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What the GCC Expects from the Upcoming COP31 Climate Talks

Dr. Mohamed Abdelraouf

November 2026

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COP31, scheduled for November 9-20, 2026, in the Mediterranean hub of Antalya, Turkey, marks a potential turning point in global climate governance. Co-hosted under a unique dual arrangement where Turkey holds the official COP Presidency and Action Agenda while Australia leads the formal negotiations, the summit shifts the global focus from debating targets to driving real-world implementation.

The critical operational and structural differences that set COP31 apart from past COPs include:

- Historically, a single nation handles both the physical hosting duties and the political steering of the negotiations. While exceptions occurred in the past due to crises (e.g., COP23 held in Bonn but presided over by Fiji due to logistical limitations, or COP25 shifting to Spain due to the civil unrest in Chile), COP31 is the first summit in the history of the UNFCCC where a split leadership format was planned by a voluntary consensus.

- Usually, the host nation organizes a smaller "Pre-COP" ministerial meeting locally to prepare for the main event. For COP31, Australia and Turkey compromised by moving the Pre-COP to the South Pacific (convening in Fiji and Tuvalu). This structural shift was designed explicitly to amplify the voices of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and keep Pacific climate vulnerabilities central to the text heading into the Antalya summit.

- While landmark conferences like COP21 (Paris Agreement) or COP26 (Glasgow Pact) focused heavily on drafting new global frameworks, COP31 has been framed as the "COP of the Future" and the "Global Implementation Accelerator." Following the conclusion of the first global stock-take cycle, the primary focus in Antalya is not on inventing new mechanisms, but on evaluating the submission of updated 2035 Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and establishing strict metrics to convert existing pledges into measurable real-world outcomes.

What is on the Table at COP31?

The 2035 Climate Targets (NDCs): Nations are under pressure to submit and evaluate updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) aimed at keeping global warming within 1.5°C.

The "35-by-35" Electrification Pledge: A flagship proposal by the Turkey Presidency aiming to increase electricity's share of global final energy consumption to 35% by 2035.

Antalya Compact for Energy Efficient Buildings: A newly launched framework targeting building energy intensity and structural efficiency.

Antalya AI Pledge: A collaborative initiative with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) to curb the environmental footprint of artificial intelligence while harnessing tech for climate modeling.

Climate Finance and Adaptation: Following past consensus building, debates center on operationalizing finance goals, delivering grants over loans for frontline nations, and advancing the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA).

Water Scarcity, Oceans, and Zero Waste: Special thematic days focus heavily on regional pressures, including Mediterranean and Middle Eastern water security, marine biodiversity, and circular economy models.

Why COP31 Matters for GCC Countries

For the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain—Antalya represents a critical diplomatic and economic arena. As part of navigating the post-oil economic transition, GCC economies are deep into national diversification strategies such as Saudi Vision 2030 or UAE Net Zero 2050. COP31's emphasis on clean energy scaling, grid electrification, and green industrialization directly interfaces with Gulf investments in solar, hydrogen, and carbon capture.

In relation to amplifying regional climate realities such as heat and water scarcity, the Middle East is warming at nearly twice the global average, facing acute water stress and extreme heatwaves. Hosting COP31 just north of the region in Antalya places local adaptation priorities, water governance, and resilient urban planning high on the Mediterranean-MENA cross-regional dialogue.

On the topic of balancing fossil fuel realities with global diplomacy, the major hydrocarbon producers of the GCC face mounting international scrutiny over phase-out timelines and coal/gas supply chains. The GCC states will have to closely monitor how the Turkey-Australia dual presidency handles the transition mechanics, carbon pricing, and carbon offset credentials in this regard.

In addition, in the field of shaping green finance and cross-border partnerships, Turkey's geographic and strategic bridge between Europe and the Middle East offers GCC sovereign wealth funds and renewable energy entities a venue to forge bilateral clean-tech, grid-interconnection, and sustainable infrastructure deals.

Taken together, for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, COP31 serves as a critical strategic arena to defend their economic interests while positioning themselves as leaders in the global energy transition. As an "implementation COP" tasked with operationalizing the transition away from fossil fuels initiated at COP28 in Dubai, the summit directly pressures Gulf states to align their national net-zero roadmaps with stricter international metrics.

Simultaneously, it offers a high-stakes platform for the GCC to leverage its massive sovereign wealth and state-backed clean energy champions (like Masdar and ACWA Power) to export green technologies and shape global carbon market frameworks. In short, the GCC countries can utilize COP31 to demonstrate that fossil-fuel-driven revenues can effectively fund viable circular carbon economies and sustainable, diversified growth models.

Dr. Mohamed Abdelraouf is the Director of the Environmental Security and Sustainability Research Program at the Gulf Research Center.

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مركز الخليج للأبحاث
المعرفة للجميع



Gulf Research Center Riyadh

Unit FN11A
King Faisal Foundation
North Tower
King Fahd Branch Rd
Al Olaya Riyadh 12212
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 112112567
Email: info@grc.net



Gulf Research Center Jeddah

19 Rayat Alitihad Street
P.O. Box 2134
Jeddah 21451
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 12 6511999
Fax: +966 12 6531375
Email: info@grc.net



Gulf Research Center Foundation

Avenue de France 23
1202 Geneva
Switzerland
Tel: +41227162730
Email: info@grc.net



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge

University of Cambridge
Sidgwick Avenue,
Cambridge CB3 9DA
United Kingdom
Tel:+44-1223-760758
Fax:+44-1223-335110



Gulf Research Center Foundation Brussels

4th Floor
Avenue de
Cortenbergh 89
1000 Brussels
Belgium
grcb@grc.net
+32 2 251 41 64