialogue, economic development in Yemen, migration and conflict, political transformation in the Middle East and academic exchange. From 2008 to 2014, Jan was a researcher at the Institute for Development and Peace (INEF) at the University of Duisburg-Essen, where his work focused on topics including the transmission of conflicts through migration processes and German Middle East policy.

Contact: hanrath@carpo-bonnn.org

About CARPO

CARPO is a Germany-based think tank with a focus on the Orient that works at the nexus of research, consultancy and exchange. Our work is based on the principles of partnership, inclusivity and sustainability. We believe that a prosperous and peaceful future for the region can best be achieved by engaging the creative and resourceful potential of all relevant stakeholders. Therefore, CARPO opens enduring channels for trustful dialogue and interactive knowledge transfer.

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About the Series

The CARPO Sustainability Series aims to contribute to the slowly growing but still quite marginal research on sustainability in the Middle East and North Africa. As this region's high vulnerability to the severe effects of climate change and global warming represents one of the greatest challenges of this century, it is imperative to tackle this field from a holistic perspective. Sustainability comprises aspects of social (e.g. justice, equality, participation, state-society relations); environmental (e.g. clean energy, pollution, waste, recycling, biodiversity); and economic sustainability (e.g. business engagement, training, education, diversification). Cross-cutting issues are highly diverse and interconnect a vast array of disciplines such as anthropology, politics, economics, sociology, environmental studies and history. Accordingly, this series will publish analyses in the form of CARPO Briefs, Reports or Studies by academics and practitioners from various fields to provide multidisciplinary analyses on key themes of sustainability.

About Green University

Green University is a pioneering higher education institution dedicated to environmental and climate change studies. Established by Presidential Decree No. 174 on May 31, 2023, the university serves as a hub for sustainability education, research, and policy development in Uzbekistan and the broader Central Asian region. Supported by the Ministry of Ecology, Environmental Protection, and Climate Change of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Green University builds upon the expertise of long-standing national research institutions. By integrating scientific innovation, policy development, and interdisciplinary education, it equips students with the knowledge and skills to address pressing environmental challenges.

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CARPO – Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient e.V.
Kaiser-Friedrich-Str. 13
53113 Bonn
Email: info@carpo-bonn.org
www.carpo-bonn.org