SOCIAL MOBILISATIONS AND CLIMATE EMERGENCY IN THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD AND TURKEY

Coordinated by: Itxaso Domínguez de Olazábal
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A real emergency in the socio-economic and socio-political sphere, beyond the purely environmental, in the face of which an increasingly aware and diverse civil society faces a sizeable number of obstacles

Itxaso Domínguez de Olazábal

Climate change has become a global emergency. Like the vast majority of current global dynamics, it disproportionately affects the countries and communities of the Global South, including the countries of the southern Mediterranean basin both because of their location and their insufficient preparation. The implications of ongoing climate change were particularly acute throughout 2021 in the Middle East and North Africa (the so-called ‘MENA region’). The fires in the southern Mediterranean were just one instance. This strong and increasingly evident impact of climate change comes on top of other uncertainties and contexts of tension and vulnerability of the population, whose human security is systematically threatened, and is even becoming a question of pure survival. In a little over 80 years, the landscapes that make up the region will be unrecognisable. By the end of the 21st century, rising temperatures could lead to huge swaths of land becoming uninhabitable. Increased aridity and salinisation will lead many already vulnerable countries to face insurmountable water, food, and energy shortages. However, international attention on the region seems to focus almost exclusively on war and political instability.

The relationship between the climate emergency and the MENA region is also particularly relevant today, given that the next two COP (Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) summits will be held in two MENA countries. In November 2021, the Glasgow Climate Pact made it clear that ambitious goals were the only option for climate diplomacy’s next rendezvous. COP26 did not achieve the major progress needed on climate mitigation and emission reductions, still falling considerably short of the 1.5 degree target (even if achieved, the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) has made clear that the consequences will continue to be drastic for the planet). It is against this background that Egypt will host COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh in November, and that COP28 will be hosted by the United Arab Emirates. They are not the first Arab states to host such meetings. Qatar hosted COP18 in 2012, which was marked by pro-climate demonstrations led mainly by young people and promoted by the authorities. COP22 was held in Marrakesh in November 2016, an occasion which turned the spotlight on domestic and regional climate activists, albeit without any tangible success.
Experts upon learning of these meetings were surprised: these are not only countries with dubious democratic credentials but also with uncertain climate commitments, beyond the merely superficial. They can be classified as ‘climate laggards’, actors who consider the costs of fully immersing themselves in the transition to be too costly for their survival as regimes because of their dependence—in various forms—on fossil fuels. Be that as it may, the meetings are going ahead, and by now the Middle East and North Africa Climate Week 2022 will already have taken place. The hope is that these countries will commit to adopting adaptation and mitigation mechanisms in line with international agreements.

Aware of the centrality of the MENA region in general and the Southern Neighbourhood (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, and Tunisia) in particular for the fight against climate change, this working paper aims to build on the knowledge included in the ‘Prospective Approach to Spain and the European Union’s Southern Neighbourhood: Target 2030–2050 published in 2021, combining the study of two of the major trends that will determine the future of the region and its countries: grassroots action and the impact of the climate emergency. In view of the urgency and potential of the threats faced, the research aims to understand the context and perspectives of climate movements in different countries in the Southern Neighbourhood. The EU acknowledged its central position in any reflection on the Southern Mediterranean, and the new agenda for the Mediterranean, also made public in 2021, has ‘Green transition: resilience to climate change, energy and environment’ as a policy area. The need to take into account the aspirations of the public is also recognised by the ‘Human development, good governance and the rule of law’ policy area. The Union for the Mediterranean has been committed to these areas for years, and a large part of its projects and activities are dedicated to the intertwined strategic objectives of sustainable development as well as human development.

Initially, the intention was to focus only on the role of young people, but we soon realised that the movements studied take on different forms and involve a considerable number of backgrounds as well as objectives and strategies. Of course, one should not underestimate the role played by young people in many of these movements, which is closely related to their need to have a voice in the public arena. After all, it is primarily their future that is at stake, which is why they show a growing awareness of the problems they face regionally and globally. However, it is also important to note that the initiatives addressed are not always young, liberal, or cosmopolitan, despite the collective imaginary projected onto them. In addition to some countries in the Southern Neighbourhood, the paper also focuses on Turkey, a country whose dynamics may be replicated in the not so distant future in neighbouring countries, and above all a country where climate movements have become an integral part of the political sphere.

1. **Social movements in the Southern Neighbourhood**

Social movements inevitably come to the fore when reflecting on the Southern Neighbourhood. The years 2010–2011 and the anti-authoritarian uprisings that shook much of these
countries represented the turning point, although they did not come out of nowhere. Young people have often played—and still play—a leading role in articulating demands shared by a large part of the population and in occupying public spaces to attract other types of people. In most cases over the past few years protests, but also movements as a whole, have been met with intensified repression by their respective regimes. But this doesn’t stop them: societies have not stopped organising for a better future, since the contexts and inadequacies that brought forth these unprecedented gatherings are not only still present but worsening every year. They have articulated socio-political and socio-economic demands. In some cases the climate was even mentioned, in what Asef Bayat defined as ‘generating new spaces within which they can express their dissent and assert their presence in the search to improve their lives’. This paper and its chapters opt for a broad definition of the concept of climate movement, which encompasses formal and informal initiatives, ones more or less organised, and those that are both one-off and long-lasting.

2. **Climate emergency in the Southern Neighbourhood: main impact**

The climate emergency has intensified existing atmospheric phenomena, endangering the planet’s sustainability. Although the negative effects of climate change are felt in all regions, the MENA is among the most adversely affected and vulnerable due to its geographic location, complicated socio-economic situation and a variety of socio-political factors. The IPCC identifies the Mediterranean region as a ‘hot spot’ for climate change, located in a transition zone between mid-latitude and subtropical climates. The region’s temperature has increased 1.5°C compared to pre-industrial levels—greater than current global warming trends (+1.1°C)—and temperature increases in the region are expected to exceed the global average by 20% over the next few decades. The Ecological Threats Register estimates that three countries in the Southern Neighbourhood—Tunisia, Morocco, and Israel—will be exposed to at least three constant ecological threats, namely water stress, drought, and flooding, while the remaining countries will be exposed to at least two ecological threats each.

Here we will review some of the main impacts of climate change in the Southern Neighbourhood, in no particular order. In the first place, we would highlight the increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme events, such as drought, flooding, and storms, both in terms of their occurrence and duration. Persistent drought plagued the Neighbourhood in 2021 due to sustained hot and dry conditions brought on by climate change. Another impact is how the increase in average global temperatures has increased the occurrence and intensity of extreme heat events in the region, again both in terms of intensity and probability and longer continuous periods with intensely hot days. In 2021 many countries in the Neighbourhood experienced daily temperatures that were not only well above average but in some cases record-breaking. This phenomenon was most evident during the summer, when a host of locations, including major cities, were listed among the hottest places in the world, with temperatures recorded near or above 50 degrees Celsius. By 2030, the region will
have experienced a sharp increase in temperatures and drought. The average temperature will have increased by an estimated 7 °C by the end of the century. Some areas will even be uninhabitable.

**Graph 1: Effects of Climate Change in the Mediterranean Basin (infographic by Story Data)**

The increased uncertainty regarding precipitation should also be borne in mind, which particularly affects countries such as Morocco and Algeria. The threat is obviously less precipitation but also evaporation and a reduction in the amount of water coming down from high elevations. There is also the threat of an increase in precipitation—by 4% for every degree Celsius that temperatures rise. Substantial air pollution should also be taken into consideration. The consequences of climate change will also be reflected in a deterioration of ecosystems affected by desertification and deforestation, ocean acidification and freshwater pollution, among others. These phenomena will have a major impact on the biodiversity and ecosystems of the Southern Neighbourhood, altering the behaviour, location, and survival ability of its fauna and flora, displacing species to warmer climates, modifying seasonal migration phenomena or altering coastal ecosystems. In the MENA region, which is already under water stress, faced with a scarcity of arable land and a loss of biodiversity, the consequences will be particularly marked.
With the increase in average global temperatures also comes an increase in sea surface temperatures, especially in major bodies of water. The MENA region is considered to be the most vulnerable to rising sea levels. As far as the Southern Neighbourhood is concerned, the rise in sea level could have fatal consequences for countries with highly concentrated urban areas on their coasts, such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Lebanon. By 2050, rising temperatures will have led to an estimated sea level rise of 7 to 36 cm, or even 1 m in some areas. In Egypt alone, sea level rise will affect more than seven million people and will lead to the emigration of at least two million. This forced mobility will further increase the pressure on these countries’ urban centres. The deterioration of coastal areas and rising temperatures will also have negative repercussions for seasonal tourism, which is a significant source of income and has already been hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic. In this regard, the effects on infrastructure—particularly port infrastructure—and the increased frequency of natural disasters must also be considered. Sea level rise will exacerbate saltwater intrusion, groundwater salinisation, rising water tables, and impaired soil drainage.

In recent years, the water-energy-food nexus has become a fundamental framework for understanding the impact of the climate emergency. All three are essential resources for the present and future sustainability of the planet in general, the Southern Neighbourhood in particular. Resources are also multidimensionally interrelated. On the one hand, the agri-food sector—both agricultural production and food processing—consumes a considerable percentage of water—usually fresh—and energy. The latter is also necessary for food transportation. On the other hand, energy production in turn consumes water. The desalination needed to increase the amount of water also requires large amounts of power. And finally, the extraction, transport, and use of water also requires energy. The region and its countries and communities experience at least one type of stress related to one of these resources. The demand for water, energy, and food will increase significantly in the coming decades. At present, the planning and management of the use of these sectors has been compartmentalised, and the consequences of the climate emergency have been exacerbated with regard to the following threats.

Water stress, in terms of water availability and quality, is the first issue to be addressed. Dwindling surface and groundwater supplies, coupled with seasonal rainfall shortages and inefficient water conveyance infrastructure (contributing to substantial water loss) has threatened water security almost to the brink of catastrophic collapse from water scarcity. We are talking about renewable water resources that are scarce but also overexploited and poorly managed. Water resources are expected to decrease by 20% by 2030, and by 2050 all countries in the MENA region will face a water scarcity problem. This scarcity will not only be a consequence of the climatic emergency, but will also be exacerbated by an uptick in population growth, the trend towards urbanisation, and agricultural and industrial development. The need for water for agriculture, but also tourism, industry, and home consumption will increase domestic competition between sectors. The consequences will be particularly severe for Jordan, the second most water-poor country in the world.

Food insecurity has sadly taken centre stage in 2022. Water pressure will have a major impact on the predominant agricultural sector and thus on the food sustainability of these countries.
On average, the countries in the MENA region employ 20% of their workforce in farming, which consumes approximately 80% of each country’s water resources. Rising temperatures will erode the productive base of the agricultural systems of these countries, implying a **30% decrease in crops in the rural areas most affected by this increase**, which will lead to an increase in food prices and therefore to less competitiveness on international markets, which will exacerbate their economic difficulties. Despite the core position occupied by agriculture, the states are very dependent on food imports, which by 2022 represented a deficit of more than $20 million per year: there will also be a hike in food prices globally, with a considerable added impact at the macro and micro levels. This insufficient food sovereignty means that the region is vulnerable to price shocks on world markets—such as the one produced by the war in Ukraine—but also to the impact of climate change in other regions. Price volatility will become a dangerous constant over the next few years.

Energy poverty has also become a reality in the Southern Neighbourhood due to a dangerous combination of high consumption and subsidies, an integral part of the social contract that has been in place for decades. The vast majority of the energy consumed comes from burning fossil fuels, both in fossil fuel-rich countries and elsewhere. It is currently unclear whether decarbonisation is an opportunity, in view of the enormous potential for renewable energies, or an even greater threat to the Neighbourhood. Not only are their countries still over-dependent on hydrocarbons for their power but those whose economies depend mainly on hydrocarbon exports—such as Algeria and Libya—who need to diversify their economies, but if they fail to do so, will be hit hard by falling prices and the measures adopted in the North in their green strategies.

**Graph 2: Primary energy consumption by region from 2015 to forecast 2050 (infographic by Story Data)**

![Graph showing primary energy consumption by region from 2015 to forecast 2050.](image)
3. Climate emergency in the Southern Neighbourhood: risk multiplier

Over the past few years, it has become clear that climate change goes far beyond the environment per se. The climate emergency acts as a considerable risk multiplier in the presence of already worrying trends and the very limited capacity of the most vulnerable communities to confront them. It has a physical and also political impact on populations’ human security. To understand them, one has to avoid simplifications such as ‘climate change fuels migration or war’ and to bear in mind that there is not always a causal relationship. The introductory graph of the document ‘Prospective Approach to Spain and the European Union’s Southern Neighbourhood: Target 2030–2050’ sheds light on many of the interrelationships between climate change and other trends and realities on the ground, bringing into focus both the complexity and central position that the idea of sustainability has for this paper.

The stress caused in different areas by climate change is amplified by the situation on the ground, the result of decades of governmental choices. Poor governance and governmental immobility become a considerable factor to be taken into account. A first problem is that the governments do not seem to consider climate change a priority, and they also stress the depoliticisation of the issue. In this sense, they compartmentalise it, focusing only on some—and very obvious—aspects such as how clean streets are or species conservation, which cost them next to nothing politically. This is compounded by poor management and wasted opportunities, with examples such as Lebanon, where water is available but water stress is caused by a serious infrastructure crisis or Egypt with its recent decision to import coal due to the scarcity of other power sources. Let us not forget the lack of foresight and excessive centralisation not only in transferring control but also in the lack of communication and resources as well as the insidious corruption at countless administrative levels and instances. Too often, regimes...
blame third parties: neighbouring countries, international organisations, the Global North... And they also fail to acknowledge or correct past mistakes (or both), like how water and food subsidies deepen the negative impact of the climate emergency. Most of the political and economic elites are threatened by the potential consequences of the evolution towards a more sustainable model. As with other socio-economic and socio-political demands, regimes are progressively turning more and more inward.

The economic vulnerability of these countries also deserves mention: the impact of global warming is also expanding in the presence of intensive growth and development models, particularly in terms of the effects of colonisation or foreign domination, followed by accelerated industrialisation. This model is overly dependent on fossil fuels and minerals, as well as other industries and sectors that require the massive extraction of resources, water, and biodiversity. Mass tourism is especially important, as well as agriculture, key to both national economies and subsistence: it is deeply vulnerable to changes in rainfall and heat and affected in multifarious ways like reductions in crop yields, shorter growing seasons, and negative impacts on livestock, and it also contributes to land depletion from water-intensive industries.
The dilemma lies in the fact that some countries do not have sufficiently diversified economies to invest in sectors less affected by climate change, which will inevitably lead to job loss and a spike in informal employment. The consequences will affect different sectors of the population with varying intensities depending on how vulnerable they are, where they live, if they are rural or urban, and the state’s ability to protect them, among other aspects. It will increase the exclusion of parts of society such as youth, women, and racialised communities. The worrying debt levels in many of these countries will further reduce the fiscal space for their authorities to implement mitigation actions. According to the IPCC (2007) adaptive capacity represents the ‘ability or potential of a system to respond successfully to climate variability, and change and includes adjustments in behaviour and in resources and technologies’, which involves significant sums.

Much has been said, without having reached a true consensus, about conflict and climate emergency. According to a considerable number of studies, it can exacerbate existing tensions and influence other factors that increase several times over the chances of conflict breaking out or escalating. This is relevant both in terms of warfare—in wars over water but also the contenders instrumentalising water—but also indirectly in terms of radicalisation. Climate change clearly worsens humanitarian crises, compounded by the impact of war in contexts already deeply affected by climate change, similar to protracted occupation.

The climate emergency also goes hand in hand with the demographic transition. The first obvious link is how the latter leads to augmenting water, food, and energy consumption, and possible competition for resources between segments of the population. In recent years, the debate on the relationship between climate change and human mobility, a structurally multi-causal phenomenon, has gotten louder. This could happen either directly—to escape drought for instance—or indirectly—to escape the conflict the impact of climate change has contributed to. In this regard, the massive displacement of millions of people is and will wreak havoc on biodiversity and the stability of countries and worsen tensions over water resources and food production. For the time being, in the Southern Neighbourhood they appear to have been limited mainly to within countries’ borders but may soon affect transnational mobility, perhaps as climate refugees if international law recognises them as such. It is particularly in cases of urbanisation that the demand for resources jump. Syria was the context of a considerable rural exodus between 2007 and 2010, partly as a consequence of the impact of climate change on agriculture and rural life. Rising temperatures could lead to heat islands, a phenomenon in urban areas that experience higher temperatures than surrounding—mostly rural—areas. The consequences can be devastating in the context of cities unprepared for natural disasters but also unprepared for the continued impact of the emergency.

