

MARKING THE BEGINNING OF A GREEN ERA

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

A picture taken with a drone shows palm trees in al-Ula, Saudi Arabia on April 8, 2021. | Photo Credit: [REUTERS](#)

One of the lessons learned from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is the need for collective action among members of the international community to effectively address global challenges such as pandemics and climate change. The pandemic has created an unprecedented crisis that demands an exceptional global response. Even as countries rightly continue to focus on tackling the immediate health emergency, the need is to have a long-term vision to build a climate-resilient global economy for the future.

Ambition alone cannot attain goals. Good results depend on our ability to act. That is precisely what defines the two recent initiatives launched by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, Deputy Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, to combat the threat of climate change — the ‘Saudi Green Initiative’ and the ‘Middle East Green Initiative’.

In fact, one of the main pillars of the Saudi G20 presidency was to “safeguard the planet”. The Saudi leadership of the summit highlighted how climate change had negatively impacted the planet, people’s lives and their well-being. The G20 introduced initiatives like establishing a Global Coral Reef Research and Development Accelerator Platform to accelerate scientific knowledge and technology development in support of coral reef survival, conservation, resilience, adaptation and restoration. G20 leaders also acknowledged the Circular Carbon Economy (CCE) Platform as a tool towards affordable, reliable, and secure energy and economic growth.

Saudi Arabia is committed to lead regional efforts to address climate change and has been making steady progress in this direction.

The Saudi Green Initiative aims to raise the vegetation cover, reduce carbon emissions, combat pollution and land degradation, and preserve marine life. As part of the initiative, 10 billion trees will be planted in the Kingdom. It aims to reduce carbon emissions by more than 4% of global contributions, through a renewable energy programme that will generate 50% of Saudi’s energy from renewables by 2030. With the understanding that the need of the hour is to do more than enough, Saudi Arabia is working towards raising the percentage of its protected areas to more than 30% of its total land area, representing roughly 6,00,000 sq km, exceeding the global target of 17%.

As part of the Middle East Green initiative, Saudi Arabia will work with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and regional partners to plant an additional 40 billion trees in the West Asian region. It represents 5% of the global target of planting one trillion trees and reducing 2.5% of global carbon levels. Saudi Arabia has been sharing its expertise and know-how with its neighbouring countries to reduce carbon emissions resulting from hydrocarbon production in the region by 60% and globally by 10%.

Saudi Arabia currently operates the largest carbon capture and utilisation plant in the world, turning half a million tonnes of CO₂ annually into products such as fertilizers and methanol. It also operates one of the region’s most advanced CO₂-enhanced oil recovery plants that captures and stores 8,00,000 tonnes of CO₂ annually. Plans are afoot to deploy additional carbon capture, utilisation and storage infrastructure. Saudi Arabia believes that nature-based

solutions will play an important role in removing carbon as part of the CCE. We have already joined hands in February 2019 with India when Saudi Arabia joined the International Solar Alliance during the Crown Prince's state visit to the country, hence promoting cooperation in the renewable energy sector. Later that year, when the Indian Prime Minister visited Saudi Arabia, several MoUs and agreements in key sectors including renewable energy were signed.

To ensure momentum and continuity, Saudi Arabia will convene an annual summit called the Middle East Green Initiative which will host leaders from the government, scientists and environmentalists to discuss the details of implementation. The aim is start implementing the plan in the fourth quarter of this year and continue for the next two decades. Saudi Arabia also recognises the scarcity of financial resources to irrigate the terrain. Therefore, in partnership with participating countries, innovative methods will be researched to irrigate from treated water, cloud seeding and other purpose-driven solutions such as planting native trees which requires support for three years to grow and will then be able to survive on their own with natural irrigation.

In 2016, the Crown Prince unveiled Vision 2030, a comprehensive road map to improve the quality of life of the citizens of the country. As part of this, Saudi Arabia carried out a comprehensive restructuring of the environmental sector and established the Environmental Special Forces in 2019. With NEOM and The Line, Saudi Arabia has already redefined the idea of sustainable habitats. NEOM's location also gives Saudi Arabia many advantages in the field of hydrogen production. According to the World Bank, for every dollar invested in resilient infrastructure, \$4 in benefits are generated. With the Public Investment Fund recently pumping in \$15 billion in the NEOM project and another \$10 billion in renewable and solar energy projects, it is clear that the pandemic has only strengthened Saudi Arabia's resolve to realise the goals of Vision 2030 and become one of the major producers of renewable energy with a capacity to generate 9.5 GW by 2023.

Our close friend and strategic partner India has also made remarkable commitments to tackle climate change and is on track to achieve its Paris Agreement targets. India's renewable energy capacity is the fourth largest in the world. India has an ambitious target of achieving 450 gigawatts of renewable energy capacity by 2030. We admire India's endeavour to build a safe and clean environment for future generations.

Saudi Arabia hopes that the launch of the Saudi Green Initiative and the Middle East Green Initiative marks the beginning of a green era and that these initiatives provide momentum to other countries to unify their efforts to save our planet.

Saud Mohammed Al-Sati is Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to India

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