beginning of the Iran war. In Gaza, only 1.5 percent of agricultural land remains unharmed.
Damage assessments are already difficult to conduct in remote rural areas. With conflict exacerbating climate impacts, the process of environmental monitoring after fires is made more complicated. Iran's rural towns of Zanjan and Tabriz struggled with disaster management after fires spread following Israel- and US-led attacks on their military facilities, exposing the local population to highly toxic dioxins and furans.

Increasing greenhouse gas emissions

As mentioned earlier, emissions from military activity exacerbate the climate crisis, and the Iran war is no exception. In just the first two weeks of the war, an estimated 5 million tonnes of CO_2 were emitted into the atmosphere. This means the war is burning carbon at a faster rate than 84 countries combined. Greenhouse gases come from a variety of sources, including the destruction of homes, buildings, and fuel reserves; the fuel consumed in combat operations; and the embodied carbon of military equipment.
Existing infrastructure may be the primary target, but attacks are also wiping out the opportunity to build more resilient societies in the region. In the long term, emissions generated by the conflict will compound with those generated by postwar reconstruction efforts in the region. When the war ends, analysts expect military spending in the region and globally to rise, in the face of an increasingly volatile geopolitical landscape. This will inevitably lead to higher military emissions. For instance, based on the White House's April 2026 Pentagon budget request of around $1.5 trillion, submitted in the context of the ongoing conflict with Iran, experts estimate that 267 megatonnes more carbon pollution could be sent into the atmosphere. This is 53 times more than the estimated CO_2 emissions produced during the first two weeks of the war.
As the conflict develops, secondary impacts will also lead to an increase in greenhouse gas emissions. Many countries, particularly in Asia, are switching from gas to coal because of the volatility of the liquified natural gas (LNG) market in the wake of the war. LNG had played a key role in the energy security of these economies, particularly following Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022. However, the Iran war is causing gas cargoes in the Persian Gulf to be delayed, rerouted, or priced out by maritime insurance premiums. The consequence has been countries like India increasing their coal consumption to meet the high demand for energy in the summer, or countries like Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam "boosting coal-fired power".
Ultimately, the war creates a double burden on the climate crisis: more emissions, accelerating climate impacts, and less funding to invest in mitigating them through the transition to renewables or building adaptation and resilience. Conversely, the greenhouse gas emissions generated by military activity throughout the conflict will compound the medium- and long-term climate pressures already bearing down on the region. All of this evidence shows a reinforcing relationship: a climate crisis compounding a war and a war compounding a climate crisis.

Weakening state capacity

The war in Iran is not only impacting environmental and climate stressors in the region. It is also preventing governments from investing in much-needed resilience and adaptation measures that could help address existing challenges. This is happening not long after the so-called great aid recession, with eight of the 10 largest humanitarian donors having reduced their funding since 2022. Historically, weakened governance systems have led to revolts and conflicts over water, energy, and food shortages that have triggered exacerbated displacement — disproportionately harming refugees, farmers, and women. While the Persian Gulf has adopted cleaner energy alternatives, the war has exposed the consequences of a policy of water overconsumption and energy-intensive systems (such as desalination plants) now under heightened threat. Furthermore, with remittance streams from foreign workers in Persian Gulf countries facing increased risk, the future of the region's social contract looks uncertain. So far, the Iran war has also caused an estimated $58 billion in damage to energy infrastructure, and the region's tourism revenue is declining around $600 million a day, further diminishing Persian Gulf governments' capacity to invest resources in the adaptation and resilience of their societies.