The climate emergency in the Southern Neighbourhood is evolving in a context of population concentration, but also a concentration of economic activities on overexploited coasts and even more at risk. The widening of economic gaps, especially in rural areas, which are more affected in terms of access to agricultural products and from a labour perspective, opens up the possibility of an increase in peripheral protests and new ‘bread riots’, increasing the risk of political instability in the region.
The impact of global warming on health has to be taken into account in a region where health systems have proven mostly inadequate to deal with Covid-19. The WHO estimates that climate change will generate an additional 250,000 deaths per year between 2030 and 2050 globally. Several factors will lead to death or the deterioration of public health: pollution, increased waterborne diseases in rural communities drinking untreated water, malnutrition, and non-communicable diseases such as obesity and diabetes, and excess mortality from extreme heat and extreme weather events. Ultimately, the climate emergency will also contribute to the deterioration of mental health in the region.

4. Climate movements in the Southern Neighbourhood. A quick country-by-country review

The chapter devoted to the situation in Morocco by Adil Moustaoui helps us to understand to what extent the periphery and rural environments have played a key role in climate movements there, far from the idea that we in Europe usually have of them as urban and cosmopolitan initiatives. In the North African country, climate justice is a cornerstone of climate claims, as well as a cross-cutting issue if we consider the complexity of the concept of environmental activism. The text focuses on some cases of militant environmental activism, which contest and resist forms of governance and management of natural resources, but also describes initiatives of citizen participation and the associative fabric that have had a considerable environmental impact.

The chapter on Tunisia by Bedirhan Mutlu and Houda Mzioudet explains that the 2010–2011 uprising, as well as subsequent movements up to the present day, was marked by the close link between socio-economic justice and climate justice, the latter never put at the top of the political agenda by the former authoritarian regime. Several movements have explicitly linked the notions of national sovereignty and environmental sovereignty, particularly with regard to the issue of food insecurity. The periphery in Tunisia is also claiming a place at the table because it is doubly affected by the climate emergency and insufficient redistribution. These and other movements are characterised by diversity, and the number of climate initiatives has mushroomed in recent years in a context of democratic transition now in danger.

Marc Español pens the chapter dedicated to Egypt, the next country hosting the COP. In this case, it is worth noting the limited room to manoeuvre that the regime, committed to a profoundly unsustainable growth model despite its declarations on the global stage, gives to civil society involved in fighting the consequences of the climate emergency. Public debate on climate is practically non-existent, and when it happens extremely elitist. This explains to a large extent the prominence of companies in environmental concerns. The few initiatives that have emerged in the country have focused on extremely local issues, with a highly depoliticised narrative, and on several occasions have sought the collaboration of the authorities to circumvent repression. Often these are one-offs, focused on the harmful effects of particular projects.
The case of Lebanon, a country facing a profound multidimensional crisis in which numerous facets are negatively affected by the climate emergency, is analysed by Joey Ayoub and Christophe Maroun. The turning point in this case was the 2019 revolution, which shook the foundations of the Lebanese political system. This had its origin, among other factors, in the devastating forest fires that rampaged a large part of the country. This uprising was made possible in part by the 2015 #YouStink movement that arose in response to the state’s gross mismanagement of waste. Both contexts of mobilisation led to the birth of multiple initiatives linking the struggle to dismantle the system with broader environmental concerns.

Turkey is a very particular case study. Brian Obach and İlgü Özler help us understand how the particularities of the political arena are also determining factors in understanding climate movements. The regime’s actions have been unambitious and, as in other countries, have been circumscribed by a capitalist and increasingly unsustainable model. In this context, the climate movement exists and is diverse, but it is also characterised by being relatively small and marginalised from other public debates, as evidenced by relatively low public participation in climate activism and limited public concern about it. Even so, awareness has risen in recent years, largely as a result of the visible impact of the climate emergency in the country. The factors explaining the lack of greater political action are complex, and are intimately related to other outgoing social and political divisions, coupled with increasing government repression.

5. Main conclusions

The chapters of this paper shed light on the relationship between the climate emergency and the causes that led to several uprisings in the Neighbourhood, both with regard to Egypt and Syria in 2011 and Lebanon in 2015 and 2019, but also in previous years, as Ismael Nour’s chapter recounts. Everything seems to indicate that two factors that could explain why climate movements were not a reality before 2010, and are still not numerous in many of these countries today, are the insufficient awareness-raising efforts, and, and above all, the fact that civil society or the population have not always been able to express their demands, either due to repression or insufficient civic life.

1. One of the most immediate, and certainly logical, conclusions is that 2010–2011 represented an important turning point, particularly because of the emergence or hope of greater political openness but also of a seemingly greater awareness. Some authors even speak of a ‘green spring’ and consider that government inaction in the face of the obvious impact of climate change was one of the phenomena that, in conjunction with several others, sparked the outrage that led to the uprisings. There are important exceptions: in several cases, climate movements have historical precedents, especially locally. In others, the demands related to the climate emergency came after, and independently of, the anti-authoritarian uprisings.

2. What does seem to be clear is the presence of a growing generalised awareness of climate change issues. Still, it does not seem that many of the movements have been
able to attract or convince large swaths of the societies concerned, to demonstrate that climate is a priority, or that citizens have the power to change some policies. This is true in terms of participation in organisations, protests, and even in the articulation of ad hoc demands. Climate is still considered a niche topic.

Graph 5: Spending priorities that the respective governments should have (Arab Barometer, What MENA Citizens Think about Environmental Issues 2022)

Climate movements and initiatives have grown in intensity, number, and type. These have been and are clearly multilevel, ranging from local to national to transnational. Local initiatives have skyrocketed (in towns, but also in smaller neighbourhoods and communities, with different characteristics in rural and urban contexts), some of which existed before 2010. Prior to this year, micro-revolts in the respective peripheries were a constant feature, guided to a greater or lesser extent by climate-related demands. Today, they are based on sustainable alternatives for the affected population, and not necessarily concerned about what happens at the macro level. This has been the case, for example, in Morocco, where the key role played by women is also noteworthy.
It is interesting to note how one exception to the bad governance rule is that as the level of analysis is lowered, local authorities appear who have reacted and aligned themselves with public demands. Also noteworthy are initiatives based on very specific issues, such as mobilisations against very specific projects (either because of their impact or before they are built or implemented), especially if they are associated with foreign players, such as Total’s gas exploitation in Algeria or shipping in garbage from countries in the Global North. There are formal movements but also informal ones, and often it is not a fight against climate change in general but against some of its particular impacts, in pursuit of access to resources or to protect nature.

The movements take on different forms and different strategies, so much so that it is difficult to generalise about them. There are numerous examples of protests or popular resistance campaigns, like in Gabès in Tunisia, or in Zagora in Morocco, or in Aïn Salah in Algeria, which sometimes resort to seemingly sophisticated mechanisms such as disputes or lawsuits. As with other movements, social media and other internet platforms have been extremely useful, so much so that sometimes they have gotten airtime with the traditional media. They have contributed enormously to raising awareness, although we should not forget that a large part of the population sees and feels the impact first-hand. As mentioned above, there are also local and issue-based initiatives. Civil society organisations have been created—like in Egypt for instance—, many of which are under the category of Environmental Nongovernmental Organizations (ENGOs). Transnational structures have also been promoted, like the Arab Youth Climate Movement or the Mediterranean Youth Climate Network, and branches of international movements have been founded, like Extinction Rebellion Lebanon. This is not to mention state or official entities.

Movements are growing in number and intensity in close relation to the concept of sovereignty and calls for the redistribution of resources and means. A noteworthy example are the accusations against the Egyptian regime of unfair disposal of the Nile River and the country’s gas. It is for this reason that offers of international assistance are not always welcomed with open arms. Sometimes, there is a consequent revaluation of traditional ways of life that had been left behind, and that were more environmentally friendly. Much of the emerging movement revolves around the idea of intersectionality: some of these initiatives and discourses question the system as a whole and shed light on the intimate link between the impact of the climate emergency and socio-economic and socio-political rights. The outrage about the insufficient official fight against climate change partly channels the outrage about other problems of bad governance and corruption, which also contribute to increase people’s vulnerability.

The concepts of climate justice and socio-environmental conflict are taking shape and gaining a prominent foothold, as the chapter in this paper by Luis Sanchez explains. Social justice can only go through climate justice, and vice versa. This is why climate-related objectives are often part of a long list of socio-political and socio-economic demands. It is not unimportant that climate movements have counted on the contribution of academics, but also of those who build knowledge in the affected contexts (farmers, fishermen, residents, etc.), progressively
building transversalities that attest to the intertwined nature of the goals. Climate can also be presented and perceived as a cross-cutting issue, which helps to overcome social divisions based on ideologies or primary identities. However, in the very idea of intersectionality lie its dilemmas, as the climate struggle can also help better understand the incompatibility between priorities, most particularly between material prospects for the future and the need for a cleaner and better adapted country and planet.

The political system is a determining factor when it comes to understanding the existence and evolution of climate movements. In principle, the more open and competitive it is, the greater the scope for climate movements and the greater the effectiveness of their actions. It is not only a question of authoritarianism, but also of participation in public debate. Accordingly, the reaction of the authorities is key, both as a driver and a disincentive. The respective analyses will show how the repression of activists, organisations, and journalists has grown, like in Egypt and Morocco. These are presented as a threat to national security although they are sometimes given a little space in order to put pressure on the most polluting players without the authorities having to be involved in direct confrontation. This perception and asymmetrical power relations mean that climate initiatives often have insufficient resources to launch sufficiently ambitious campaigns.

It is precisely in the latter sense that the benefits of an official push for climate demands can be perceived, as in the case of Tunisia. Several governments have set up an agency or ministry dedicated to the fight against climate change as a result of both external and domestic efforts; even so, their efficiency and room to manoeuvre seem limited in most cases. It is not only the institutional dimension that is conclusive, it is also the case of the economic structure of the respective country since in a significant number of cases the elites represent a major obstacle to real transformation.

CONCLUSIONS

The anti-authoritarian uprisings of 2010–2011 and those that have taken place in the Southern Neighbourhood subsequently were a turning point in our understanding of the socio-political and socio-economic priorities of their societies. The movements also shed light on a central issue, insufficiently addressed by analyses of the region, namely climate justice.

The climate emergency is a global priority that has for decades underscored the importance of cross-border cooperation and joint action, like with many other challenges in the Mediterranean. The EU’s new agenda for the Mediterranean recognises the importance of climate and is ambitious in this regard. These initiatives are, of course, welcome and any ambition is too small. The European Green Pact must succeed in driving the green transition regionally and internationally: the Southern Neighbourhood can contribute to the EU diversifying its own energy sources, as well as becoming a central and indispensable ally in the fight against the
climate emergency. The EU’s green diplomacy will undoubtedly become a mainstay for years to come. Promises are exciting, but they need to be translated into real regional initiatives.

In this sense, the water-energy-food nexus should be more than a buzzword, and these sectors need to be analysed as a whole and also integrated into a comprehensive plan that provides solutions that require both public policies and investments in the short, medium, and long term. The complexity of the EU’s Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) is particularly noteworthy: the understandable objective is to tax at the borders those products whose manufacture generates more CO₂ than allowed within the bloc, but the consequences will undoubtedly be asymmetrical for regimes and societies in the South. Brussels also needs to think about incentives, both for countries and for external actors willing to invest in transformation projects.

If this paper has shown us anything, it is that, regardless, the voice and needs of societies must be taken into account, and a multidimensional and multilevel approach must be adopted that aims to go beyond exclusively working with governments. Both in terms of their insufficient reaction to the imperatives of the climate emergency (a category that includes purely cosmetic measures) and in terms of its localised impact, which macro projects are unlikely to address. It is in this sense that the imperative of helping to prevent the most vulnerable from suffering the most arises: humanitarian assistance will be even more important, but not enough, showing the importance of reflecting on how to collaborate with the authorities in the adoption of more efficient policies like how the reduction of fossil fuel subsidies will require much more social protection.

The bilateral cooperation frameworks on which the European Neighbourhood Policy is based can and should be converted into green alliances. We also believe that efforts should be made to not depoliticise cooperation and joint actions since climate change is as political as any other global and regional dynamic. This would require not condoning violations of international law in Palestine and Western Sahara, but also paying attention to issues of gender, class, and race, among others, in addition to respect for the human rights of local populations.

Finally, it should be noted that several reports by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the results of which are reflected in the Arab States Climate Finance Mobilization and Access Strategy 2022–2030, indicate that most bilateral and multilateral aid is directed towards mitigation, while adaptation is an even higher priority. In addition, much of the aid will generate more debt in the future, in an already heavily indebted region. Aid is currently insufficient in the case of countries such as Libya, Algeria, Palestine, and Lebanon, as it is mainly given to governments that play their cards—and trump cards—diplomatically, such as Morocco and Egypt, followed by Jordan and Tunisia.
1. Climate change and social mobilisation in the Southern Neighbourhood before 2011

Ismael Nour

1.1. Introduction

Discussing climate change in the Southern Neighbourhood region means covering a broad range of issues that converge to form a complex reality that is sometimes difficult to encompass. Unpicking climate change in the countries of the southern Mediterranean basin reveals situations of structural crisis that may initially be considered to have little bearing on the process of global warming into which our planet is plunged.

It is harder still to tackle the issue of social movements and their links to the struggle against climate change in a region of the world governed by authoritarian regimes, where the space for any civil movement is highly restricted and subject to thorough government scrutiny. In addition, the task becomes even more difficult if it is one of conducting a detailed analysis of a context prior to the rise of climate changes studies and their impact on the population’s civil movements before 2011, to compliment the focus placed on the posterior context characterising this Working Paper as a whole.

1.2. Climate change, an issue scarcely analysed in the Southern Neighbourhood

The significance and importance of climate change as a cross-cutting issue in political, economic, and social analyses on an international level is a relatively recent phenomenon, although it is true that since the 1980s there has been growing interest in studying this process and its effects. We can place the moment that climate change became a mainstream matter in academic research somewhere between 2010 and 2015. The academic analyses existing prior to these dates vary a great deal in subject matter and depth, depending on the geographical area on which they focus. What’s more, they were largely conducted by academic institutions from the Global North (McSweeney, 2015).

In the case of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, most of the analyses conducted centred on – and centre on – the political impact that climate change might have on the region and the resulting armed conflicts and political destabilisation that could arise in the zone and their subsequent repercussions on the countries of the Global North, particularly Israel and the European nations.

It is not easy to find publications on climate change coming out of countries of the region to the south of the Mediterranean. Yet we do get the idea that the countries of the zone formed
part of a general consensus among the developing countries on questioning climate action and the distribution of responsibilities on an international level, where the countries of the North would appear to have greater responsibility owing to the process of accumulation and plundering of wealth that took place after the first industrial revolution and the subsequent colonial expansion. In the view of the Southern Neighbourhood countries, the need for economic development took precedence – and often continues to prevail – over the urgency of combatting climate change, when it was not yet an issue at the forefront of the international debate.

At that moment, with the debate still at an initial and relatively rudimentary stage, it is understandable that there should have been a lack of special interest in analysing the presence of social movements and civil initiatives centred on the battle and raising public awareness in the southern Mediterranean basin of the impact that climate change could have on the region. The lack of study and analysis on this issue in no way means that social movements or a general concern about climate change did not exist in the Southern Neighbourhood. However, we should spell out the political and social context in which these movements had to – and have to – develop.

Taking the Democracy Index compiled by the UK magazine *The Economist* as our reference, the MENA region is the least democratic in the world. In 2010, every country, with the exception of Israel – something equally questionable –, was listed as non-democratic. Some were classified as hybrid regimes, most as authoritarian. This might go some way to explaining the dearth of significant social movements related to the battle against climate change.

The absence of a political context and a framework of consolidated civil rights that allow the exercise of the civil liberties of protest and of assembly, as well as the infeasibility of a genuine election turnout that facilitates the existence of political parties with green agendas, are a formidable obstacle and a key element to understanding the non-construction and lack of development of a popular climate movement with those characteristics.

Despite this political and social context, we can pick out some sectors that have had certain scope for mobilisation. These are linked to economic activities dependent on weather conditions and the conservation of natural spaces, such as tourism or agriculture. This capacity to protest on the part of the companies and individuals operating in these economic sectors derives from the weight that their activities carry in the economies of the region, which provide employment for most of the countries’ populations, and, in the case of tourism, are a source of international currency in the countries of the southern Mediterranean basin. Thus, the protests arising from these sectors are not seen as destabilising action, but as legitimate complaints that might even enjoy certain indulgence by governments that are generally apathetic or little inclined to accommodate studying or preventing climate change in their respective countries.

It is, however, difficult to pinpoint social movements related to climate change, more so if we search before 2010. In fact, in the examples identified and which will be detailed over
the course of this chapter, the references to climate change are limited and the reasons for
the demonstrations focused on the poor implementation of development policies, the mis-
management of resources on the part of the governments, corruption, or bad governance in
general.

