

Qatar set to host major climate talks

November 22 2012, by Michael Casey



In this Sunday, Jan. 16, 2011 file photo, the 45 meter height Wind Tower brings upper level wind to the public square at the Masdar Institute campus as a part of Masdar City in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Hosting the climate talks is the latest bid by Qatar to flex its muscles on the international stage, following its successful bid to host the 2022 World Cup and its backing of Libyan and Syrian rebels. (AP Photo/Kamran Jebreili, File)

(AP)—When the tiny desert nation of Qatar was chosen to host the latest round of United Nations climate change negotiations, environmentalists were stunned.

Talks were already in trouble, and now the high-level discussions were moving to a member of OPEC that had shown little interest in [climate change](#) and appointed a former oil minister to lead the negotiations, which start Monday. The country's economic boom, driven by vast oil and [gas reserves](#), has led to free electricity for citizens and an abundance of gas-guzzling SUVs in the capital, Doha. It has also made Qatar the world's highest per capita carbon dioxide emitter.

"Nongovernment organizations had mixed feelings about it," said Wael Hmaidan, a Lebanese activist who is director of the Climate Action Network. "Some were very concerned and found it a threat knowing that Qatar has not been engaged in the climate change negotiations, while others found it an opportunity to get the climate debate higher on the political agenda of the region."

Activists complain Qatar has shown little leadership so far and been much less transparent than previous hosts of the annual [climate conference](#).

Among the most vocal has been [advocacy group](#) Avaaz, which asserts that "having one of the OPEC leaders in charge of climate talks is like asking Dracula to look after a [blood bank](#)." It also criticized Qatari leaders for attending a big oil conference just ahead of the talks, a sign its priorities may be misplaced.

But publicly, delegates have been careful to avoid criticizing the emirate. The top United Nations climate official said preparations are on track.

"I'm not concerned," said Christiana Figueres, the executive secretary of the United Nations Climate Change secretariat. "We are very grateful. Qatar not only offered, but literally fought for the opportunity and privilege of hosting."

"We have been impressed with work of the Qatar team and how they have brought themselves very quickly up to speed with the complexity of the issues," she said.

Hosting the conference is part of the tiny Gulf nation's campaign to project itself as a powerhouse on the world stage, after winning the bid to host the 2022 World Cup and backing rebellions in Libya and Syria.

It also offers the ruling family an opportunity to change perceptions about a region that in the past has seemed concerned only with protecting its vast oil and gas reserves from the impact of any climate agreement.

Qatar and its Persian Gulf neighbors insist that portrayal is outdated.

The United Arab Emirates has, for example, endorsed the extension of the Kyoto Protocol, which limits the greenhouse emissions of industrialized countries. It was also the first Gulf nation to sign on to the Copenhagen Accord supporting a long-term deal to reign in emissions.

Even Saudi Arabia, which in the past led opposition to a global agreement capping greenhouse gas emissions, has moderated its position and shaken up its negotiating team.

Leaders in the Gulf also are more vocally acknowledging the impact of climate change, endorsing the science that shows emissions are on rise and recognizing they are not immune to the impact of global warming. They also are promising to do their part to combat it.

"I describe Qatar as the epicenter of climate change. There is no water, no food. It's barren desert," said Fahad Bin Mohammed al-Attiya, chairman of Doha's COP18 organizing committee. "Any problems to harvest season or productivity outside the Gulf would immediately

impact our ability to have access to food at reasonable global prices."

Qatar and the UAE have rolled out green building codes in an effort to shift away from energy-wasting high-rises that dominate the skyline. Qatar says it will produce 20 percent of its energy from renewables by 2024, while Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE have announced plans to invest heavily in solar power.

The UAE, which has set a target to generate 7 percent of its electricity from renewables by 2020, is home to the International Renewable Energy Agency and the government-run Masdar Institute, which has built the first phase of a pre-planned city powered by renewable sources. The UAE has also announced plans to build four nuclear reactors, the first of which should be operational by 2017.

"We don't want to continue to be seen as only an exporter of oil through barrels or gas through pipelines," said Sultan Ahmed al-Jaber, the chief executive officer of Masdar and UAE's Special Envoy for Energy and Climate Change.

"Our approach should be an energy mix approach where oil and gas continues to play a role, nuclear continues to play a catalytic role but the only energy source that will grow over time will be renewable energy," he said. "That is simply because the technology is maturing and the world better recognizes the need for advancing this technology."

Activists, though, want to see Gulf countries go further at the [climate talks](#).

Former Irish President Mary Robinson said they should commit to voluntary emissions targets, like former conference host Mexico did. Gulf nations' total emissions are a fraction of China's and the United States', but setting targets would help inspire others to take action.

"Leadership of the Gulf countries is very important" she said at a meeting addressing climate change in Dubai.

Activists say they also could do more to cut fuel subsidies that make bottled water more expensive than gasoline in many Gulf countries, policies partly enacted to keep the lid on political dissent.

Others have called on the Gulf—which has some of the world's highest per capita incomes thanks to its vast petrodollars—to contribute to the U.N.'s Green Climate Fund. The fund aims to channel \$100 billion annually by 2020 to aid poor countries. So far, Gulf countries have contributed nothing.

"Qatar has a GDP per capita which is three times ours in Europe," EU Climate Commissioner Connie Hedegaard told The Associated Press. "Should ... also the Qataris come up with some financing? So we have tried to encourage them. I don't know what the response will be, but let's see."

Expectations are also high that the Gulf countries will play a more productive and public role in negotiations, after years in which only the UAE countered Saudi Arabia's obstructionist tactics and its widely-ridiculed demands that OPEC members be compensated for loss of oil revenues in any agreement—a move criticized by impoverished nations who would be forced to compete with the world's top oil producer for aid.

Those views have been moderated, al-Attiya said, as Gulf countries recognize efforts to diversify their economies are not as difficult and costly as they once seemed. Still, Gulf countries led by Saudi Arabia are demanding measures in any agreement that would assist them in shifting away from fossil fuels.

The Gulf countries want to have the right to use a diversity of energy sources, including both fossil fuels and renewables, said al-Attiya.

"It's not an excuse," al-Attiya said. "Every country wants that right, provided that right to diversify is governed by rules that say, for instance, you are not going to diversify at the expense of causing more damage to the environment."

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