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Opinion paper

Convergence and conflict with the 'National Interest': Why Israel abandoned its climate policy

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HIGHLIGHTS

- In 2013 Israel defunded its climate policy despite cost and efficiency savings.
- Initially climate policy converged with national interests: 'climate bandwagoning'.
- Deepwater natural gas finds in Israeli waters ended renewable energy ambitions.
- Advocates failed to securitise 'climate change' which would have raised its profile.
- Policy failure reflects both national idiosyncrasies and wider international trends.

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how Israel abandoned its climate policy through the prism of the country's evolving energy profile, most importantly the 2009 discovery of huge natural gas reserves in Israel's Mediterranean exclusive zone. The article outlines five phases of Israeli political engagement with climate change from 1992 until 2013 when the National GHG Emissions Reduction Plan was defunded. Israel was motivated to develop its climate policy by international norms: OECD membership and the 2009 UN Summit in Copenhagen. Although the eventual Plan may not have significantly reduced Israel's emissions, it contained immediate cost-effective, energy efficiency measures. Despite rhetorical support for renewable energy, in practice, most Israeli leaders consistently perceive ensuring supply of fossil fuels as the best means to achieve energy security. The gas finds thus effectively ended a potentially significant switch towards renewable energy production. The development of commercially competitive Israeli renewable energy technology may change this prevailing economic calculus alongside renewed international and domestic leadership and a resolution of the region's conflicts. Although Israel's political circumstances are idiosyncratic, the dynamics shaping its climate policy reflect wider trends such as competing economic priorities and failure to consider long term energy security.

1. Introduction

Although technologies and strategies that can dramatically decrease greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions have been identified, recent years have seen a marked retreat in national and international efforts to address climate change (Brown, 2014). Israel has been a conscientious participant in other international environmental efforts, so its lackadaisical attitude to ghg reduction reflects this recent trend of disengagement (Tal, 2002). Israel's political circumstances may be idiosyncratic, but the dynamics shaping its climate policy's development and subsequent abandonment are nevertheless instructive.

Since climate change emerged as a global priority at the 1992 United Nations 'Earth summit' in Rio, Israel has made only symbolic efforts to counter ever-increasing growth in local emissions. the figures speak for themselves: Between 1996 and 2012, Israel's GHG emissions rose by 21 percent to 80 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent ($MtCO_2eq$) (ICBS, 2012; Ayalon et al., 2014). for a brief period around the 2009 Copenhagen Conference of the Parties (Cop15) TO THE United Nations Framework Convention ON Climate Change (UNCFCC) there was a surge of local interest especially in the potential for renewable energy and in November 2010 the government announced a National GHG Emissions Reduction Plan (Michaels and Alpert, 2013). As a result some modest climate policy measures were introduced but these efforts were ultimately scuttled when a government funding crisis left the policy defunded (Udasin, 2013).

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This article outlines five phases of Israeli political engagement with climate change: from 1992 until the abandonment of the climate policy. It explores this against the backdrop of Israel's search for energy security and its changing energy profile, notably the 2009 discovery of huge natural gas reserves in Israel's Mediterranean exclusive zone.

Similar to many other countries, the story of Israel's climate policy reflects competing economic priorities and the wider international hesitation to transition to a low-carbon economy. The article also highlights tensions particularly evident in Israeli policymaking. First, few government decisions are actually implemented unless they are of particular importance to the bureaucracy (Nachmias and Arbel-Gantz, 2006). Second, although 'national security' overrides other policy concerns, the Israeli government and public have consistently failed to perceive climate change as a 'security' issue (Horowitz and Lissak, 1989; de-Shalit and Talias, 1994). Securing the supply of fossil fuels is, however, afforded top priority as a critical security issue (Shaffer, 2011). Third, while there was little actual concern about climate change, in 2009–2010a broad range of political interests attempted to promote their agendas by strategically linking their issue with climate change, a process known as 'climate bandwagoning' (Jinnah, 2011). In subsequent years, this coalition of interests shifted, making robust climate policy a liability.

2. Observed and predicted climate change in Israel

Israel's climatological community agree that the Eastern Mediterranean region is experiencing a warming trend: summers are warmer with an increase in the number and duration of hot summer days and in relative humidity. Some areas of the country have also experienced significantly decreased rainfall (Michaels and Alpert, 2013; ICCIC, 2011). The country suffered a severe drought from 2005 to 2012 consistent with global trends that show that the ten warmest years on record all occurred since 2000 (NASA, 2014). These observed changes suggest Israel's climate is entering a new period of uncertainty.