Likewise, we must not undervalue the existence of initiatives arising from international bod-
ies, notably the United Nations, the European Union, or the World Bank, which seek to in-
volve – with limited success – social movements and societies in their drives related to the
environment and combating climate change in the Southern Neighbourhood.

1.3. The view of the people of the Southern Neighbourhood on climate
change

Understanding the impact that climate change has on the countries of the Southern Neigh-
bourhood means analysing the grasp and perception that the people of the region have of this
process and its potential impact on their daily lives. According to a study conducted in 2009
by the Arab Forum for Environment and Development (AFED), over 95% of the population
polled acknowledged noticing changes in the climate in their countries. It is an extremely high
figure and one that must be taken into consideration when it comes to studying the initiatives
against climate change in the region.

According to the study, in the view of the sample consulted climate change would have a
greater impact on health (78%), water security (72%) and food security (69%), coastal areas
(53%), forests (49%), and tourism (39%). In the same document, the majority of the sam-
ple acknowledged that their governments were not doing enough to tackle climate change.
However, 94% of those surveyed recognised the importance of their countries forming part
of global climate action initiatives.

Despite the opinion on climate change existing in the region, in the view of the population
of the Southern Neighbourhood there are more pressing matters at hand. According to the
surveys carried out in 2020 by the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) and the
EUROMED on civil society and social movements in the Euro-Mediterranean region, the pop-
ulations of the southern Mediterranean basin put climate change in fifth place in the order
of priorities. The lack of democratic systems, the rule of law, the struggle against corruption,
extremism, social justice, and education rank higher than climate change as the most urgent
matters to be addressed, according to the people of these countries.

1.4. Arab bread, drought in China, and climate change

On 17 December 2010 in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid, the young street vendor Mohamed
Bouazizi set himself on fire outside the Palace of Government after the authorities had con-
fiscated his wares. His action made him a martyr in the eyes of a population weary of the
impunity, neglect, and indifference they suffered at the hands of the Tunisian political elites. Thousands of citizens flooded the streets of the country demanding a change in a corrupt system incapable of protecting its people and ensuring them a decent life. The protests spread to other countries of the region, where the people identified with the demands of Tunisian society.

The reasons that led millions of people to protest in the streets across the Arab world are complex and varied. Yet we can find certain common threads in the different countries that experienced this process of transnational protests:

1. The inability of the governments to provide a decent quality of life and effect a real change in the material wellbeing of their citizens.
2. The severe political, social, and economic repression to which the population were subjected. Added to which was the total impunity of the economic and political elites of the countries, corruption, and the absence of a transparent and just legal system that enabled any kind of accountability of the governing elites.
3. The lack of future prospects in a region with an extremely young population, where 54% is under 25, according to the UNDP (2010).

These structural elements coincided with an exponential rise in the price of wheat on the international market in one of the regions of the world with the lowest percentage of arable land, owing to its geography and particular weather conditions.

The lack of arable land, however, has been no impediment to the region seeing major population growth over the last few decades, surpassed only by the growth of the sub-Saharan region of Africa. In these circumstances, the southern Mediterranean basin countries are incapable of guaranteeing food supplies to their people with domestic production alone and must turn to the international food market to cover national demand. In fact, Egypt is currently the world’s main wheat importer and among the top positions in the rankings are countries such as Turkey, Algeria, and Morocco. Smaller countries such as Lebanon, Tunisia, or Israel also appear on the list.

The functioning of the international commodities market is no different to that of any other good traded internationally. However, they are products with highly volatile prices owing to their close connection to weather conditions and the special protection they are under from national governments. In order to address this volatility, the governments of Arab countries in 2010 employed major subsidy policies for food. Nevertheless, expenditure on food was the main outlay incurred by the inhabitants of the Arab world. For instance, in Egypt in 2010 food accounted for 44% of families’ monthly spending, very similar to the 42% that families in Syria used (Thompson, 2011).

This close link between weather conditions and prices of foodstuffs became apparent in 2010, when in China, the main consumer and producer of wheat in the world, a severe drought afflicted the country’s agricultural sector. Chinese farmers’ inability to cover the domestic market forced the government of the Asian country to turn to the international markets to
meet domestic demand. The purchase of millions of tons of wheat for China brought about an unexpected spike in the price of an essential good in millions of households around the Arab world.

In other words, the drought in China, an entirely unexpected and random event—it was the worst the country had suffered in 60 years (Qui, 2010)—triggered the distortion of the price of a basic foodstuff, wheat, in a region of the world in which the population allocated nearly half of its monthly income to feeding itself. It was ultimately an additional reason for the people turning out to protest against their governments in the historic demonstrations that took place between 2010 and 2011.

This increase in the price of wheat was not the main reason that prompted millions of Arabs to go out and voice their discontent in the so-called “Arab Spring”. Yet it certainly was a major element that was added to the people’s demands. In the protests that took place in Egypt it was common to hear the chant “Life, liberty, and social dignity” when in the Egyptian dialect “bread” and “life” are the same word. The chant could have been taken as a desperate cry aimed at the Egyptian government, which was incapable of guaranteeing the bread, life, of its own people.

Climate change is threatening to make this type of events increasingly violent and frequent. In addition, the interconnection that exists in the global production chain, including the food production chain, reveals the vulnerability to which dozens of countries are exposed regarding food security. This unquestionably applies to the world’s least fertile region, where its fragile food security is a key element for stability and development.

1.5. “Bread riots”, a permanent fixture in North Africa

Protests over the price of food in North Africa were not new to the region, they were a permanent fixture. Social protests linked to the high cost of food have been reported in every country in the zone since the 1980s. Particularly notable were the precedents in the 1970s and 1980s, when, pushing a neoliberal agenda that subsequent studies have found harmful to the economic structure and social protection network existing in the Arab countries (Hanieh, 2015), the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank required the governments of North Africa to cut food subsidies in favour of a liberalisation of this segment of the economy. The decisions of the international bodies resulted in an increase in the price of food, which on some occasions amounted to rises of over 70%. In Egypt (1977), Morocco (1981), and Tunisia (1984) mass demonstrations erupted in which the public called on their governments to reverse the measures taken at the behest of the foreign agencies.

Continuing with the sequence of protests, in 2007 and 2008, coinciding with an international food crisis, public demonstrations of discontent took place in the North African countries as a result of the increase in the price of basic foodstuffs. Once again, as during the Arab revolts of 2011, it would be a mistake to associate the social protests solely with the process of climate
change, but it now seems clear that it plays an underlying role that gives us a fuller grasp of the uprisings.

On this occasion, the increase in the cost of food was down to a rise in the price of fossil fuels that made their production more expensive since agriculture is an energy-intensive activity. This had an impact on the final prices of products (European Commission, 2011). At the same time, in several countries that export basic foodstuffs such as Russia, Argentina, or Pakistan various weather and climate events took place that could be associated with climate change and which affected the productivity of the harvests. This prompted these countries to block the exports of their products to prevent supply shortages at home.

The spike in the price of food was a particularly sensitive issue in those countries where energy resources did not carry much weight in the balance of trade. These resources would have been able to offset the trade imbalances triggered by the situation. The solution involved a reduction in state subsidies and the temporary increase in the price of the affected foodstuffs.

In September that same year, violent demonstrations took place in Morocco that ended in 30 arrests and at least 300 injured (Climate Diplomacy, 2015). The protests, organised by the Moroccan Association for Human Rights, opposed the 30% increase in the price of food announced by the government to alleviate the situation caused by the rise in the prices of essential products on the international market. The Moroccan authorities’ decision also coincided with the start of Ramadan, a time of the year when spending on wheat-based foods increases exponentially.

The following year, there were similar protests in Egypt, where the 25,000 workers of the giant Misr Spinning and Weaving Company, one of the country’s biggest publicly owned textile firms, took to the streets to protest the rise in the cost of living and low wages (Al Wahaidi, 2017). The workers’ protests spread throughout the country, securing certain successes such as the increase in the national minimum monthly wage.

1.6. Farmers and their role as climate change messengers

According to the FAO definition of 1996, food security is the situation in which all people have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences. Food security has become a concept strongly linked to food sovereignty, a country’s capacity to produce a sufficient amount of food or to turn to the international markets to cover the dietary needs of all its people. Consequently, it is a concept closely linked to agriculture and the availability of stable and safe sources of water to cover the demands of this activity.

The Mediterranean basin, particularly the southern basin, is one of the areas of the world with least availability of water resources and the countries of the region report the highest levels of water stress on the planet. Of the 16 countries that the World Resources Institute considers to be in a critical state because of high water stress, seven of them form part of the Southern
Neighbourhood (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Tunisia), a list on which there are also another six Arab countries (World Resources Institute, 2019).

Agriculture was and continues to be the prime consumer of fresh water globally. As far as the MENA region is concerned, it is estimated that the sector consumes nearly 85% of the available fresh water. This figure correlates directly with the weight of the agricultural sector in the economy and production capacity of each country. Morocco and Egypt are the countries that devote the largest amount of fresh water to agriculture, both investing over 85% of their water resources. Similarly, the two countries are those that employed a greater percentage of the population in the agricultural sector: Morocco had nearly 50% of its population working in this sector in 2010 and Egypt, nearly 30%, according to World Bank data.

The population of the Southern Neighbourhood countries is on the rise and has seen significant growth over recent decades, a trend that is expected to continue in the coming years, which means growth in food consumption in the region. The increase in demand for food and a drop in the water resources available complicate the situation of the governments of these countries, which must seek a way of raising agricultural production with diminishing water resources or accept depending still further on the volatile international food market.

This situation is being aggravated by climate change, which has hastened the reduction of available water. Against this backdrop, the hardest hit are those segments of the population that because of their economic activity are directly exposed to that shortage of resources. This segment is also the economic sector that encompasses and employs most poor: agriculture. Farmers, consequently, act as the first line of defence against climate change and as facilitators in forecasting the impact that climate change can have on the region and the repercussions that climate change will have on the urban spaces of the Southern Neighbourhood.

Despite the absence of significant social movements in the region, we can observer specific moments in which the population employed in the sector has voiced its concerns in the face of situations of water stress or have acted as “messengers” of situations that would subsequently have a major impact on the social and economic dynamics of their respective countries, in spite of the inaction of their respective governments.

1.6.1. Egyptian farmers cannot water their crops

In Egypt, 90% of the water consumed comes from the Nile River, a watercourse shared with another 10 African countries. Systems of irrigation channels take the water from the ancient river to different cities on its delta to facilitate its use in the irrigation of crops. Egypt, known at the time as the “breadbasket of the Roman Empire”, continues to live up to its reputation. It is Africa’s chief wheat producer and until 2020 it was the continent’s biggest rice producer, which is truly noteworthy if we bear in mind that nearly 90% of its territory is desert.

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1 In the report consulted, Palestine does not appear as an analysed territory, but the situation of Israel has been taken as a reference in order to include it.
Yet despite its incredibly fertile land, Egypt is not capable of producing enough to fill the bellies of its people. The most recent data show that nearly 30% of the Egyptian population is not able to maintain a nourishment that covers its dietary needs, a percentage that has grown in parallel with the rise in the population that lives below the poverty line in the country.

In 2009, hundreds of Egyptian farmers protested to the government in over 10 different regions of the country about the lack of water to irrigate their crops (Green Prophet, 2010). Particularly prominent were the demonstrations of around 600 farmers from the Minya Governorate of Upper Egypt, a region that was home to 60% of the country’s poor population (World Bank, 2012), who staged a sit-down protest outside the Ministry of Agriculture in Cairo.

The plight of the Egyptian farmers was the result of a whole host of factors that brought about a drop in the water resources to maintain their crops. First, a good part of the farmers who took part in the protests grew rice, a crop that requires a high level of irrigation. Second, the lack of maintenance of the irrigation systems meant that a large part of the water was lost before it could be used. Third, the farmers accused the authorities of favouring those who had connections in the government, who continued to have water to irrigate their crops, compared to the rest of the farmers whose sources of water had been cut off. Lastly, the protests came at the same time as unusually high temperatures were being recorded, which reduced the amount of fresh water available that year as there was a higher level of evaporation.

The protests received a certain amount of media coverage, although the only response from the Ministry of Agriculture of Egypt was the announcement of a reduction in the land allocated to the growing of rice.

### 1.6.2. A drought, 3 million migrants, and the Syrian revolution of 2011

The events that took place in Syria between 2006 and 2010 are another example that allows us to appreciate the close relationship between the agricultural sector, climate change, and the central role that farmers play in auguring the impact of climate change in the Southern Neighbourhood.

In 2006, in a country crossed by the civilisation-spawning Tigris and Euphrates rivers, an unprecedented drought began that lasted at least until 2010, the origin of which is associated with the process of climate change. This event forced tens of thousands of Syrian farmers and livestock farmers to leave their homes in rural areas of Syria and move to urban centres as it was impossible to keep up their main economic activity. It is estimated that between 2006 and 2010 the primary sector went from employing 30% of the population to less than 15%. Crop productivity fell by around 50% and 85% of the livestock in the north-eastern region of Syria was lost (Romero, 2019).

Syrian cities received nearly 3 million migrants, what with the domestic displaced and refugees from the war in neighbouring Iraq, which resulted in greater pressure on essential services. The north-eastern region of Syria went from being the one with the lowest level of
poverty in the country to being the poorest, with over 2 million people in a situation of extreme poverty. At the same time, food prices rocketed. Between 2009 and 2010, the cost of wheat and corn increased by 50%.

The drought in the north of the country combined with a harmful political agenda pursued by the Syrian government, with the expropriation of rights over land in the north, the increase in the price of petrol, and the scrapping of subsidies on fertilisers. These actions triggered a drop in the standard of living of the Syrian population. Concurrently with this domestic situation, protests against the government of Ben Ali erupted in Tunisia and shortly afterwards the Egyptians took to the streets demanding the end of the Mubarak regime. The Syrian government was quick to ban the demonstrations in solidarity with Egypt and Tunisia and repress any kind of public protest.

The self-immolation of the young man Hasan Ali Akleh in the northern city of Al-Hasaka, in the same region that had been plunged into poverty owing to the severe policies of the Syrian government and an exceptionally harsh drought, acted as the trigger for protests in the city that subsequently spread to other regions of the country in the framework of the so-called “Arab Spring”. All these elements combined, coupled with the structural violence on which the power of the Syrian regime is built, ended up leading to the horrific civil war that broke out in 2011 and which continues to this day.

1.7. The future of the struggle against climate change in the Southern Neighbourhood

1.7.1. The environment and Islam, spirituality against climate change

The Southern Neighbourhood is a diverse region in terms of ethnic, religious, and cultural identities. Yet in every country Islam and the Arab identity are in the majority, with the exception of Israel, which has a significant Arab Muslim minority. It is also important to highlight the presence of Christian and Jewish minorities in the region. The adherence to Islam by most of the region’s population is often analysed as an intrinsic part of the existing dynamics and is mistakenly held responsible for the structural violence that dominates the region. However, the presence of Islam in the Southern Neighbourhood must be acknowledged as an objective reality that, coordinated in the proper manner, could act as a catalyst for the movements in defence of social and economic justice and the battle against climate change.

Islam states it is the responsibility of Muslims to protect the planet and maintain the perfect balance of God’s creation. There are numerous mentions in the Koran and Sunnah of the responsibility of Muslims, considered to be God’s representatives on Earth, to care for the environment. Likewise, Islam has a strong social base that lays down Muslims’ responsibility to protect the most vulnerable population and requires an equal distribution of wealth.

Based on Islamic principles, one might expect the existence of movements in defence of the environment in the southern Mediterranean basin. Yet the environmental agenda does not
appear to have acquired real importance on the agendas of the region’s Islamist parties. The need for economic development in the countries, the absence of a truly competitive political arena, the political persecution that many of these movements suffer in their respective countries, or the conception of environmentalism as a movement typical of the West, have consigned the Islamist parties to championing agendas focused on protecting the most vulnerable population with a heavily social conservative and anti-Western rhetoric.

However, despite the absence of an environmentalist Islamist movement, the current conditions in which the most vulnerable population is more exposed to climate change and its negative impacts may be an indicator of the impending rise of a path that advocates a green agenda based on Islamic principles.

### 1.7.2. The struggle against climate change and Israeli apartheid

The Jordan River, shared by Israel, Palestine, and Jordan, is one of the water basins under greatest pressure globally. This Biblical river carries a fraction of the volume that it did in the past owing to weather conditions, pollution, and the population pressure to which it is subjected. Added to which is the occupation of the water resources on the part of the State of Israel, which controls the source of the river and administers the quotas that are distributed among the three countries. In fact, Israel receives more water from the Jordan River than Jordan and Palestine combined, despite having less population.

