

Headline: As Dubai prepares for COP28, some world leaders signal they won't attend

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People walk near the Al Wasl Dome at Expo City ahead of the COP28 U.N. Climate Summit, Tuesday, Nov. 28, 2023, in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. AP

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DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Dubai prepared Tuesday to host the COP28 climate talks as world leaders, including U.S. President Joe Biden and Pope Francis, signaled they would not be attending the negotiations that come during the ongoing Israel-Hamas war roiling the wider Middle East.

Under a still-scorching November sun, workers stapled up bunting and decorated Dubai Expo City's iconic Al Wasl Dome with trees and other green foliage ahead of the summit, scheduled to start Thursday in the United Arab Emirates.

Armed United Nations police patrolled about half the area of Expo City where the delegates will debate, while the other half will host other climate events. Airport-style security screenings greeted those coming into both areas.

The two-week meeting of international leaders aims to assess where the world stands when it comes to limiting emissions to slow global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) compared with pre-industrial times. Emirati officials said Tuesday they expect over 70,000 attendees at the talks, including heads of state.

Britain's King Charles will be among the leaders to attend the talks. However, some have said or otherwise signaled they won't be attending the Conference of the Parties — where COP gets its name.

They include the 81-year-old Biden, who attended both COP26 in Scotland and COP27 in Egypt.

"The president has been very much focused on the conflict between Israel and Hamas over the last month or so," said John Kirby, a spokesman for the White House's National Security Council, on Monday. "He was working the phones over the course of Thanksgiving weekend. And I suspect that he'll continue to work the phones in coming days."

The White House has said it is sending a climate team, including Special Envoy John Kerry, climate adviser Ali Zaidi and clean energy adviser John Podesta.

Pope Francis meanwhile canceled his trip to Dubai for the U.N. climate conference on doctors' orders Tuesday, although he is recovering from the flu and lung inflammation, the Vatican said.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will likely not attend the talks, Israel's Foreign Ministry told The Associated Press on Tuesday night. Nor will Foreign Minister Eli Cohen attend the summit, the ministry said, citing the war.

Arab nations have reacted with rage over the punishing bombardment and ground offensive in the Gaza Strip after Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel. The UAE reached a diplomatic recognition deal with Israel in 2020, but public anger still seethes in this autocratic nation of seven sheikhdoms.

Meanwhile, Syrian President Bashar Assad won't be attending either, according to the pro-government newspaper Al-Watan, despite receiving an invitation from Emirati leader Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Instead, Syrian Prime Minister Hussein Arnous will lead the country's delegation.

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Assad has slowly reintegrated himself into Arab regional politics in the last year, despite his brutal crackdown on 2011 Arab Spring protesters that descended into a civil war and consequently became a regional conflict. The war has killed half a million people and displaced half of Syria's population.