

COP28: How war and militarisation fuel the climate crisis

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At the UN climate summit in Dubai, experts and activists are sounding the alarm on the devastating toll of rampant militarisation on our planet, and why Israel's war on Gaza is a climate justice issue.

The spectre of the war on Gaza looms over the [UN climate summit, COP28](#), currently underway in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Walking around the conference among delegates from around the world in formal attire and traditional dress, it is not rare to see someone wearing the chequered black and white kuffiyeh, a symbol of solidarity with Palestine.

Just 2,400 kilometres away, Israel continues its [deadly war on Gaza](#). In two months, more than 17,000 Palestinians have been killed, including over 7,000 children. Thousands more remain trapped under the rubble. In the [West Bank](#), escalating Israeli violence has killed at least 250 Palestinians.

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Activists have brought the Palestinian cause to COP28, using [demonstrations](#) and panels to call for a permanent ceasefire and drawing connections between the fight for climate justice and the fight against Israel's 75-year-long occupation of Palestinian land.

But Israel's war on Gaza remains absent from any official agenda or negotiations taking place at the summit, as do conversations about the devastating impact of militarisation on the global climate.

Global polluters

In recent years, climate experts and activists have increasingly emphasised the nexus between militarism and climate change and called for demilitarisation as a key priority in addressing the [unfolding climate crisis](#) facing our planet.

"The emissions story is wrapped up inside another story, and that is runaway military spending," said Deborah Burton, founder of the social justice co-operative Tipping Point North South, on a panel titled 'Acting on military spending and military emissions'.

Between 2010 and 2020, conflicts around the world almost doubled from 30 to 56, and with them, the industry of war has blossomed. War machines, military exercises,

and defence infrastructures demand enormous quantities of natural resources and contribute significantly to climate breakdown.

[Studies show](#) that global militaries are the world's biggest industrial polluters, contributing 2,750 million tonnes of carbon dioxide, or 5.5% of all greenhouse gas emissions.

This is more than all 52 countries in the African continent combined, and almost three times as much as the civil aviation industry. And this figure does not include emissions generated from the conflict itself.

There is also a strong correlation between a country's military spending and the amount of emissions it produces, with wealthier nations who bear the burden of responsibility for the climate crisis spending 30 times more on financing their military than on tackling climate change.

Despite ample evidence showing that militarisation accelerates climate breakdown, global military spending reached an all-time high of \$2.24 trillion in 2022, with the 31 NATO states alone accounting for over half of this value.

And with war in Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine and many more, this is set to continue rising.

The true environmental cost of war remains obscured, with military emissions reporting left out of the Kyoto Protocol in 1992 and left as voluntary under the Paris Agreement, after pressure from the US.

Gaza's climate catastrophe

For the first time ever, the COP28 summit dedicated the entirety of Day 4 to 'Relief, Recovery and Peace', highlighting the intersection of climate change and conflict.

That same day, on Sunday 3rd of December, Israel [killed](#) more than 700 Palestinians in Gaza in 24 hours, ramping up its attacks just days after the temporary ceasefire expired.

The trail of destruction wrought by Israel's war on Gaza extends far beyond the immediate human casualties.

The 16-year siege and successive military assaults on the Strip have led to long-term [environmental degradation](#), severe pollution, and an intractable public health crisis. Before the current bombardment, 96% of water in Gaza was already considered unfit for human consumption.

The current Israeli bombing has destroyed infrastructure and agricultural land, with 60% of housing units flattened. Toxic smoke and particles from munitions and debris are polluting the air, soil and water.

Israel has also dropped [white phosphorus](#) bombs on Gaza and south Lebanon, a highly toxic chemical that causes severe burns and can seep deep into the soil and water systems, remaining there for many years.

What has been most concerning has been “the speed at which this level of destruction was accomplished,” said Dr Neta Crawford, professor at Oxford University and co-founder of the Cost of War project.

