EDA WORKING PAPER

Executive Summary

Environmental Security:
Addressing Water and Climate Change Risks in the UAE

Dr Mari Luomi

Senior Research Fellow, Emirates Diplomatic Academy

- Environmental change, degradation and scarcity can in many ways contribute to conflict or insecurity at both national and human levels. Conversely, conflict can have negative impacts on the environment. However, the fact that environmental change generally interacts with a variety of socioeconomic factors complicates addressing and mitigating related security threats and risks.

- When examining environmental change and its security implications, it is important to point out certain general characteristics. These include: the influence of the human factor (human actions are often the root cause of environmental change.); the transboundary nature of environmental challenges and their uneven distributional impacts; and low prioritisation of environmental security challenges related to other policy issues.

- There is an ongoing debate about the 'securitisation' of the environment, namely treating environmental challenges as existential threats, which may result in changes in the dynamics of policymaking, instruments utilised and actors involved.

- Critics have worried in particular that securitisation would lead to militarisation of the approach to environmental challenges. They argue that, while a military approach may work in the short term, its efficiency decreases over time given the high number of interacting variables.

- Given the characteristics of environmental security challenges, many are of the view that achieving environmental security requires solutions that are based on collaboration among various stakeholders, for example 'environmental peacebuilding'. Many also advocate for solutions that simultaneously target a variety of underlying and interacting factors that may be aggravating the security impacts of environmental change. Another way to conceptualise environmental security issues is through the lens of risk, which can help placing them in a broader policy context.

- Countries in the Middle East have very different levels of vulnerability to environmental security threats. Generally, poorer countries (due to financial, technological and capacity constraints) and countries that suffer from conflict are the most affected. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), given its high-income status and its high technological and institutional capabilities, can be considered among the more resilient countries in the region to environmental security threats.

- There are no standardised ways to holistically measure environmental security threats. The UAE's environmental performance overall is close to the average of the MENA region, which as a whole suffers from a number of structural and human-induced environmental problems. Major challenges for the UAE remain in the areas of greenhouse gas emissions, resource consumption levels, fish stocks, waste and air pollution.

- As the Middle East in general, water scarcity and climate change arguably pose the greatest environmental threats and risks to the UAE. In terms of water, the main challenge will be securing water supply for a growing population. Climate change, in turn, will create security risks both directly and indirectly, as its negative impacts are projected to become increasingly intense and frequent as a result of rising global average temperatures.

- The UAE has some of the most progressive environmental policy frameworks in the region. It has recently launched a national water security strategy and a long-term climate change policy framework. There are no major examples of the UAE securitising environmental challenges, which are mostly addressed through environmental policy and governance. Going forward, however, water security (the security of desalinated water supply particularly) and climate change are likely to push the UAE and other countries in the region to actively decide on how to incorporate the security dimensions of climate change (and environmental scarcity, degradation and change more broadly) into a functional regional governance framework, which is yet to emerge.

- This working paper concludes with suggested actions for the UAE government at the domestic, regional and global levels on how to enhance environmental security, particularly with regards to water scarcity and climate change.