

KBLG's Hessam Kalantar: The UAE is the “Perfect” Venue for COP28

The decision to hold the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference, also known as COP28, in Dubai, UAE has been met with scrutiny, mostly from Western organizations, including criticism that the conference will be held in one of the world's largest oil-producing countries and will be headed by Sultan Al-Jaber, CEO of UAE state-owned oil company ADNOC. Certain of these organizations allege that Al-Jaber's roles as president-designate of COP28 and oil executive present a conflict of interest and portray it as the fossil fuel industry's hijacking of the UN's climate talks.

However, Hessam Kalantar, founder and managing partner of Kalantar Business Law Group (KBLG), a boutique Abu Dhabi corporate law firm, says that Dubai is a strategically sensible host for COP28, and that most of this type of criticism is suggestive of “virtue signaling” by western powers. For one thing, COP events have in the past been hosted by hydrocarbon producing countries. Moreover, fossil fuel companies were formerly excluded from intergovernmental climate discussions, which Kalantar believes was counterproductive. Oil, coal and natural gas have, after all, been powering economies for over 150 years, and currently supply about 80% of the world's energy. This statistic must change, and quickly, but that requires big oil to be enticed to meaningfully engage, and become the “energy transition” enablers that they are already (and sometimes too hastily) calling themselves.

“We need to be realistic – we can't just switch off the oil taps overnight. The oil producers need to be part of this conversation. While they may have been a big part of the problem, they are also very much part of the solution,” Kalantar says. “The oil companies are needed to fund the innovation necessary to develop alternative energy sources at scale. This is especially important for developing countries, which, unlike developed countries, have not had the time or the funding to industrialize while simultaneously exploring the use of low carbon fuels.”

Despite being a major oil-producing nation, the UAE has made significant strides towards sustainable energy. Masdar is a state-owned renewable energy company, also chaired by al-Jaber, that was established in 2006, predating many other countries' renewable initiatives.

Dubai is also located strategically, as it is a bridge between East/West and North/South, not just physically, but also culturally and symbolically. The UAE has vibrant ties with various countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, and, according to Kalantar, these ties are conducive to fostering conversations where all stakeholders have a seat at the table and the right to be heard.

Furthermore, the Middle East today has a louder voice than ever before, in part because it is attracting larger inflows of investment and encouraging the adoption of a knowledge based economy focused on technology and services such as education and healthcare. Kalantar adds that the Middle East has the ability to host important global events that make their mark on history, including recently Expo 2020 in Dubai and the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

According to scientists, the Middle East is one of the global regions that will be disproportionately impacted by climate change. The already high temperatures are rising and the region faces the constant threat of desertification and water deficiency.

Kalantar adds that COP28 will bring an inflow of intergovernmental climate expertise to the UAE. However, the concern is that, as with many conferences of this sort, all the talk, interest, and enthusiasm may fade away after COP28 is over and the delegates and experts have returned home. Thus, he believes it is important to cultivate that know-how locally, and ensure that there will be a repository of expertise to help deploy climate solutions that are customized for the geography and conditions of the Gulf nations.



As part of COP28, the UN will publish the first two-year assessment of global progress to slow down climate change, also known as the global stocktake. The world is set to fail to achieve the benchmarks set by the 2015 Paris Agreement, and Al-Jaber has urged nations to admit their failures in meeting the climate agenda.

Among KBLG's goals is to support transactions whereby private sector involvement in climate solutions is incentivized and rewarded by government, because governments alone cannot solve these problems. KBLG is advising on sustainable finance transactions, and the firm is very keen to expand this competence and become advocates for local sustainable frameworks and climate regulation.

“The emergency that is the climate crisis has instilled a sense of purpose in us as both lawyers and citizens. We are not alone in this passion and we owe it largely to the significant strides that are now being taken in our own part of the world, particularly the UAE, to pass regulations, such as Abu Dhabi Global Market's recently enacted sustainable finance framework, and to fund innovations such as green hydrogen,” said Kalantar.

With all that is already underway in the UAE to battle climate change, it does seem that the UAE, including its energy producers, are well placed to lead the dialogue at COP28.