“It often takes years to unfold this kind of destruction,” she said, speaking to *The New Arab* at COP28.

In just the first month, Israel dropped more than 25,000 tonnes of explosives on the Gaza Strip, the equivalent of two nuclear bombs, according to [EuroMed Human Rights Monitor](#).

Activists and climate experts attending COP28 have raised the alarm that Gaza’s 2.3 million residents are now increasingly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, in a region that is already warming twice as fast as the global average.

“If we’re going to be talking about justice, it’s very important to be intersectional. And we cannot talk about preserving the environment if we’re not going to be talking about preserving life,” Rania Harrara, founder of the Young Arab Feminist Coalition and member of the WGC MENA Feminist Taskforce, explained to *The New Arab*.

“How are we going to be sitting here talking about water scarcity or water preservation if we have human beings dying because of poisoning of this water, and of the pollution caused by the bombing?” asked the youth activist, who has been at the forefront of organising efforts for Palestine at COP28.

For Harrara, while it is important to emphasise that what’s happening in Gaza and across Palestine is a [climate justice issue](#), it should not be a prerequisite to have a space in the movement.

“What disappointed me is that in the climate sphere, people tend to listen to us more when we explain to them the intersection between climate justice and Palestine... like they care more about the land than humans. But there’s no land without us,” she said.

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A cycle of profit

Analysts say that another way militarisation is accelerating climate breakdown is by diverting money and funds away from climate finance and green initiatives.

Climate financing has been a key issue at this year’s summit, with a landmark agreement to mobilise a [Loss and Damage fund](#) reached on the first day.

So far, \$700 million has been pledged to the fund to help climate-vulnerable countries, just a fraction of the \$100 billion per year pledged in the Paris Agreement and far short of the estimated \$387 billion per year needed to finance climate adaptation. Activists say military spending should be diverted to reach this target.

The US, the world’s biggest polluter and richest country has come under particular scrutiny for only pledging \$17.5 million to the fund.

Meanwhile, a bill to provide Israel with an additional \$14.5 billion in military aid, in addition to the \$3.8 billion it already receives every year, passed the US House of Representatives and is currently being debated in the Senate.

As one speaker at COP28 put it: “Why is there money for war but never for climate reparations, for protecting people and the planet?”

This year, NATO members committed to invest 2% of their annual GDP to military spending. This would mean an additional \$2.57 trillion by 2028. The industry around militarisation remains extremely profitable, particularly as global instability rises.

The US, which is by far the largest arms exporter with 40% of sales worldwide, sold [\\$205.6 billion](#) worth of military equipment to foreign markets in 2022, an increase of 49% from the previous year.

“Demilitarisation is not on the agenda because it brings them so much profit, they're not willing to risk anything that touches their pockets,” said Harrara.

Many of these military equipment sales go to governments in countries that are already on the frontlines of the climate crisis, fuelling political instability and militarisation that compound environmental threats.

In some cases, escalating climate crises can drive more instability, creating a vicious cycle that lines the pockets of the military and arms industry. But Dr Crawford warns against this narrative often pushed by the industry, which implies that climate change is a security threat requiring a militarised response.

“Climate change is fuelled by armed conflict. But it's not the case that climate change necessarily causes armed conflict,” she said.

“The causes of any conflict are really complicated. Even if you believe that climate change will cause war, then what you want to do is reduce emissions to reduce the impact of warming. That's the first step. And then the second step is to invest in other ways of resolving conflicts, other than military force, so you invest in dialogue and diplomacy, in the resilience of communities, in helping governments make investments in renewables.”

“You don't wait for climate change to have the impacts that you think might lead to conflict,” Dr Crawford said.

With time running out to avoid climate catastrophe, it is becoming increasingly difficult for UN climate change talks to continue to ignore the devastating effects of rampant militarisation on both human life and our environment.

The New Arab will have continuous coverage of COP28 from Dubai. [Click here](#) for more

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