The vulnerability of the Jordan River basin prompted the creation in 1994 of the environmentalist and pro-peace construction NGO Friends of the Earth Middle East, now known as EcoPeace Middle East. The goal of the organisation, which has offices in Tel Aviv, Ramallah, and Amman, is to establish cooperation in the green framework for the protection of the environment in the region. It is a pioneering project that has received broad international recognition for its efforts.

EcoPeace Middle East has focused on the search for the construction of dialogue on the distribution of water from the Jordan River, the Dead Sea, and the groundwaters shared among the three countries. It has also played a prominent role in the struggle to protect the Dead Sea amid the process of gradual drought it is suffering and the creation of an aqueduct from the Red Sea to ensure its preservation. However, its action challenges the underlying framework whereby the Jordan River basin is managed unilaterally by Israel, which, consequently, normalises the climate apartheid to which the Palestinian people are subjected.

In contrast, there is PENGON, the network of Palestinian civil environmentalist organisations, which has led raising awareness of climate change, environmental justice, and water in Palestine. PENGON enables raising the debate on climate change in Palestine, challenging Israeli apartheid and the normalisation of this reality by the international community.

It would be wrong and to a certain extent naive to believe that the battle against climate change is the answer to the situation of illegal occupation and structural discrimination that
the Palestinians face in the Occupied Territories, since it is a matter that requires political commitments that go beyond the struggle against climate change. Yet a transnational initiative in the Jordan River basin could have the potential to become a space for dialogue that enables highlighting the Israeli occupation of the water resources shared among the three countries and building a framework for the effective resolution of conflicts in the zone.

1.7.3. Young people in the Southern Neighbourhood, the region’s hope against climate change?

Around 28% of the population of the Arab countries is between 15 and 29 years old, which amounts to 128 million people (Youth Policy, 2009) and all the statistics point to this number increasing in the coming years. Yet the political participation of the young population in the Middle East and North Africa region, and by extension the countries of the southern Mediterranean basin, is one of the lowest in the world.

According to the Arab Barometer, most of the population under 29 of every country considered climate change a serious problem (Arab Barometer, 2020). This position is understandable if we bear in mind that youth unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa region stands at over 25%, according to International Monetary Fund data, the highest figure of any region in the world. It might go some way to explaining why young Arab people are more conservative when it comes to estimating the importance of climate change.

The lack of a regional context in which there are civil liberties to facilitate the free movement of information and the development of civil organisations and movements appears once again as an element that limits the younger population’s appreciation and capacity for action in the struggle against climate change.

Nevertheless, there is one example of a transnational movement led by young people from different countries in the Arab world in the struggle against climate change. The Arab Youth Climate Movement (AYCM) appeared during the staging of COP18 in 2012 in Doha, the capital of Qatar. While according to the AYCM’s own website it is an independent movement, it has the support of international bodies such as the United Nations, Climate Action Network, and the Global Campaign for Climate Action. The action of this movement has been limited in time, chiefly during the COP held in Qatar. However, it is a milestone for the youth of the region and its capacity to mobilise and raise awareness in the battle against climate change.

The existence of this movement and other similar ones on a smaller scale drove the climate demonstrations that took place in the city of Marrakech in 2016, coinciding with the staging of COP22. Most of the demonstrations were led by young Moroccans protesting climate change and the repression existing in the country. Moreover, the emergence of the AYMC helped lay the foundations of a space for young people’s mobilisation ahead of the upcoming climate conferences that are expected to be held in Egypt in 2022 and the United Arab Emirates in 2023.
Likewise, there is an unquestionable need for social movements committed to the struggle against climate change in a region in which this process could have truly devastating effects of an extremely severe calibre. A battle against climate change originating from the young people of the Southern Neighbourhood countries is undoubtedly a necessity and an element that could act as a driving force to simultaneously power more just, more sustainable, and more democratic societies. Because the struggle against climate change is, ultimately, a struggle for greater social justice, greater dignity, and greater freedom.

1.8. The non-mobilisation of civil movements in the Southern Neighbourhood before 2011, endemic in the region

As described over the course of the chapter, the social initiatives in the struggle against climate change prior to 2011 in the southern Mediterranean basin countries were limited and quite low-key. On many occasions, they were movements that did not arise from an awareness of the battle against the process of climate change, but in response to its impact on the daily lives of the people in the region.

The political context plays a significant role in this idea of non-mobilisation and cannot be overlooked. The constraints on the expression of opinion in the public arena, be it physically or virtually, are under obsessive scrutiny by the governments of the region and it often acts as very important disincentive in the restriction of public mobilisation in general.

In addition to the political situation is a preoccupation with material reality on the part of the majority of the people in the region who, understandably, prioritise economic wellbeing over an issue often perceived as distant and somewhat intangible. Despite the urgency of climate change, this remains a secondary concern in contexts of endemic poverty and structural economic fragility.

The population’s disaffection with their governments, often seen as sources of stability and not as guardians of social welfare, completes the picture of understanding non-mobilisation in the region prior to 2011. The lack of connection and accountability on the part of the governments also affects social mobilisations that end up taking place in extreme situations when there is no longer any other viable alternative.

However, the examples provided over the course of this chapter comprise a precedent in social mobilisation against climate change in the southern Mediterranean basin: from the protests against the rise in the price of food in Morocco in 2007 to the “Arab springs” of 2011, taking in the farmers’ protests in Egypt in 2009, the migration of thousands of Syrian farmers between 2006 and 2010, and the emergence of an incipient transnational movement led by the region’s youth.

Until 2011, the struggle against climate change in the region was low-key, adapting to the difficult political and social reality in which it had to develop. Yet those first steps of the climate movement in the Southern Neighbourhood are essential to understanding what came after and what is still to come in the years ahead. As the Arabic saying goes, “movement is a blessing”.
Bibliography


2. Socio-environmental Conflict and Climate Emergency in the Southern Neighbourhood. An analysis of the implications for human mobility

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2.1. Introduction

Socio-environmental conflicts have emerged in recent decades as key elements when analysing the major social and environmental concerns of our time. As stated in the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015), environmental issues must be addressed from an integrative perspective, taking into account the connections environmental aspects have with economic, political and social processes.

Socio-environmental conflict is highly diverse and complex and is present in every corner of the planet where capitalist human societies interact with nature. Their origin can be varied, but the main factors that trigger these conflicts are usually linked to extractive or development projects (Gudynas, 2015), which exhibit important factors related to the power inequalities of the actors in conflicts (Martínez Alier, 2004), different levels of violence and processes of destruction of nature.

Many of these conflicts today are aggravated by global problems such as the climate crisis, which adds vulnerability factors to both the ecosystems and the communities involved, acting as accelerators of phenomena such as displacement or forced migration, interpreted within the conceptual framework of human mobility.

The analysis of socio-environmental conflicts therefore represents a consolidated but still emerging field, both in the academic and institutional spheres. In this chapter, I will briefly conceptualise socio-environmental conflicts, discussing their analytical potential for addressing global challenges. In the following, I will discuss the struggles for environmental justice arising from various conflicts, presenting the most relevant cases from the Levant and North Africa. Subsequently, I will analyse the influence of the climate emergency on the activation of socio-environmental conflict and the movements for environmental justice and climate justice that emerge in response. Lastly, I will address the implications of these dynamics for human mobility globally and in the regional context of the Southern Neighbourhood.

2.2. Socio-environmental conflicts and environmental justice movements

The association between conflict, society and the environment is by definition varied and complex, since the causes that trigger conflicts and their manifestations can vary considerably
in scale and intensity. The control and exploitation of natural resources can spark conflict between states or supranational institutions, violent intra-state conflicts of varying intensity or a wide variety of social conflict at the community level. In this text, I focus on the analysis of community socio-environmental conflicts locally, although cases of conflicts at other scales and intensities will be cited.

With these premises in mind, socio-environmental conflicts can be defined generically as social conflict in which an environmental component is in dispute (Sabatini and Sepúlveda, 2002). We might highlight some general and defining characteristics of social conflicts that are of interest to us in interpreting socio-environmental conflict. Social conflicts are dynamic processes that evolve over time and take place in the public sphere. An environmental impact or problem can become the basis for a potential conflict, however, if there are no organised actions by a social actor (with responses and reactions from other actors), it cannot be considered a conflict per se (Walter, 2009).

Within this framework, there are factors that set in motion or accelerate socio-environmental conflicts, such as the exploitation of natural resources that leads to dispossession and plunder of territory, differences in attitudes, values and beliefs about nature and the environment and institutional and governance factors (McNeish and Shapiro, 2021).

The factor of the distribution of years and benefits is crucial, since these conflicts usually involve the access, appropriation and distribution of natural resources and territories to one actor or group of actors, excluding the rest. This vision is related to the concept of ‘ecological-distributive conflict’, coined by Joan Martinez Alier and Martin O’Connor to describe social conflict generated by unequal access to natural resources, and in which environmental impacts and economic benefits are distributed in such a way as to cause conflict. This view is shared by a large number of leading authors in the field of political ecology (Sabatini and Sepúlveda, 2002; Alimonda, 2015).

Factors related to differences in values and interests with respect to nature are also central to this approach. The term ‘languages of valuation’ refers to disputes related to the existence of different interests originating from different values, world views or ways of relating to nature (Martínez-Alier, 2004). Conflicts characterized by these power asymmetries and differences in visions and conceptions of nature and territory generally trigger resistance movements by the affected communities. The struggles of these human groups in the face of aggressions to their territories and ways of life can be analysed as ‘movements for environmental justice,’ some of which are studied in this paper.

2.2.1. Struggles for environmental justice in the Southern Neighbourhood

Over the past three decades, many grassroots communities and social movements around the world have embraced this concept to structure their struggles to protect their environment and livelihoods from the processes of appropriation, transformation and dispossession of na-
turing. With the idea of collecting, analysing and systematizing these struggles, the Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas) provides information built collaboratively with affected communities about 3,621 socio-environmental conflicts around the globe (EJ Atlas, 2022).

Following David Harvey (1996), environmental justice movements are rooted in power inequalities and the ways in which those inequalities produce distinctive environmental consequences for marginalised and impoverished communities. The concept of ‘environmental justice’ was born in the 1980s in the United States, when there was a growing awareness in various communities and sectors of the population of the unequal distribution of environmental degradation marked by differences in class, ethnicity and gender. In other words, the main polluting industries and hazardous waste dumps were systematically located near impoverished and racialized neighbourhoods and communities, having a serious impact on their health.

First-generation environmental justice studies, due to their point of departure, focused on environmental injustices suffered by communities in the United States, but the concept has become enormously popular in recent years and numerous subsequent studies have focused on different parts of the world, especially communities and territories in the Global South.

In the context of the Southern Neighbourhood, movements for environmental justice are being closely analysed using the framework of political ecology since they exhibit socio-political and environmental factors that make them extremely complex. EJAtlas has recorded and analysed 114 socio-environmental conflicts in the regions of North Africa and the Levant. This number includes 10 conflicts in Iraq and six in Sudan that are not taken into account in the context analysed, bringing the total number of environmental justice struggles in the Southern Neighbourhood recorded in the EJAtlas to 98.¹

For North Africa specifically, the Atlas lists 18 conflicts in Morocco, eight in Algeria, nine in Tunisia, three in Libya and 20 in Egypt. In the Arab Levant region, 20 cases were reported in Lebanon, 17 in Palestine and three in Jordan. In terms of themes, the largest number of conflicts are grouped under the Fossil Fuels/Climate Justice category, with 25, Waste Management with 15, Water Management with 14 and Infrastructure and Built Environment with 13. Details can be found in Table 1.

Based on these data, we can say without a shadow of a doubt that the climate crisis represents one of the main triggers or accelerators of socio-environmental conflict in the Southern Neighbourhood. Conflicts directly related to opposition to fossil fuel burning facilities, resistance to fracking and other unconventional hydrocarbon exploration, or directly related to climate justice, make up the most numerous conflict category with 25. In addition, many of the con-

¹ The conflicts analysed in EJAtlas are recorded collaboratively by social organizations, activist groups and local or regional academic institutions, so the data is biased towards only giving visibility to conflicts in which environmental justice movements are aware of the EJAtlas initiative and have internet access, either directly or through partnerships with other groups or institutions or both. This clarification means that the number of conflicts with an environmental component throughout the Southern Neighbourhood is probably significantly higher than recorded in the Atlas.
flicts related to water management, infrastructure construction and land conflicts are directly affected by the climate crisis.

Table 1. Socio-environmental conflicts and struggles for environmental justice in the Southern Neighbourhood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPES OF CONFLICTS</th>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fossil Fuels/Climate Justice</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waste Management</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water management</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrastructure and built environment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mineral ores and building materials extraction</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land conflicts</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial disputes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism and recreation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biodiversity or conservation conflicts</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| TOTAL               | 20    | 20      | 18      | 17        | 9       | 8       | 3      | 3     | 98    |

Source: Own production based on data from ejatlas.org

As we can see, several territories in the Southern Neighbourhood are currently experiencing how the consequences of the climate crisis are leading to increased conflict. These global processes are manifested with distinctive particularities in the different regions of the world although there are concerns shared by the social movements and communities involved in mobilizations for environmental justice related to the climate crisis, as we will see in the next section.
2.2.2. Climate emergency and environmental justice: climate justice movements or climate movements

The growing concerns regarding the climate emergency are also related to the failure of institutional action in concrete measures to combat climate change, which has undoubtedly contributed to the increase, structuring and interconnection of various social movements and communities affected by the phenomenon (Camargo, 2019). These movements can be grouped under the conceptual umbrella of ‘climate justice movements’ or ‘climate movements’.

The concept of climate justice is directly related to that of environmental justice and is based on the assumption that the social and environmental effects of climate change will not impact all human groups equally (Borrás, 2016). Although the origin of the concept of environmental justice, as we have seen, was focused on local socio-environmental conflicts, the basis of its claims has many points in common with the causes behind the movements for climate justice, essentially of a more global or internationalist character.

As we pointed out in the previous section, the asymmetry between costs and benefits (environmental and economic) is one of the sparks that sets off socio-environmental conflicts. In the case of climate justice movements, the asymmetry component in the origin of conflicts is transferred to the global scenario, in which industrialised countries, especially large transnational companies and conglomerates and economic elites, have a greater responsibility for the causes of the climate emergency, largely monopolising the economic benefits generated by the industrial processes that trigger and feed climate change. Meanwhile, the communities and human groups most vulnerable to the climate emergency are mostly located in countries of the Global South, which have received and will receive severe environmental impacts and alterations, having barely enjoyed the economic and living standard benefits derived from the Western development model (except for certain political and economic elites in those countries). Therefore, as Susana Borrás points out, ‘the climate justice movement is the response of the international environmental justice movement to climate change’ (Borrás, 2016).

In addition to the asymmetry component mentioned above linked to the concept of ecological debt between the North and the South, climate justice movements also incorporate into their discursive framework the component of intergenerational justice and the need to carry out long-term climate policies, since many of the collectives that make up and cement these movements together are mainly made up of young people, such as the student strikes and Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion (De Armenteras, 2021).

2.2.2.1. Climate movements in the Southern Neighbourhood

The geographical context of the Southern Neighbourhood faces an unprecedented challenge in the coming years due to the climate emergency. The region is extremely fragile climatically, as its arid and semi-arid environment is highly vulnerable to the temperature increases and
precipitation decreases predicted in the latest IPCC reports, which may make the region virtually uninhabitable before 2100 (Pal and Eltahir, 2015).

While the governments of the various countries in the Southern Neighbourhood have signed international treaties such as the Paris Agreement or implemented agreements to encourage the development of renewable energy, discontent among the population regarding environmental issues seems to be increasing steadily.

Against this backdrop, environmental mobilisations in the countries in the Southern Neighbourhood have increased significantly in recent years. Although media attention to environmental movements in the region does not resonate as much as to European environmentalism or the murders of environmental defenders in the Americas, the voices of environmentalism in the Southern Neighbourhood are gradually beginning to gain more prominence.

These people often face repression and censorship in a complicated context, since many countries in the region have been immersed in different levels of conflictive processes in recent years. That is why activism that focuses its struggles on securing clean water or pushing for action on climate change can face prison sentences or other repressive state action.

Even so, several mobilisations related to the climate crisis have been launched in recent years in the region as part of the global movement for climate justice but with the specificities of a region that is extremely fragile and vulnerable to climate change and that will face very severe conflict in the coming years, as detailed in the section below.

2.3. Climate emergency and conflict in the Southern Neighbourhood. Implications for human mobility

There are many empirical examples that demonstrate the connections between climate change and conflict from various disciplines and approaches. A large part of these studies focus on conflicts related to the scarcity or difficulties climate change creates for access to natural resources, focusing on food insecurity, water, fishery resources and forests (Homer-Dixon, 1999; von Uexkull and Pettersson, 2018; Sánchez and Alaminos, 2021).