Climate change is likely to influence Israel's water resources, agriculture, bio-diversity and public health (ICCIC, 2011). Predicted sea level rise would also damage Israel's narrow Mediterranean coastal strip, threatening 60 percent of the population, vital infrastructure, a recharge aquifer, coastal ecology and tourism. Concerns about local impacts of climate change were brought home in 2010, when a fire in the Carmel forest raged over 35,000 ha, destroying five million trees, killing 44 people and displacing 17,000. Continued drought and hot summers make Israel's forests particularly vulnerable to such fires in the future (Tal, 2013a).

3. Israel's climate change policy – Phases of Indifference

Israeli policymakers showed little interest in climate change until the OECD accession process began in 2006. A brief retrospective reveals five stages in the country's approach:

3.1. Phase 1: Denial (1992–2000)

When the UN 'Earth Summit' convened in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, Israel was one the few countries without a head of state or even a leading political figure in attendance. As a result of this low profile and the rapid influx of over a million immigrants from the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Israel was recognized as a non-Annex 1 or 'developing' country to the UNFCCC.

This classification reduced Israel's obligations to the international community to: (a) keeping a national GHG emissions inventory and; (b) formulating and implementing a voluntary national mitigation programme. Israel ratified the UNFCCC in 1996 and the Kyoto Protocol in 2004. Israel's Inter-ministerial Committee on Climate Change first convened in 2000 and shortly after submitted the First National Communication on Climate Change' to the UNFCCC.

3.2. Phase 2: Economic opportunism and empty promises (2001–2008)

Israel's emissions grew steadily during the 2000s, driven by an increase in coal-fired electricity, a rise in private kilometres travelled and little official interest in green building and energy efficiency. At this time, Israel's pattern of GHG emissions growth thus resembled 'recently developed countries' like Spain rather than other developed countries (Yanai et al., 2008).

This growth occurred despite the fact that the Israeli government adopted several climate-related resolutions during this period. A 2001 decision to voluntarily reduce GHG emissions (Government Decision 2913) established Israel as a recipient of Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) financing. Israel took advantage of its rapidly developing economy to advertise itself as '*an excellent venue in which to develop CDM projects because although categorized as a developing country under the Kyoto Protocol, it has all the characteristics of developed countries*' (MEP, 2006; 17). By 2011, Israel had registered 22 CDM projects, financed mainly by the UK and Germany estimated to reduce national emissions by 4.2 $MtCO_2eq$ in 2012 (Edwards, 2011).

In December 2008, two parliamentarians proposed Israel's first Climate Bill. Although it failed at the preliminary reading, the Bill precipitated a flurry of ambitious policy pronouncements relating to energy use: the government committed that by 2020 it would reduce national electricity consumption by 20 percent and generate 10 percent of national energy supply from renewable sources (Government Decision 4095/150; Government Decision 4450).

3.3. Phase 3: The OECD accession process (2006–2009)

In 2006 the Israeli government began the accession process to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The OECD requires member countries to be 'like-minded' across a range of issues rather than through binding mechanisms. At that time all OECD countries except Mexico, South Korea and Chile were Annex 1 UNFCCC signatories, with binding emissions reduction targets. OECD membership entailed an expectation that Israel demonstrate meaningful efforts to reduce emissions within a three-year accession period.

In March 2009, Gilad Erdan became Minister for Environmental Protection. Erdan was far more committed to addressing climate change than his predecessors. He employed American management consultancy firm McKinsey & Co. and policy think-tank, the Samuel Neaman Institute to help formulate a climate policy to meet OECD expectations and in anticipation of the UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen later that year.

The 'McKinsey report', published in November 2009, predicted a doubling of Israeli emissions by 2030 under a 'Business As Usual' (BAU) scenario due to its growing population and rising standards of living. It offered a cost-benefit analysis of various emissions reductions measures identifying abatement potential of 45 MtCO2eq a year achievable through switching to low carbon fuel sources and adopting efficiency measures and green building standards. These measures imposed no net cost on the economy by 2030. McKinsey noted that Israel had lower GHG emissions reduction potential than other countries because it lacks heavy industry with limited possibilities for hydroelectric, nuclear, and