

In Paris climate conference coal will still be elephant in the room

Written by Gal Luft

Thursday, 03 December 2015 00:00

Outside the UN General Assembly the Paris Conference of Parties (COP21) will be the largest gathering of world leaders. Such an impressive turnout of 147 heads of state and governments is a remarkable achievement for those who root for a binding global treaty to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. But behind the climate kumbaya lies a painful truth: Many of those leaders will not attend the summit out of concern for the world's changing climate, but rather to ensure that their countries, mostly developing ones, don't end up sacrificed on the altar of climatism.

It is a sad testimony to the human condition that 2 billion people still suffer from energy poverty, having no light to read, no energy to cook a meal and no power to provide clean water. Energy poverty is a damper on global growth as it prevents the poor from elevating themselves economically.

Many climate proponents argue that poverty is partly a result of harsh climate conditions. It is the droughts, floods and storms that exacerbate poverty. Some go even further, linking wars and conflicts, like the Syrian civil war and the attendant mass migration, to climate change. According to this view, if we only cooled the planet slightly, the poor will be spared from all these problems.

However, the reality is that if COP21 leads to a legally binding cap on carbon emissions the developing world could be worse off. The reason is that the workhorse of developing Asia, where most of the world's poor reside, has always been and will continue to be coal.

Coal fires nearly 80 percent of China's power sector. India, where the number of energy poor is larger than the entire US population, uses coal for 60 percent of its power generation. The combined 600 million people of the 10 Southeast Asian countries are also heavily dependent on coal. The region's energy demand is projected to increase 80 percent in the next 20 years, a rise equivalent to Japan's current demand, and three quarters of the newly approved installed power capacity in the region is coal-based.

It is not that Asians particularly like coal. To the contrary, coal is a major source of air pollution which causes numerous health problems. But at the same time coal is vastly cheaper and more plentiful than any other source of baseload electricity. Natural-gas power plants are twice as expensive to construct as coal plants, and natural gas in the region is more than four times as expensive as in the US. Renewables will take decades - if ever - to reach cost parity with coal, and there are problems of reliability.

Rich countries may be able to afford to rid themselves of coal. And this they do. Amber Rudd, the UK's secretary of energy, announced recently that Britain will shut down all of its power plants within a decade. In the US where natural gas prices are extremely low, coal has been under attack for some time. The Obama administration is not only making it impossible to build new coal plants domestically, but it also pressures other countries to deny financing to coal

In Paris climate conference coal will still be elephant in the room

Written by Gal Luft

Thursday, 03 December 2015 00:00

projects abroad.

Coal will therefore be the elephant in the room in Paris. The rich will try to coerce the developing world into using less coal, using various carrots and sticks as well as peer pressure. This will leave the poor with only two choices: resist and cause the collapse of the talks or agree to accept goals that will never be fulfilled.

Instead of vetoing coal altogether, the developed world should direct its resources to steering and incentivizing the coal sectors of the developing world toward better and more efficient coal utilization.

But such an incremental approach may not be as emotionally satisfying for leaders of the rich as delivering coal a coup de grace.

Those leaders who are unable to defeat IS, pull their economies from stagnation and protect the borders of their countries will try to deliver a phony victory against what they view as the planet's public enemy No.1. Sadly, if they get their way it will be the world's poor that will pay the price.

The author is co-director of the [Institute for the Analysis of Global Security](#) and co-chairman of the [Global Forum on Energy Security](#) and Senior Adviser to the [United States Energy Security Council](#)

Previously published in the [Global Times](#) .