In the context of the Southern Neighbourhood, the socio-environmental conflict generated by the climate crisis has its own specificities of a particularly vulnerable regional geographic context. Rising temperatures are expected to cause an increase in extreme phenomena such as heat waves, especially in the summer. According to a study by the Max Planck Institute, the number of very hot days in the region has doubled since the 1970s and heat waves are projected to occur 80 days of the year by 2050 and 118 days of the year by 2100 (Lelieveld et al., 2016).

Another very relevant issue in the region is sea level rise, as a large percentage of its population lives in coastal areas. According to a World Bank report, the region faces the threat of

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2 For further information on this issue, please see the chapters on climate mobilisations in different countries of the region included in this collaboration.
losing more than 90% of coastal and freshwater wetlands if sea levels rise one meter (Blankespoor et al., 2014).

Egypt is perhaps the most noteworthy case. One-third of the Nile Delta and much of Alexandria, Egypt’s second largest city, are below the global mean sea level. Infrastructure works to drain these areas for agricultural and urban use, such as dams and dikes, are at risk if sea level rise as predicted by various studies occurs, and will displace two to six million people (Sivakumar et al., 2013).

The climate crisis will put added pressure on the region’s recurrent water and agricultural resource management problems. The most relevant case of conflict unleashed by the incidence of water stress and depletion of water resources is Syria, which experienced the most severe drought on record between 2007 and 2010, leading to the degradation of agricultural resources and increasing economic pressure. Indeed, some studies argue that increased social vulnerability and conflict over scarce water supplies during this period catalysed the onset of the Syrian war (Selby et al., 2017).

At the regional level, it is expected that in addition to all the associated environmental impacts, the increase in drought periods affect agricultural income, decrease public health and weaken political stability in the region, which will increase conflict at different levels (IPCC, 2014).

If adaptation or mitigation measures are insufficient, many communities are forced into displacement or migration. This same fate is shared by an increasing number of people for different reasons, from displacement due to armed conflict aggravated by environmental causes to forced migration due to rising sea levels in island or coastal populations.

### 2.4. Human mobility due to environmental conflicts

All human migratory phenomena are due to heterogeneous and multi-causal factors, so that the elements that cause them must be taken into consideration broadly. When approaching environmental displacement and migration, we should be aware that ‘environmental degradation and mismanagement are intertwined with the political, economic and social drivers of displacement’ (PNUMA, 2017). This statement is in line with the political ecology approach, which provides a complex and interdisciplinary lens when analysing the relationships between political, economic and social factors with environmental conflicts and changes (Alimonda, 2015).

These human mobility phenomena can be caused by systematic violations of economic, social, cultural and environmental rights and generally affect the most vulnerable parts of the population the most, making the perspective of ecological-distributive conflicts once again very important in this analysis. Within this interpretative framework, some authors and institutional reports argue that ‘climate change stands as the most important socio-distributive conflict’ (Ricciardi and Socorro, 2019).
According to the United Nations International Organization for Migration (IOM), environmental migrants are ‘persons or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affects their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad.’ (IOM, 2014: 13).

Along these lines, environmentally displaced persons would be ‘persons who are displaced within their country of habitual residence or who have crossed an international border and for whom environmental degradation, deterioration or destruction is a major cause of their displacement, although not necessarily the sole one’ (IOM, 2014: 13). However, when reference is made to ‘displacement’ in the context of a disaster, it may refer to ‘situations in which persons are forced or obliged to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, either as a consequence of or to avoid the effects of a disaster caused by a natural hazard. That displacement may take the form of spontaneous flight or evacuation ordered or imposed by the authorities. Displacement may be internal or international’ (Nansen Protection Agenda, 2015).

Another interesting concept is that of relocation or planned relocation, which refers to people and communities that must relocate to another place to rebuild their livelihoods. More precisely, the planned relocation of a collective is defined as ‘the definitive (or long-term) movement of a community (or a significant part of it) from one place to another, where important characteristics of the original community are preserved, such as its social structures, legal and political systems, cultural characteristics and world view: the community remains together at the destination, in a social form that is similar to that of the community of origin’ (Campbell, 2010: 5,859).

Finally, it should be specified that, although the term ‘climate refugees’ is often used in academic and social movement circles (Loewe, 2014; Gray, 2010) referring to forced migration phenomena in the context of climate emergency, ‘this expression has no legal validity, since the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees does not recognize environmental factors as a valid criteria for defining refugee status’ (PNUMA, 2017).

2.5. A look at the data in the Southern Neighbourhood

Although there is consensus that the phenomena of human mobility associated with environmental factors, and specifically with the climate emergency, involve a large and growing number of people, quantifying migration for environmental reasons is a difficult task. This is for a variety of reasons but the one to highlight is the very complex and multi-factor nature of the environmental migration phenomenon due to methodological problems and the lack of concrete standards and guidelines for collecting data (Ionesco, Mokhnacheva, & Gemenne, 2017).

Even so, the difficulties in handling data reliably and effectively are still considerable. First, because it is hard to distinguish situations in which environmental factors trigger a mobility process from other factors. This point can be nuanced and contextualised in qualitative stud-
ies, but it is more complicated to systematise in quantitative ones. Another important factor are the limitations in terms of official notifications from states on internal displacements and, even worse, cross-border displacements. In addition, there is a lack of data on the so-called ‘trapped populations,’ which are those affected by environmental degradations or impacts that cannot move due to a lack of economic resources or support networks (GRID, 2021).

In the Southern Neighbourhood, natural disasters and other environmental factors caused 341,000 new displacements in 2020 (GRID, 2021: 35). Wildfires, storms and earthquakes also forced people throughout the region to flee their homes, resulting in one of the highest numbers of new displacements due to environmental factors in the last decade.

Floods in Tunisia and Egypt, forest fires in Israel, Lebanon and Syria, and earthquakes in Algeria and Iran were particularly shocking. Many displaced persons were forced to flee for a second, third or even a fourth time. The combined effects of disasters, conflicts, economic hardship and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic are making displacement in the region chronic, cyclical and prolonged.

The case of Syria is particularly relevant. Wildfires caused the displacement of 140,000 people in total, and 25,000 new displacements in the Latakia, Tartous and Homs governorates. They damaged houses, electricity grids and water lines, as well as farmland, compounding food insecurity. Some of the evacuated villages housed internally displaced persons who had returned after fleeing the conflict. The fires came on top of a deep economic recession. The country is heavily dependent on imports, and the tightening of U.S. sanctions in June 2020 led to a sharp devaluation of the Syrian pound, which has eroded the population’s purchasing power. The prices of food, water and care items have reached new highs, generating a context in which economic conditions add to environmental conditions to provoke displacement and human mobility.

These examples illustrate how different types of socio-environmental conflicts can combine to generate or prolong displacement. In recent years, this nexus has attracted the attention of researchers and policymakers, reflecting a significant shift in the way risk factors for environmental crises are defined and understood.

This change has begun to take root in the Southern Neighbourhood as well, but progress in terms of policy development on natural disaster risk reduction, peace-building and long-lasting solutions has been slow so far. Greater support for these issues is an important prerequisite for the region’s stability and the formulation of solutions or alternatives to the problem of human mobility linked to environmental factors (GRID, 2021: 38).

Conclusions

Despite the vast scientific evidence mentioned above, the academic corpus on the relationship between climate change and conflict continues to debate the dynamics through which climate change can generate socio-environmental problems or impact, and how these dy-
namics can provoke, reactivate or prolong different types of conflicts. Among other issues, one of the main focuses of the discussion are the possibilities and adaptation and mitigation of the affected communities and their alternatives to the dominant models of development and ways of relating to nature.

This is where political ecology’s contributions to the analysis of socio-environmental conflicts, and especially from the studies of environmental justice and climate justice movements, may be promising. The starting point is to consider socio-environmental conflict as a potential vector of a transformation to sustainability.

As we have already seen, it is common for socio-environmental conflicts to generate different types of violence and deprivations of different kinds for the affected communities or human groups, which can lead to their forced displacement, relocation or even their disappearance, whether symbolic and cultural or physical (Pérez Rincón, 2018). However, when there are effects of the dynamics of a conflict that can act on the main cause of the impacts or alterations, even paralyzing or suspending that cause, the socio-environmental conflict may be considered as a ‘force’ or vector working towards sustainability (Temper et al., 2018; Scheidel et al., 2018).

These transformative dynamics are often triggered by environmental justice movements, and in the case of conflicts generated by the climate emergency, the new climate justice movements could also exercise that transformative potential. In fact, numerous examples are already being given collected by various reports and scientific articles highlighting the contributions of rescuing and valorising traditional knowledge that can be fundamental in climate change adaptation and mitigation (De Freitas et al., 2018).

In this line, the new proposals to apply the decolonial approach to environmental justice studies from political ecology are also stimulating. Highly interesting contributions have been collected on the different struggles of diverse communities in the Global South to question dominant epistemologies and confront the ‘coloniality of knowledge’ that dominates in techno-scientific analyses of major socio-environmental problems and conflicts (Alvarez and Coolsaet, 2018; Sánchez Vázquez, 2020).

In the context of the Southern Neighbourhood, it is especially important to be able to begin to envision positive transformation dynamics in the face of the climate emergency. We have already seen how the region is particularly vulnerable to the climate changes that will occur in coming years, and how the actions taken at the institutional level are clearly insufficient for the time being. Therefore, focusing on the transformative potential of the proposals of the environmental justice and climate justice movements, although it may seem naive at first, can be a complementary path to be integrated into the actions needed at the state and supra-state level.

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3. The Climate Debate in Morocco: Environmental Activism and Climate (In)justice in Times of Crisis

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3.1. Introduction

As this document explains in its introductory chapter, the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region in general and the Southern Neighbourhood in particular are among the areas most threatened by global warming, desertification, and water stress. The region also comes to be a reflection of climate injustice. Many reports point to the need for urgent action.

In Morocco in particular, the environmental situation has deteriorated dangerously in recent years. The lack of effective protection of the country’s natural and vital resources contributed to what some critics call environmental crimes against biodiversity. Likewise, the absence of effective state policies has exacerbated the situation and, as a consequence, different initiatives at different levels and forms of protest have emerged over the last few years. These initiatives represent a response to denounce the lack of effective national environmental policies and answer climate injustice mechanisms.

After a review of the impact that the climate emergency is having on the country, the objective of this chapter is to present, first, the context in which environmental initiatives and instances of environmental activism have emerged in Morocco. Second, we will discuss the main challenges and obstacles facing climate justice in Morocco. Thirdly, given that the concept of environmental activism is extremely complex and wide-reaching, in this section we will describe some cases of militant environmental activism, which contest and resist forms of governance and management of natural resources. We will then develop a mapping of some initiatives of citizen participation and the associative fabric that have an environmental impact that are worth mentioning. Finally, we will present a number of conclusions.

3.2. Climate and the environment in figures

A recent 2017 report on environmental degradation in Morocco published by the World Bank estimated that the total cost of this degradation represents around 3.5% of the GDP, the equivalent of almost 960 dirhams per capita per year (Rapport sur l’état de l’Environnement et du Développement en Méditerranée, 2020). The concentration of economic activities on the coast, with 80% of industrial activities and 53% of tourism facilities, is also at the source of this situation (ATTAC/CADTM, 2015).

The main concern of the Moroccan population, both urban and rural, is indisputably the water scarcity and water stress the country experiences. According to the 2017 World Bank report,
water availability in Morocco went from 3,500 m³ per person per year in 1960 (for a population of 12.3 million) to 731 m³ per person per year in 2005 (for a population of 30.4 million). In 2015, this figure dropped even more to 645 m³, well below the average water stress of 1,000 m³ per person per year. The per capita water resource potential in 2020 was estimated at 620 m³. This ratio, which is commonly used to compare countries, classifies Morocco as a country with high water stress, at less than 1,000 m³/person/year (Bouhia, 2020).

The estimated damage caused by greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions produced by Morocco into the global environment was estimated at 1.62% for 2014. (Bouhia, op. cit). A recent study shows that Morocco's average global greenhouse gas emissions are 1/500th, which places it 47th out of 160 countries. The same study states that in 2020 1.78 tons of CO₂ were emitted per capita in Morocco.¹

Another point of concern is the rise in sea level, between 2.6 and 15.6 cm by 2020, as well as an increase in average temperature between 0.7 by 2020 and 3–5 degrees by 2080 (Jawad, 2015). Also of concern is the high number of threatened coastal species, 48, and marine species, 56 (Rapport sur l’état de l’Environnement et du Développement en Méditerranée, 2020). It should be noted that agriculture accounts for 18% of GDP and creates 40% of jobs in urban areas and 80% in rural areas, while fishing accounts for 2.3% of the GDP (Ministry of Agriculture and Maritime Fisheries, 2019). The latter sector, strategic for the country’s economy, has been since independence oriented towards intensive and export-oriented agriculture, with the guidance and financial support of the World Bank (ATTAC/CADTM, 2015). Finally, according to 2019 Afrobarometer data, only 29% of the Moroccan population is aware of the dangers and effects of climate change on society.

3.3. Responses to climate change and climate (in)justice

The rural population, the most affected by climate change, has developed a number of adaptation strategies over the last few decades. These are based on resource exploitation systems that favour mobility, flexibility in land use, diversification of production and a diffuse mobilisation of natural resources over space and time (Bonte, Elloumi, Guillaume, & Mahdi, 2009). Families in rural areas have long been forced to adapt to environmental constraints, the dangers of continuous and intensive production, climatic changes, and transformations in their economic and political surroundings. They diversified their sources of income to complement agricultural and pastoral activities according to economic opportunities and national and international political contexts. This forced diversification is based on two planks: pluractivity and migration, both internally and internationally, a structural phenomenon since time immemorial.

Faced with this increasingly worrying reality, the National Initiative for Human Development (INDH), launched in 2005, had among other objec-

¹ https://www.ecoactu.ma/cop26-emissions-gaz-a-effet-de-serre-energie-maroc/
tives to curb immigration and combat the social economic inequality that exists in rural areas. The INDH was a milestone in terms of its participatory approach and relationship between civil society associations and actors with the communes and municipalities, with the aim of implementing fair and democratic governance in resource management. The formalisation of these initiatives through laws took longer than expected, and is more or less recent. Over the last two decades, the Moroccan state has also implemented several plans and actions to combat climate change. These actions were legislated and regulated through: Law No. 11-03 on Environmental Protection and Conservation (2003); the Green Morocco Plan (2008); Law 28-00 on Solid Waste Management and Disposal (2006); Law 77-15 (commonly known as Zero Mika Law ‘zero plastic bags’) (2016); the Morocco Climate Change Policy (2014); the National Strategy for Sustainable Development (2017); and the National Climate Plan: Horizon 2030. In 2018, Morocco was the leader in Africa in efforts to combat climate change under the Climate Change Performance Index, reaffirming the country’s commitment to the Paris Agreement on climate change. In addition to the formal mechanisms promoted by the organic laws, other forms of citizen participation have been experimented with at the initiative of several municipalities and local and international organisations. This demonstrates an interest not only from the state itself but also from civil society in introducing principles of participatory democracy into the field of climate justice. However, depending on the administrative structures and their political affiliation, this interest acquires heterogeneous and different levels and forms of participation and appropriation.

All these initiatives were accompanied by new forms of social mobilisation and environmental activism in several socioeconomically marginalised areas (Quintal and Trudelle, 2013). Environmental activism often touches not only on climate justice but also on social, political, and economic justice, as we will see in the following sections. The possibility of climate justice implies, first and foremost, distributive justice, political justice in decision-making, and fairness in that process. Likewise, it requires corrective justice insofar as it should not only be equitable in imposing sanctions in response to any violation of the law but also in repairing the damage it causes to individuals and groups. Finally, it requires social justice and recognition, given that socio-ethnic, economic, and political factors are often involved in climate injustice and environmental crimes suffered by ethnic minorities and vulnerable social groups (Mbare, 2019). Schlosberg (2007, 2013) draws a parallel between the lack of social recognition of the situations of injustice experienced by discriminated groups and the disqualification of the unique relationship they have with nature and their environment. Injustices depend, according to Schlosberg, on the multi-scale relationships that exist between actions that transform, threaten, and overexploit the environment and the synergies between ecosystems. Therefore, these injustices in most cases destabilise the ecosystem and subsistence conditions of the communities and create forms of social disaffiliation, which explains why forms of environmental protest and activism emerge.