In the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council, sustainable development mega projects are being shelved to make fiscal room for repairing battered energy infrastructure and strengthening defense capabilities. While the economies of Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar are more dependent on oil revenues, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are not immune to the macroeconomic pressures of a volatile energy market, in addition to the climate stressors that exacerbate resource scarcity. Rising fuel and insurance costs for Persian Gulf shipping carriers, abetted by an unreliable cease-fire, undermine the promise of deals like an Abu Dhabi port group's $22 million dirham investment to develop Khalifa Port, which houses the world's three largest shipping lines: CMA CGM, COSCO, and MSC.
At best, these Persian Gulf countries will experience a dip in foreign capital flows and tourism and a spike in risk premiums for investors. Together, these changes may subvert the Persian Gulf's long-standing image as a prosperous business hub for expats. Along with expanding budget deficits across Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, crackdowns against Shia minorities in Bahrain and Kuwait have increased since the Iran war, further depleting the Persian Gulf's governance capacity; some are experiencing displacement after having their citizenship revoked. In the long run, a diverse resource market in the Persian Gulf cannot function fully without a diverse labor market to participate in it. On the other hand, resource-dependent, debt-burdened countries like Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, and Morocco face more structural challenges that complicate the reversal of economic and social devastation. In Iraq, oil infrastructure is under persistent attack, and fuel prices are rapidly rising after a 70 percent slash in electricity imports from Iran, which has deepened preexisting public frustration over unemployment, affordability, and state capacity in managing conflict.
Supply shocks also limit energy availability used to sustain food supply chains and agroproduction, which involve irrigation, refrigeration, and transportation — processes made more costly by rising temperatures and extreme heat waves plaguing the region in the summer. Historically, food insecurity and inflation were significant stimuli for unrest during the Arab Spring; and underdeveloped, conflict-exposed countries, where farmer populations make large contributions to GDP, suffer disproportionately from the consequences of food insecurity. Yemen serves as the region's most severe example of food insecurity that is exacerbated by high displacement rates. Countries like Syria and Palestine are affected to similarly acute degrees. The impact of the US-Iran war on food inflation has eroded purchasing power, lowered demand for higher-value agricultural commodities, and raised input and production costs for farmers. These realities negate the labor opportunities that traditionally exist in farming for displaced populations. The seasonal nature of employment in the agricultural sector, which has become increasingly jeopardized by shorter rainfall and increased drought cycles, further alienates displaced and rural households.
Persian Gulf states, which are highly dependent on food imports for staples like soybeans, vegetable oils, and corn, are also primary exporters of ammonia, urea, and sulfur — fertilizers that farmers in Egypt and Morocco heavily rely on for production. Morocco is one of the Persian Gulf's largest importers of sulfur, a key agricultural fertilizer. Egypt's protracted battle with inflation and indebtedness to foreign grants and loans (to finance delayed megaprojects after a rise in oil prices) has sharpened social grievances among consumers grappling with poverty. Lebanon represents an even more concerning case of debt accumulation and fragile governance delivery systems that are unable to keep up with proliferating displacement, overcrowding shelters, and spreading climate-induced diseases, caused by Israel's escalating military incursions in the south. With 33 percent of Lebanon's GDP dependent on remittances from the Persian Gulf countries, the better-off segments of Lebanon's population are not spared from livelihood uncertainties and government mistrust.
Lastly, the rerouting of humanitarian aid delivery through longer aviation routes — that originally traveled through the Strait of Hormuz — and the global deprioritization of postconflict reconstruction funds by major donors like the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs have pushed socioeconomically fragile and resource-poor states into deeper instability. Humanitarian organizations seeking to help displaced Iranians only have access to a third of the funding required to sustain emergency relief efforts. In Lebanon and Palestine, infrastructure damage by Israel has led to immobility and delays across aid carriers, entrapping would-be aid recipients in a state of displacement. Extreme reliance on international aid and the absence of a framework for regional integration and cooperation in response to the Iran war will only compound MENA governments' struggles in coping with resource insecurity and displacement in a context of mounting conflict and climate stressors.

Family members gather their belongings after an air strike on an apartment block in Tehran, Iran, on March 12, 2026.
ALAA AL MARJANI/REUTERS

A chef lights a fire with wood and coal to prepare food for his restaurant following a regional gas shortage in Guwahati, India, on March 19, 2026.
ANUPAM NATH/AP

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What next? pressing policy decisions

The Iran war has had immediate consequences for global geopolitics, economic growth, human security, and energy markets. It also has a climate vulnerability dimension. Understanding the environmental and climate fallout of the conflict can help policymakers identify how to minimize its potential consequences. It can also help observers assess the extent to which desalination plants in Iran or cultivated land in Lebanon are being prioritized as common targets of military strategy, against a background of the logic of war increasingly colliding with the logic of climate vulnerability. And at the same time, it can help countries that are concerned about a new migration wave in the Middle East — like the one that followed the Syrian War — think about how to prevent such a wave, or at least prepare for it.
The Iran conflict has made clear that war and climate change interact in dangerous ways, amplifying negative impacts on societies and economies with both short- and long-term consequences. Policymakers who seek to alleviate these harms should no longer silo their responses to conflict and to climate. The single most important action that could address this threat-multiplying relationship is to cease hostilities and end the conflict permanently. In the meantime, policymakers must integrate climate and environmental vulnerability outputs into security and military assessments, to better understand the impact of conflict on populations, governance, and military capacities. Such integration would require a range of actions, such as analyzing how rapid- and slow-onset events that undermine rural livelihoods or increase water and food insecurity interact with military tactics, or considering how military personnel on the front lines respond to climate impacts. Additionally, to prevent or minimize human suffering, policymakers must invest in adaptation and resilience so that their societies are better equipped to respond to climate shocks, including those exacerbated by conflict. This would lead to more resilient populations, less easily exploited by military tactics that build impact via climate and environmental vulnerabilities. And to address the displacement challenges brought about by both climate and conflict, policymakers should prioritize cost-effective interventions and financial support for climate mobility action, such as disaster preparedness and response or planned relocations. Finally, policymakers and civil society actors should take advantage of this moment of policy plasticity to localize energy and food systems and increase investment in renewable sources of energy that are less vulnerable to geopolitical impacts. Such energy efficiency investments and increase in renewables in China and Spain, for instance, have made those countries less vulnerable to the energy impacts of the war.
These policies offer opportunities for cost-effective interventions that can support people — especially the most socioeconomically vulnerable populations — as they experience climate impacts, including those exacerbated by conflict. Although the Persian Gulf has struggled with developing a coordinated approach to the climate and energy crises, the war presents a new opportunity for countries in the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East to strengthen their adaptive resilience through more integrated clean energy and water infrastructures.

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