Critical voices such as Moustakbal’s (2017) point out that ‘[s]o far, the Moroccan state has not developed its own strategy in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiation process’. This lack of independence is rooted in the history of French colonialism and the post-war modernisation theory, as well as in the alliance of the Moroccan ruling classes with foreign capital. The fact that Morocco’s ruling classes do not have a clear and independent perspective on the climate crisis does not prevent them from seeking new opportunities to accumulate more profits in the name of environmental protection. Most companies involved in green development projects, both domestic and foreign, have historically been responsible for the pollution of many local ecosystems (Moustakbal, op. cit).

The COP summits so far have failed to develop detailed and effective action plans to address climate change in each country and instead propose a framework of general and institutional principles accompanied by a monitoring and control process at the international level. In a fragile ecological context such as Morocco’s, the environmental and ecological transition requires radical measures to change production and consumption patterns. These are aspects that the INDC Maroc (the national conference for the presentation of Morocco’s contribution to the fight against climate change) and the various official documents have not yet addressed.

3.4. Environmental activism

In Morocco, opening up to the market economy and the development of individualism have led to the atomisation of communities but also to the emergence of new forms of socialisation. There were different kinds of consequences, demographic, cultural, social, and political, and with varying intensities (from very slow to radical), but they all converge in the same direction: the destructuring of the rural environment and highly polluted cities (Ben Brahim, 2003). Faced with these new social and economic realities, new forms of response and political action emerged in Morocco as a result of the association of the natural environment and its resources with local culture where both ethnic and territorial identities were key to these political actions. Quintel and Trudelle (2013) argue that the political action proposed by citizens in Morocco on the issue of the environment provides answers to the needs and challenges posed by the destructuring of the rural environment. Their collective action is sometimes organised, sometimes spontaneous, but above all is characterised by its heterogeneity.

These citizens’ movements can be classified into three broad categories according to the motives and reasons for their creation: (i) partnerships created by a local elite, (ii) partnerships created through public or private actors (NGOs, government initiatives, etc.), and (iii) partnerships that emerge directly from civil society to explicitly respond to problems experienced at the local level (Charfi, 2009). Most of these climate movements point to the responsibility not only of the state and the public sector in their resource exploitation activities, but also of the private sector and multinationals. Although climate injustice affects all components of local ecosystems, the protests of these movements are more intense and structured in the territories that suffer the most from water stress or where Amazigh populations live.
It should be emphasised that these movements call above all for action by the public authorities (resolution, control, or sanctions) since the effects and consequences on the climate also tend to accumulate and worsen. The demands of these movements are thus marked by clear references to regional disparities, which explains their presence mainly in the southern regions suffering from serious infrastructure deficiencies and water stress. This is why, as a whole, they identify and raise more structural issues such as corruption, lack of transparency, and the public authorities’ lack of public consultation. As found by Vernin (2017, p. 6) for the case of Tunisia—which resembles that of Morocco—the composition of the movements is heterogeneous. In the vast majority of cases they can be defined as ‘movements of residents in an area’, although others are presented as ‘citizen’s movements’. This is explained by the fact that environmental injustice has a territorial basis: pollution and drinking water cut-offs rarely distinguish between victims according to their social class, professional background, age, or political opinion. Some movements are part of or interact in various ways with local or national civil society, some have no links, and other movements are the result of a coalition of local organisations and the horizontal meeting of activists who work on or generally have a strong environmental dimension.

These movements are also distinguished by their form and duration over time as they can be highly structured or spontaneous, and as such sustained, or rather be part of an immediate social pressure perspective such as a reaction to an unusual event, a cut to water supply, mismanagement of public lands, or simply a reaction to an environmental problem resulting from mismanagement. The strategies of the movements differ depending on the precise impact of climate change, the territories, and the activists’ background. It should also be noted that both the counterparties and the scales of political interjection of these movements could vary (Ministry responsible, the regional government, or even the municipality/commune) to reach an immediate resolution, negotiation, and to pressure for a decision or the fulfilment of promises.

In this sense, demands can be limited to stopping environmental injustice, but they can also be accompanied by additional demands and alternative proposals and can even be distinguished from other social movements whose demands for ‘economic and social rights’ do not depend, at least not directly, on how natural resources are managed. Therefore, the means of action are different. In most cases, they involve the organisation of demonstrations, sit-ins, or the seizure of public or even natural spaces such as mountains, forests, and plots of land. Some movements have created links with international and global environmental activism initiatives.

We understand that the notion of environmental activism is very complex, broad, and can encompass different forms and manifestations. This chapter distinguishes this environmental activism into two subgroups. The first is dedicated to militant environmental activism that contests and resists forms of governance and management: it is a form of relational activism that has the particularity of mobilizing the citizen sphere for an anti-establishment public and political action (O’Shaughnessy and Kennedy, 2010). The second is made up of initiatives of
citizen participation and the associative fabric that describe a set of behaviours and actions at the collective level with an environmental impact worth mentioning, driven by individuals who cannot be categorised as activists per se, but who are nonetheless linked to the public sphere.

3.5. For climate justice: protest, resistance, and injustices

This section contains an outline of the grassroots social movements themselves that campaign for the environment and the climate. We will focus on those movements that arise as a consequence of the critical context of water stress and very particularly we will focus on political actions of movements that arose in villages, towns, communes, and cities as a response to poor public management of water distribution or overexploitation of natural resources. For this purpose, we will draw on three experiences of environmental activism, trying to describe the context in which they arose, as well as their dynamics of protest and resistance: Ben Smim, the Thirst Revolts in Zakoura, and the Movement on the Road ‘96 Imider. These represent three examples of the multiple experiences of activism that have emerged in the last decade in Morocco.

3.5.1. Ben Smim stricken by drought: where is our spring?

Ben Smim is an Amazigh village 15 km from Ifrane and 67 km from the city of Meknes with a population of just over 3,000. It is known for its famous source and spring Aghbalou Amaqran, now called Ain Ifrane by the multinational Euro-African Water Company (CASTEL), owned by French tycoon Nicolas Antaki. Created in 2001, this company signed a contract in 2005 with
the Moroccan government to exploit 60% of the water produced by the spring to be sold as bottled mineral water under the Ain Ifrane brand, which has been on the market for more than 10 years. It is an example of the various expropriations of natural resources from the population for the benefit of multinational capitalist companies.

This movement flourishes as a result of the widespread fear that the population will be deprived of the spring water that they have been using to irrigate their crops for decades, or water for their consumption. The population saw how this project endangered their 200 hectares of crops and 5,000 head of cattle. All this was at the origin of the reactions led by 72-year-old Ali Tahiri, in charge of the Ben Smim brotherhood. Coinciding with the start of construction in 2006, popular protests broke out involving all the village inhabitants. These were repressed by the forces of law and order and were unable to prevent the construction of the bottling plant. Tahiri was charged along with other residents with disturbing the peace. In September 2007, there were further altercations between law enforcement and protesters and activists who had opposed the project, ending in the arrest of six people who were sentenced to three months in prison without bail.

March for the right to water from the Ben Smim spring. (Image provided by Asociación para el contrato mundial del agua (Association for the World Water Contract))

3  https://www.acme-eau.org/Au-nom-des-habitants-du-village-de-Ben-Smim-province-d-ifrane_a1712.html
The Ben Smim mobilisation has the support of anti-globalisation movements, which consider the case a symbol of the commodification of public goods and made Ben Smim known abroad. Mehdi Lahlou, professor of economics and president of the Association for the World Water Contract (ACME), said in a statement to Le Monde that water is the only thing that allows this population to live in Morocco, and that there was no guarantee that the specifications for water consumption and distribution between the parties with the right to consumption would be respected. Thanks to the ACME platform, the inhabitants of Ben Smim were able to draw up several communiqués and manifestos which they sent to the Ministry of Agriculture and other water management institutions, signed and supported by several bodies defending climate justice, both in Morocco and abroad. The inhabitants continue to accuse the operator of exceeding 60% of the flow rate agreed upon in the specifications, and demand that the 3 litres/second quota granted by the Sebou River Basin Agency be complied with. Dissatisfaction and helplessness have increased in view of the recent construction of a golf course, which further aggravates the water problem in Ben Smim. The population is suffering from water stress levels that exceed the average for the country, an average that is already very low. While the tycoon Antaki continues to exploit the source and to claim that the water is the property of the state and not Ben Smim the consequences for the population are getting worse and worse.

3.5.2. Thirst Revolts in Zagora

At the end of August 2017, the inhabitants of the city of Zagora, a town of 30,000 residents located in the south of Morocco at the foot of the Atlas Mountains in the valley of the Daarja river launched a series of protests in the town square, in front of the town hall and the National Drinking Water Office (ONEP). The reason was water shortages, in particular the increase in the number of daily water supply cuts. These demonstrations, known as ‘Thirst Revolts’, began during the summer of 2017 and came to a head on Sunday, 8 October, when the protesters, mostly high school students and other young people, were assaulted by law enforcement with the excuse that the demonstrations had not been authorised by local authorities. The march of 8 October was also called in response to a series of arrests of young people who had participated in previous demonstrations. These incidents led to the arrest of 23 people, seven of whom were referred to the Court of Appeals of Ouarzazate for unauthorised assembly and disturbance of the public order. As a result of these arrests, a committee was created to support those arrested for the Thirst Revolts. This support committee called for a series of protest marches to demand not only the release of the detainees, but also that the population’s demands, particularly respect for their right of access to water, be met.

The case of the Thirst Revolts is yet another example of how the consequences of climate change and injustice in Morocco are closely related to socio-ethnic and economic factors. Zagora is a historically Amazigh region with one of the lowest income levels in the country. Regardless of its geographical location almost at the gates of the desert, the region has for decades suffered a marked neglect on the socioeconomic level.

It is also important to note that this water crisis is due not only to a shortage of rainfall, but also to the overexploitation of the water table by agriculture, especially watermelon cultivation, which consumes enormous amounts of water. This uncontrolled crop has proliferated in recent years due to the profits and benefits it generates, not only nationally but also for export abroad. The inhabitants and protesters of the Thirst Revolts directly accused the Ministry of Agriculture of having promoted this crop that benefits large farmers to the detriment of sustainable local agriculture. The protesters also lambasted the National Drinking Water Office for its passivity in managing the water crisis.

The Thirst Revolts emerged just one year after the start of the Hirak Rif Movement. Government fears that they would be protracted and have the same consequences as the Rif Movement led the Moroccan government to promise urgent strategic measures at the end of October 2017. The water crisis in this region is however becoming increasingly acute, and the level of water stress is breaking its own records due to the drought in Morocco for the last two years.

6 https://alyaoum24.com/966286.html
3.5.3. Movement on the Road ‘96 Imider

The Movement on the Road ‘96 Imider is perhaps one of the most significant social movements, not only because of the environmental and ecological dimension of its political action but also because of its activist dynamics. Imider is a small rural town in the southeast of the Tinghir province, a region with a majority Amazigh population. In addition to a high poverty rate, the commune lacks any basic infrastructure, as it is isolated from most of the surrounding villages by the lack of passable roads, access to electricity, health centre, schools, or drinking water supply. Imider has the largest silver mining deposit in all of Africa, exploited by the Moroccan mining group Managem through its subsidiary Société Métallurgique d’Imider, managed by Société Nationale d’Investissements (SMI) which is itself a subsidiary of Al-Mada (the former Omnium Nord-Africain group). Until 1996, the Imider silver mine was operated by a public company that was finally privatized in 1998 and became part of the group of companies owned by the royal family.

Movement on the Road ‘96 Imider prefigures the renewed forms of a broader movement on the margins, the result of a history of local mobilisation dating back to the 1980s. Exploitation of the mine set off a water crisis for the villagers. In 1986, residents came out to demonstrate when a well was built on land owned by the commune. In 1996, the inhabitants of Imider mobilised again and organised a 45-day sit-in. It was violently broken up by the forces of law and order, resulting in the arrest of 23 people and the death of one resident, Lahcen Ourahmane, who became a symbol for the movement.

Assembly/agraw at Imider. (Image: screenshot from the documentary Amussu directed by Nadir Bouhmouch)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uilU8EzYpU0

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7 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uilU8EzYpU0
The year 1996 is considered a symbolic date, marking the mobilisation that began in 2011. In the spring of 2011, Imider began to suffer from an acute lack of water resources that damaged agricultural activity, the main source of income for inhabitants. By 2011, the Imider movement had made itself known and began to wage its struggle autonomously. One of the first actions taken by the movement was to establish a permanent camp on Mount Alebban, at an altitude of more than 1,000 meters, to close the valves of the water pump that supplied the mining company. The movement continued to occupy Mount Alebban in protest until 17 September 2019, when the activists and villagers themselves decided to dismantle the camp after nine years of mobilisation in fear of possible interventions by security forces. On 19 September, the authorities demolished the camp.

The Movement on the Road ‘96 Imider had demanded from the beginning the recognition of the economic and social rights of the Aït Atta tribe, claiming that they had been stripped by the Managem mining company of its right of access to water. The list of the movement’s demands is long indeed and includes not only access to drinking water, but also investment in the commune taking advantage of the profits earned from the mine and the creation of jobs for the town’s unemployed youth and students during the summer. Its agenda of environmental demands is focused on denouncing the contamination of water tables from the dumping of toxic mining waste, as well as the monopolisation of water resources to the detriment of local agriculture and compensation for the inhabitants for the environmental damage caused by mining.

The movement’s protest dynamics reflect a high degree of politicisation of a community like Imider’s located on the margins. Independently of its traditional forms of Amazigh organisation called agraw (assembly), and the cross-management of power and the importance of the people’s voice, the movement also demonstrated an enormous capacity for innovation and creation of different forms of its political action and by making art and documentaries part of this political action. In this way, the movement in collaboration with documentary film director Nadir Bouhmouch produced a documentary entitled Amussu which recounts the day to day struggle and the trajectory of the movement over three years. It is an audio-visual production which was able to record and provide an ethnography of the different forms of mobilisation and daily political actions of the movement itself. El Khalaoui and Bogaert, (op. cit, p. 183) point out that the Movement on the Road ‘96 Imider constitutes an emblematic contemporary collective action, since it symbolises, in one way or another, a variety of dispersed struggles that are structured in the rural world around Amazigh activist networks whose epicentre revolves around the question of the right to land and access to local natural resources.

3.6. Citizen participation and associative network initiatives

In this section we will proceed to briefly map some citizen participation initiatives in the area of environmental management and governance. It is difficult and sensitive work to present a generic definition of these citizen initiatives. In general, they encompass different realities.

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8 An Amazigh word meaning movement.
and a wide range of experiences that could be classified as ‘ecological’ or ‘for environmental and/or climate justice’, or ‘against extractivism and/or productivism’. Our intention is to start with those initiatives of the associative network that were launched in the urban environment and then move on to the rural environment.  

3.6.1. Urban environment

In the city of Chaouen, the participatory council for environment, climate, energy, and sustainable development was set up in 2016 as a consultative body whose task is to plan and discuss a strategy for sustainable development and energy management in the city. The body also participates in negotiating and arriving at a consensus on budget items dedicated to environmental preservation. Another citizen participation initiative is the so-called Workshop: Tourism and sustainable development Promotion of ecotourism along the coast, Souss-Massa National Park and mountains, Agadir province. The most active associations are the Association des Sciences de la Vie et de la Terre du Souss (ASVTS), Association de Enseignants des Sciences de la Vie, and the Paysage Association for the environment and culture. This network of associations has launched several projects in the Agadir municipality.

Another prominent organisation is the Moroccan Forum for Environmental Initiatives, which fights for environmental protection at the local, regional, and national levels. Organised for the first time in 2006 and in 2008, the municipality of Tiznit decided to institutionalise this initiative. This forum represents a platform for discussion and consultation that each year brings together the associative actors with representatives from municipalities and outside services on issues considered priorities for the local development of municipalities and communes.

Neighbourhood initiatives represent a mechanism that is part of an approach that involves residents and neighbourhood associations in support of the management of spaces and environmental issues that concern the neighbourhood. One of the most successful initiatives is Asmae. It is a neighbourhood platform that works in collaboration with local associations on projects related to protecting the environment.

CIDEAL MAROC has been a public service non-profit association based in Tangier since 2010, actively working in development cooperation. Its objectives are to implement several actions to contribute to improving the living conditions of the vulnerable and disadvantaged, their environment, and to fight against the effects of climate change on vulnerable segments of civil society.

The Observatory for the Protection of the Environment and Historical Monuments in Tangier initiative was put together by several

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9 To learn about other initiatives, both rural and urban, see Marcoc: Justice climatique, urgences sociales. Hennani; S, Jalal, H; Imad, O; Maâras, Kh and Telb, M. et. al. (2021).
10 Maroc // Projet Jeunesse et Environnement | Asmae asbl - Belgique
11 Association CIDEAL Maroc
12 https://marsadtanger.org/
civil society actors in the city of Tangier in collaboration with other national and international organisations. The objective of this observatory is to meet the goals of sustainable development at the regional level, to classify and characterise the historical heritage of the city of Tangier, to strengthen the capacity of civil society to intervene in solving problems related to the environment and historical heritage, and to contribute to improving living conditions in its various fields.

3.6.2. Rural environment

The El Mouddaa Adaptation Initiative in Morocco was designed and implemented through a comprehensive system with a participatory and inclusive approach, aiming to build a community of resilience to climate change. Chosen as a pilot project by United Nations Climate Change, El Mouddaa is an Amazigh community of 350 people, located on the southern slopes of the High Atlas Mountains, near the Toubkal National Park. The village is very isolated and is 2,000 meters above sea level. As part of the project, the young people built stone dams, strategically placed to reduce flooding and damage to village infrastructure and also put the main irrigation underground to reduce the vulnerability of local agriculture by ensuring permanent irrigation. The El Mouddaa initiative won the Ecuador Community Adaptation Award in 2012 (see the report Youth in action on climate change: inspirations from/around the world, 2013, El Mouddaa Adaptation Initiative, United Nations Climate Change).13

Workshop with women from El Mouddaa. (Source: Youth in action climate change: inspirations from around the world)

13 https://unfccc.int/topics/education-youth/good-practices/youth-engagement/el-mouddaa-adaptation-initiative-morocco
The Ziz Valley is a veritable laboratory of local environmental and climate initiatives and mobilisations. Further south, in the Ziz Valley, where there is very little rainfall and access to water is much more precarious, associations have begun to implement projects to rehabilitate the so-called khettaras, an irrigation system based on gravity-driven water drainage to the much drier areas. Associations include the Association de développement dans la commune de Sifa, l’Association pour le développement d’Aoufous, l’Association Provinciale de Lutte contre la Désertification et pour la Protection de l’Environnement, l’Association Al-Amal, l’Association Oasis Tafilalet pour le Développement, Association Oasis Ferkla pour l’environnement et le patrimoine, and le Réseau Tafilalet des associations de développement en la ciudadad de Rissani. The objective of this network of associations is to create local development projects with the population itself and to jointly establish contacts, both in Morocco and abroad, to find funding for their projects. These new actors and the involvement of international NGOs are symptomatic of the transformations taking place in the structure of the Moroccan state. In fact, the progressive withdrawal of the state from the management of the climate problem is at the source of the expansion of associations.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have been able to see how the dynamics of the mobilisations in Ben Smim, the Thirst Revolts and the Movement on the Road ‘96 Imider converge with demands related to jobs, health care, education, and development in general. They are voices that demand a responsible development model in the face of a triple-sided crisis: socioeconomic, political, and environmental. What we have seen both in the numbers and in the realities denounced by the movements is that the water crisis is worsening in a very worrying way and that the impacts of extractive activities aggravate it even further.

The various struggles and forms of protest that have emerged in Morocco in the last decade—not only those we have identified in this paper, but others such as those of Douar Chlihat in Larache, the demonstrations against phosphate mining and its impact on the population in the city of Asfi, and so many others—is proof that the state is not reacting. The Moroccan government is under fierce pressure from competition in international markets and the logics of productivism and capitalism that have a negative impact on how natural resources are managed and on the population in general. While the Moroccan state is trying to prove to the world that it is taking action against climate change, the voices of resistance are growing. The experiences born from civil society that we have mentioned in this paper show that the initiatives carried out by the associative fabric and civil society are trying to address in various ways the negligence of the state in a range of areas as well as its inability to provide basic infrastructure such as water supply to villages, to build roads, or that people organise themselves into cooperatives to produce and distribute local products and address the consequences of climate change on the local ecosystem.

Initiatives that in some ways displease the Moroccan state, and for that reason are victims
of various forms of intimidation and repression during the exercise of their political actions in the public arena.

It is also of note that there is a growing interest in the role that Islamic ethics could play in environmental mobilisations. The Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change signed in 2015 by 20 Muslim countries, including Morocco, is a manifestation of those initiatives that fall within the Islamic tradition, both Quranic and prophetic. Although some international Islamist organisations have included environmental components on their platforms, and education-oriented Muslim environmental groups have been formed in several countries, these groups remain relatively few in number and a strong transnational Islamic environmental movement of the stature of Greenpeace has yet to emerge (Ornert, 2020).

Finally, it must not be overlooked that the climate crisis and its injustices in Morocco show that the population is the most vulnerable socially and politically and the most fragile economically, and that it is the population that must take up the mantle to adapt to the new climate scenarios.

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14 [https://www.ifees.org.uk/about/islamic-declaration-on-global-climate-change/declaration-drafting-team/](https://www.ifees.org.uk/about/islamic-declaration-on-global-climate-change/declaration-drafting-team/)


Until Summer 2021, Tunisia represented the only and last hope for a successful democratic transition in the Arab region. However, President Kais Saied’s recent power grab revealed the challenge of this transition process. Saied’s references to the “popular will” and “national sovereignty” have resonated with many Tunisians disillusioned by the failures of democratically elected governments. Today, Tunisians are reiterating their revolutionary call for profound changes in the system, not only at the institutional level but also in matters related to socio-economic justice. In this context, climate justice stands as a pressing issue in the way of a profound and sustainable change. Some popular mobilisations have previously linked the notion of national sovereignty to environmental sovereignty.

Yet, evoking “the people” or “the nation” as a unified entity risks undermining another key concept that needs to be taken into account when addressing the climate emergency: intersectionality. Historically embedded injustices based on gender, age, class, race, and geography condition how different segments of the society experience the impact of climate change. The diversity of pro-environment mobilisations in Tunisia, ranging from youth activism to local movements in various governorates, also highlights the need to consider intersectionality when talking about the climate crisis. Hence, this piece will focus on the tension between “national sovereignty” and “intersectionality”, two crucial concepts in the fight against climate change and social justice. It will particularly discuss how regional disparities caused both by policy choices and climate change are transformed into urban injustices through unplanned urbanisation. This focus will help us identify the divergence regarding the effects of climate change and among the pro-climate mobilisations without forgetting the interconnectedness of the climate crises at the national and international levels. The piece will conclude with recommendations to both pro-environment movements and policymakers on addressing the climate emergency in a transitional period.

4.1. Introduction

The power grab initiated by President Kais Saied on July 25, 2021, and the subsequent exceptional measures, such as the freezing (and later dissolution) of the parliament, extension of his powers to the executive by naming a PM in September 2021, drew a slew of anxious reactions as to the future of Tunisian democracy. In his view, these actions were necessary to restore sovereignty to the people. Riding the populist discourse, Saied built his popularity on
the people’s sovereignty. The support he garnered from the population also tells about how Tunisians feel over the destiny of their country’s affairs.

The environmental question is no less critical for Tunisian policymakers, civil society activists and average citizens. A slogan seen in a Tunis neighbourhood read “no national sovereignty without environmental sovereignty”. The sentence sums up what Tunisian civil society, considered one of Tunisia’s surviving democracy’s pillars, has been tirelessly working hard to safeguard a future generation of Tunisian activists’ right to live a dignified life and future. Yet, Tunisian climate activism cannot be depicted as one united front in the quest for sovereignty. Historical injustices and practices alongside the post-revolutionary democratisation process have shaped the movement creating a vibrant but diverse scene of mobilisations. This diversity showcases the divergence of interests, priorities, and approaches in fighting environmental justice. This divergence can sometimes be seen as the basis of conflictual relations, which can be analysed through the “core/centre-periphery” model of the Dependency Theory.

“No national sovereignty without environmental sovereignty,” says the Graffiti spotted on the street in Tunis. Source: Nadia Haddaoui, Tunisian freelance journalist’s Twitter account: https://twitter.com/carnetdoute/status/1451949231275642895?s=20&t=vcC8o01F5YLqR0guAxfnA
Dependency Theory argues that the global capitalist economy is structured to ensure the flow of wealth and resources from the periphery to the centre, causing the latter’s enrichment at the expense of the former (Cajas Guijarro and Perez-Oviedo 2019). However, when talking about the environment, the trend seems to be reversed with waste (Clapp 1994) and emissions (Roberts and Parks 2009). Hence, the development of the core has lasting consequences for the environmental crises experienced by the periphery. This paper considers core-periphery relations when analysing the historical roots of environmental injustices and diversity of the pro-climate movements not only at a global level but also at national and sub-national levels. We also draw on Elinor Ostrom’s collective action theory and its effect on climate change. She stressed the importance of a ‘polycentric approach’ in dealing with climate change by adopting local-level solutions and policies for global problems, such as the climate crisis. Her famous theory of “The Tragedy of the Commons” argues that common resources of a particular community can be well-managed by the beneficiaries of those resources. By advocating a “bottom-up” approach to local issues, the theory calls for less government intervention and more support for individuals as well as their communities, away from external groups such as economic, political, and social policymakers; the latter can be a source of “the tragedy of the commons.”

The shipwreck of a fuel-laden tanker off the Gulf of Gabes on April 15, 2022, sent shockwaves nationwide and worldwide, alerting the environmental NGO World Wildlife Fund (WWF) about an environmental disaster in the Mediterranean Sea. It brought sad memories of the city oasis historical struggle against state-sanctioned pollution, whose main culprit is the Tunisian Chemical Group, a state company specialising in phosphate processing. Being the world’s only maritime lush oasis, Gabes’ fate tipped over since independence to become the most polluted seashore in Tunisia, earning the ominous nickname of “the shore of death.” (Ajl, 2018). Located next to Gabes’ phosphate processing plant, Shott al-Salem is the other side of the developmental coin in Tunisia. It is popularly known as the shore of death.

In Gabes and beyond, the climate crisis in Tunisia has brought to the surface the intersectional character of the social movement for action for environmental sustainability. We first trace its background and post-revolutionary evolution to unpack the pro-climate movement with an intersectional approach. We then look at the echoes of transnational pro-climate activism in Tunisia; we continue with an analysis of civil society, climate activists and state institutions’ decades of work in averting climate change and its effect on natural resources, land and food sovereignty. We lastly consider the micro-dynamics of environmental injustice through the urban waste crises.

4.2. **Part I: The Historical Background and Post-Revolutionary Evolution of Climate Struggles in Tunisia**

The politicisation of the environmental question can be traced back to Ben Ali and his “environment-friendly” policy. It was mainly aimed at pleasing the EU, which was funding the significant projects for cleaning up the Mediterranean and reducing waste. This facade of
environmental greenwashing’ hid an ugly reality of heavy censorship of media, “tight state control over research and torture and imprisonment of activists” (Darwish, 2017). The establishment of the National Agency for the Protection of the Environment one year after he seized power and of Labib as the mascot of Ben Ali’s state environmental policy consolidated Ben Ali’s grip on the question of the environment behind a facade of democratisation and genuine concern about the impact of global warming (Goldstein, 2014; Pepicelli, 2021). At the same time, environmental activism was suppressed. The state monopolised heavy and highly polluting industries: Gabes GCC and Gafsa’s phosphates mines represented the grim reality of the state’s sacrificing the population’s well-being in the country’s most polluted areas. Many Tunisians saw the 2008 Gafsa Protests as the first spark of the Tunisian Revolution when the Ben Ali regime began to show signs of weakness and ushered in its downfall. Social justice was one of the fundamental aspirations of the 2011 Revolution in Tunisia. Environmental justice has emerged as a critical component of social justice for activists in the aftermath of the Revolution. Figure 1 indicates a growing awareness of the importance of climate change around the Arab world. Furthermore, Tunisia is one of the leading countries in this regard. On the other hand, figure 2 shows that climate change is considered less severe than other environmental issues such as water pollution or trash. Arguably, a comprehensive vision linking the climate question to the immediately experienced problems by the citizens seems to be lacking.

**Figure 1: How serious of a problem is climate change?**

![Figure 1](image)

While activists have often considered the environmental question a pillar of social justice, post-revolution Tunisian politics has led them to a feeling of disillusionment with the political class and the state institutions in seriously addressing the climate crisis. Even though Article 45 of the 2014 Constitution includes the right to a healthy environment and the aim to eliminate

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1 Source: Arab Barometer ("What MENA Citizens Think About The Environment in 11 Graphs" 2022)
Civil society has witnessed a boom in Tunisia with the democratic transition process and the attainment of democratic rights, most notably freedom of speech and association. Pro-environment or pro-climate activism also benefitted from this boom. Their growth and greater diversity have marked the post-revolutionary pro-climate mobilisations. According to the statistics on the Ministry of Environment’s online registry, there are 243 officially recognised NGOs working on the environment in Tunisia (“Statistiques” 2022), while a private website that keeps track of NGOs in Tunisia lists 173 associations working on the environment (“Associations” 2022). The diversity is visible in the forms and strategies of mobilisation or their domains of interest. The pro-environment movement has grown in various records, such as non-governmental organisations or ad hoc mobilisations, and it has relied on different strategies and alliances (Loschi 2023).

Figure 2: How serious of a problem is the following?

Civil society has remained dissatisfaction with the state’s lack of a clear and comprehensive vision to deal with the pressing environmental crisis (Salehi 2017). The state’s inability to bring about a revolutionary transformation in environmental politics can be partially explained by the instability of institutions and the political scene: the Ministry of Environment changed its name nine times, and twelve ministers have been named in the eleven years after the Revolution. In the absence of a robust institutional initiative, civil society has been the frontrunner in the struggle for environmental and climate justice, as has happened with many other issues in post-revolutionary Tunisia (Ben Naser 2021b).

2 Source: Arab Barometer (“What MENA Citizens Think About The Environment in 11 Graphs” 2022)
With regards to their areas of work, some associations specifically target the question of climate, as it is the case for L’association Tunisienne du Changement Climatique et du Développement Durable (Tunisian Association of Climate Change and Sustainable Development) and L’Association Tunisienne de Climatologie (Tunisian Climatology Association).

Many other forms of collective action, ranging from small local CSOs or local protests to the Tunisian branches of international NGOs, contribute to the struggle from different angles. Simultaneously, Tunisia has witnessed several non-institutionalized pro-environment mobilisations in the last years, ranging from national formulations of global events such as Earth Hour to public protests organised by local communities, or digital activism. The pro-environment movements are also diverse in their approaches. They have developed numerous activities in domains such as cleanliness, environmental protection, sustainable development, environmental education, biodiversity, climate change, and green economy. Most recently, a crucial step has been taken towards coalition building and unity among these civil society actors with the organisation of a “National Gathering of Environmental Dynamics” and the creation of the “Tunisie Verte” (Green Tunisia) network (Ben Naser 2021b).

4.3. Part II: Transnational Environmental Activism

The Tunisian revolution gave impetus to several civil society organisations from Tunisia to connect with international organisations on matters related to climate change, mainly from the Global South. In 2013, Tunis hosted the World Social Forum (WSF), in which several civil society members, NGOs and organisations representing ethnic minorities and indigenous people from all over the world, particularly from Global South countries heavily affected by climate change. National branches of renowned international networks such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) or Youth for Climate have been formed in Tunisia. They have been at the frontlines of activism, asking for an international response and global environmental justice. Internationally coordinated forms of activism like the Earth Hour have been attracting attention, especially in the capital city of Tunis (Sayadi 2022).

Similarly, on March 25, 2013, during the WSF, a “Water Justice Day” was held in Tunis. It discussed the global water crisis: water justice advocates argued that the crisis is political, with far-reaching implications on the environment. Indigenous activists indicted the global neoliberal policies for exacerbating climate deregulation. Climate activists often considered the fierce competition for broader access to scarce water resources to ensure governments’ economic growth, particularly indigenous peoples in the Global South and the Western Hemisphere, as detrimental to their livelihoods and sovereignty over such resources. They consequently asserted their right to defend water sources for the planet’s well-being.

The event concluded with the articulation of a few goals. These include the importance of connecting water justice advocates worldwide with Tunisian social movements and linking global campaigns with local water Justice struggles in the Maghreb region and around the
world. Another theme included the question of water as a common and a human right, which revolves around social movements’ campaign for the right to water and sanitation while fighting the “privatisation of water services, the commodification of water resources and the corporate takeover of community water supplies.” The roundtable built connections and “exchanged key strategies with local groups in Tunisia and Northern Africa.” (European Water Movement, 2013)

With the help of the public authorities, Tunisian activists have been using international venues to make their voices heard at the global level. Tunisian civil society has been participating in elaborating Tunisia’s Nationally Determined Contributions (Web Manager Center 2021). It has also been present within the Tunisian delegation for successive COPs (Arab Reform Initiative 2022). The creation of a young negotiators initiative for the 16th Conference of Youth (COY26), a precursory event to the COP26, has been welcomed as an effort to incorporate the youth and the civil society in the development of Tunisia’s environmental politics and its diplomatic position on the matter (“Revue Trimestrielle d’Information Climatique” 2021). Recently, Tunisian civil society and environmentalists achieved historical success regarding the waste crisis that pitted Tunisia against Italy: the showdown lasted for months and created a diplomatic row between both countries over illegal Italian waste dumping in the Sousse region (Maher 2022). These examples evidence that authorities are ready to create a space to ally with pro-environment mobilisations in some instances. In the meantime, the continuing degradation of the environmental situation and the growth of the pro-environment movements indicate the more general lack of a comprehensive vision or a strong political initiative to tackle the problem.


Studies have shown how core-periphery relations are replicated at the national level in Tunisia, in the case of interior regions of the south and the west serving as the periphery of the coastal core (Belhedi 2011). In fact, since independence from France in 1956, the Tunisian hinterland has been disregarded by state development strategies, leading to the neglect of several demands for basic needs such as access to water and sanitation to complete dependence on the state for providing them with foodstuff. Ironically, in some regions where water reserves represent the largest in the country, as in the northwest (in the governorates of Jendouba and Kef in particular), many remote areas have no access to potable water. Some have no water at all, after decades of post-independence marginalisation. Some of these contexts can be traced back to pre-independence Tunisia. Colonial policies adopted in the structure of the industries of natural resources or the land distribution in the regions where the collectivisation policies after independence nationalised all former colonists’ lands and properties, creating a property crisis, especially land feuds in regions where tribal affiliations and connection to ancestral lands came at odds with the state’s nationalisation project, seen as expropriation of local property and lands. It is essential to look into the underlying factors behind mobilisations
against climate change. They are the indirect consequences of old policies undertaken by the colonial authorities and later continued by the newly independent state.

The concentration of food, phosphates, oil, and iron industries, for instance, in coastal areas in the northeast and centre-east of the country, is a testament to an imbalance of national resource sharing. Whereas wheat, vegetables and fruits are usually produced in the fertile lands of the interior regions, the whole food industrial production complex is carried out in factories in large cities that the government had established since early independence. The economic discrepancy profoundly affected job opportunities, creating an acute dependence of the interior regions, historically considered the country’s breadbasket, on its food and water subsistence in the centre. Over the last two decades, the dire economic conditions, particularly unemployment and regional disparities in resource sharing, drove the inhabitants’ anger because of the unequal treatment and resentment towards the central government. They perceived such treatment as the continuation of systematic marginalisation of their region since its independence from France. The frustration culminated in the impoverished area of the mining region of Redeyef in the governorate of Gafsa in the flaring up of protests in 2008 over the lack of job opportunities in the region and the long-term health impact of the mining industry on the inhabitants. The latter has been affecting the locals’ long-term health (including chronic tooth decay) through water pollution due to chemicals used in processing phosphates.

During the authoritarian rule of Ben Ali, the violent and bloody repression of the protests was considered by scholars of social movements as the first spark of the Tunisian Revolution. Even before, Sidi Bouzid and other areas in the southeast and central west of Tunisia saw widespread protests that rocked the Tunisian Revolution in 2010-2011. The simmering frustration of long-time marginalised populations led to several mobilisations and protest movements that punctuated the Tunisian transition, some of which began in areas where pollution and climate change mainly affected them.

After the Revolution, several protests and mobilisation movements caught national and even international headlines in these impoverished regions, with some of these protests involving old state-local population feuds over lands, natural resources and pollution, such as the ones in Gabes, in the oasis area of the Jerid (southwest), and the historical phosphate mining region of Gafsa. For instance, in the last case, sit-ins were staged on the mining sites with protestors interrupting the production of phosphates and leading Tunisia to a national crisis due to the value of phosphates for the country as one of the largest producers in the world.

### 4.4.1. Reversing top-down policies exacerbating Tunisia’s climate crisis

Tunisia’s environmental state policies continued with the post-colonial Tunisian state status quo politics of dealing with the climate crisis, particularly fighting desertification. Recently, a new generation of researchers embarked on a venture of debunking the old paradigms of the colonial policies in stemming the advancing desertification in Tunisia’s most climate-vulnerable regions, as well as the inability to “encapsulate the challenges that drylands face due
to climate change.” (Foroudi, 2022). In the article titled “If the desert was green,” journalist Layli Foroudi pointed out the inadequacies of the solutions articulated by successive Tunisian governments, posing the puzzle “How tree planting became obsolete”. By implementing “solutions”, including intensive agricultural projects that are inadequate to Tunisian arid areas. Such solutions adversely affect local ecosystems and the local economies (Ibid.)

Climate mobilisation in Tunisia did not start in 2011. Ben Ali’s Tunisia has witnessed timid and limited mobilization in the academic field, usually carried out in consultation with transnational climate organisations (mainly on the African continent). The Tunis-based NGO, the Observatory for Food Security and the Environment (OSAE), and the Medenine-based Institute of Arid Regions (IRA, its French acronym), an academic research centre under the patronage of the Ministry of Agriculture, serve world-class academic communities from different universities across the world, with interest in the sustainability of arid regions in the south of Tunisia. These cases represent Tunisian civil society mobilisation and its close work with academia in drawing attention to the climate crisis in Tunisia regarding water, arid regions and food sovereignty.

4.4.2. IRA’s mission in putting research at the heart of fighting desertification

The IRA, as a Tunisian state research centre, is an example of the work of academics in averting one of Tunisia’s oldest climate change crises: desertification. It was founded in 1976 and is mandated by the Ministry of Agriculture to conduct research needed to develop the agricultural sector, protect natural resources, and fight against desertification in Tunisia’s arid and desert regions. One of its goals is to focus on regional disparities as a critical form of injustice in the Tunisian south. It works in close contact with civil society and locals in southern governorates such as Medenine, Tataouine, Gabes, Tozeur, and Gafsa to study the short and long-term effects of desertification on Tunisia.

The IRA was the primary entity behind implementing observatories in the arid southern governorate of Medenine. The advancement of the desert has been one of the greatest threats to the Tunisian environment and its ecosystem. The continuing encroachment of the Sahara Desert in the southern region is but one of its manifestations. The arid zones threatened by the desertification phenomenon saw a national action plan chaperoned by the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (ratified in 1996), established several observatories to assess and monitor desertification in the main agro-ecological zones of Tunisia. Efforts at limiting desertification go back to colonial times. Post-independence Tunisia simply continued with the policies set up during that period. This points out the unsustainable solutions for the phenomenon, with the issue of greenwashing perpetuating the old colonial solutions by the Tunisian state in fighting desertification. IRA has contributed to the national and regional development effort in the conception and the study of several nationwide projects. In the last decade, the centre has enhanced its research output through a cooperation framework with several actors in the field, mainly economic ones. By signing partnership agreements, organising training workshops and assisting the agricultural sector through laboratory analysis, livestock husbandry through artificial camel nursing and goat improvement in arid and desert regions of the south (IRA website)
4.4.3. Food insecurity: building food sovereignty in Tunisia

OSAE was established as an observatory to monitor the issue of food and water sovereignty in Tunisia while taking into account the impact of climate change on water stress and food shortage in Tunisia. The issue of food sovereignty predates the Tunisian Revolution. The first crisis happened in the 1960s with the collectivisation period and the agrarian restructuring process that led to the pauperisation of rural Tunisians and pushed them to an exodus to the large cities. Later, the 1980s bread riots ultimately toppled the Bourguiba regime. One of its leading causes was the Tunisian state’s limiting government subsidies of foodstuffs to implement the IMF’s imposed structural adjustment plan in 1986. This, in turn, hurt the agricultural sector.

The most recent mass mobilisation revolving around food sovereignty materialised two days before Ben Ali’s flight from Tunisia, on January 12, 2011, in the oasis town of Jemna (Jerid area, southwest Tunisia). The saga of the Association for the Protection of Jemna Oasis (APJO) and the fight of the locals of the town of Jemna became a success story of civil society activists and local populations’ mass mobilisation in reclaiming their lands from the state. It ended what they saw as a century-old injustice of land dispute, going back to the French colonisation of Tunisia.

The Jemna social solidarity experiment brought Tunisians from all walks of life to lend support to the locals in their fight for the oasis and the youth’s occupation of the date plantation in 2011 to protest the historical injustice visited upon their community due to colonialism and corruption that continued well beyond the end of the colonisation (Ben Kahla, 2022; Fletcher-Bowlsby and Gordner, 2019). The Jemna experiment symbolised the social and political clout Tunisian civil society acquired after the Revolution. With the rise in the number of environmental organisations after 2011, this experiment further points to the dynamism of Tunisian civil society in averting crises as witnessed in other Arab Spring countries.

The most popular civil society organisation is the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, FTDES (French acronym), established in 2011. The FTDES’ work on environmental rights was acclaimed internationally, mainly because it facilitated popular movements in the structuring and organisation of the annual “Congress of Social Movements” (Ben Kahla, 2022; p:32).

The OSAE has decried the adverse effects of intensive husbandry and mechanised agriculture as contributing factors to climate change in the Tunisian south in particular. These activities are the leading and direct cause of about 20% of world carbon dioxide production, one of the main components of climate change (OSAE Call for Applications Second summer school Climate Change and Food Dependence, 2020).

As an indefatigable political activist since 1981, Habib Ayeb, a geographer, climate activist and founding member of OFS, has been actively mobilising for the climate emergency with the food crisis in Tunisia at the heart of his battle since 2011. He has expressed his concern about the over-plantation policy in the south of Tunisia and its long-term adverse effect on the sustainability of arid regions, including land degradation, regarding the palm dates’ plantation...
project. This is in addition to overgrazing in the arid zones. Desert greening is desertification; he argued (Foroudi, 2022). In his book co-authored with Ray Bush, “Food Insecurity and Revolution in the Middle East and North Africa. Agrarian Questions in Egypt and Tunisia”, Ayeb made a case for food sovereignty, “which they understand as a ‘process without an end, [...] that promotes peasant and small farmer demands for autonomy and control over food production and consumption’ (p. 149).” (Roape, 2020).

Ayeb has also produced films and documentaries about the food crisis in Tunisia, including the most popular one, “Couscous: The Seeds of Dignity”, in which he criticised the Tunisian state’s neoliberal policies in dealing with the climate crisis’ effect on the food security of many Tunisians, in particular the most marginalised (Hussein, 2012; OSAE, 2017; Roape, 2018). His work on building food sovereignty in Tunisia for the last three decades strives to establish a new concept of agricultural sovereignty and food policymaking. This would break with Tunisia’s food dependence on the international market for its population’s food subsistence. His other documentary, “Gabes Labess (on the oasis of Gabes and impact of climate change), drew attention to the climate and agriculture and environmental crisis in Tunisia, with the growing food dependency. This was exacerbated by Tunisian policymakers’ possible approval and signature of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (ALECA, as it is commonly known by its French acronym) with the EU (Ayeb, 2019).

Tunisia has moved from being Rome’s breadbasket to entirely relying on imported wheat to satisfy its population’s needs (Aliriza, 2021). Ayeb likened food sovereignty to socialism, “a political and a conceptual battleground.” Tunisian civil society’s social movements have been struggling for the last 30 years to uphold the rights of people to a healthy, sustainably produced and agro-ecologically food (Ajl, 2018).

The war in Ukraine has exacerbated the debate about Tunisia’s dire economic crisis. The country’s dependence on wheat imports from both Ukraine and Russia has shed light on Tunisia’s food security dilemmas, and their link with climate change. While the country only imports 3.3% of its wheat, barley, maise, rapeseed and sunflower oil and seed needs from Ukraine and Russia, there is a worrying trend when considering wheat as the Tunisian diet’s main component. According to the Observatory of Economic Complexity, 47.7% of wheat imported by Tunisia comes from Ukraine and only 4% from Russia, for the year 2019 (ISPI, 2022). Tunisia is listed among those affected by the economic repercussions of the war in Ukraine, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Net food importers will suffer the most from the financial repercussions of the war (Moukhallati, 2022).

Tunisia’s current agricultural policy is blamed for adversely impacting the environment and the sustainability of the country’s natural resources, leading to a climate crisis. With extreme droughts affecting agrarian land areas, the agricultural GDP “will fall by 5 to 10 per cent by 2030, compared to 2010.” Water scarcity from which Tunisia has been suffering “intensified by climate-related droughts and the salination of coastal aquifers due to rising sea levels, water is being overexploited by the agricultural sector, added to state policies of intensified irrigation for monocultures. This ultimately leads to water waste (Amayed, 2020).
4.5. Part IV: Local Dynamics of Environmental Justice: Mobilizations around the Urban Waste Crises

Migration serves as a potential “way out” for the populations in the rural zones affected by the growing adverse impacts of climate change. Studies show a clear relationship between yearly precipitation rates and out-migration among households living through agriculture in interior rural regions (Sobczak-Szelc and Fekih 2020). According to a report by the World Bank, the number of climate migrants in North Africa is projected to increase, reaching 4.5 million by 2050 in the optimistic scenario and 13 million in the pessimistic one (between 2.1 % and 6% of the total population) (Clement et al. 2021, 24). Tunisia is expected to be one of the hot spots for this climate-driven migration. But migration is not only a result of climate change, but it also serves as a mechanism for transforming inter-regional disparities into urban ones. Rapid urbanisation in Tunisia has led to severe urban inequalities, notably with the emergence of unregulated and unplanned low-income suburbs (Gsir and Bounouh 2018) known as hay chaabi or quartier populaire. Urban dynamics of environmental injustice reveal the value of an intersectional approach and the centre-periphery relations in understanding the climate crisis and pro-climate mobilisations in Tunisia.

A most mediatised example of these mobilisations occurred around the major Tunisian cities’ waste management crises. Improper solid waste management, be it uncollected waste or mismanaged landfills, has grave consequences for the climate, mainly through greenhouse
gas emissions (Premakumara et al. 2018). In the last few years, the landfills of El Gonna (Sfax) and Borj Chakir (Tunis) have become the symbols of the waste management crisis in the country and led to local mobilisations. Located in poorer suburbs (hay chaabi), these landfills showcase the centre-periphery relations embedded in environmental injustices of relatively small geographical areas. Sidi Hassine delegation, where Borj Chaker is located, and Agareb delegation, where El Gonna is located, have poverty rates of 9.4% and 10.7%, respectively, well above the averages in their governorates (4.6% for Tunis and 6.3 for Sfax) (Dhraief et al. 2020). The residents of these delegations, already among the worst-off in the society, are also carrying the environmental costs of industrial and urban activities in big centres like Tunis and Sfax.

Borj Chakir alone receives 3000 tons of waste per day, collected from 38 municipalities in the Greater Tunis (Grand Tunis) area (Ben Naser 2021a). On the other hand, Al Gonna is estimated to be receiving about 620 tons (Africa News 2021) of waste from the 28 municipalities of the Sfax governorate, Tunisia’s second-largest urban and industrial centre. In such a situation, local environmental activists like Sami Bahri, who is fighting for the closure of the Agareb landfill, ask, “why us... what have we done to deserve this?” (as quoted in Salman 2021). Sami is not alone in his fight; he is part of the Manish Msab (I am not a landfill) campaign, which asks for the closure of the Al Gonna landfill in Agareb as prescribed by the law and promised by the authorities. A similar local mobilisation has been formed in Sidi Hassine under the slogan Sakkar El Msab (close the landfill). Activists point to the health issues experienced by the residents of these neighbourhoods, such as high levels of asthma in Borj Chakir with the increased levels of air pollution (Ben Naser 2021a). Their demands are the same: closure of the landfill and justice for the residents of the neighbourhoods bordering the landfills.

Yet, the decision to close the landfills is not an easy one. These two landfills in question serve the two most industrialised and most populated cities of Tunisia. Closing the El Gonna landfill has led to a catastrophic situation in Sfax, where the municipal authorities did not collect waste for over four months (Tunisie Numerique 2022). As a result, the residents of Sfax have organised demonstrations and filed lawsuits against the Ministry of Environment (Business News 2021), forcing it to declare the reopening of the El Gonna landfill (TAP News Agency 2021). This decision has further enflamed the protests by the residents of Agareb. Those events ended with the death of a protester allegedly due to the tear gas used by the police (France 24 2021). As the landfill was closed back very quickly, garbage started accumulating in the streets of Sfax. Protestors in Sfax took back the streets (Elthabti 2021). The General Union of the Tunisian Workers (UGTT) called for a strike (Directinfo 2021), pressuring the government to announce that garbage collection would resume immediately and that a new landfill would be opened in five months 62 km away from the city (Mosaïque FM 2021). Today, the residents of Sfax and Agareb are waiting for the government to keep its promise of opening a new landfill and recycling facilities. As for the Borj Chakir landfill, experts warn that the Agareb / Sfax scenario can soon reproduce because the Ministry of Environment has temporarily prolonged its usage. Still, it is yet to offer a viable long-term solution (Tunisie Numerique 2021).
These mobilisation dynamics reflect how the spatial distribution of mostly class-based inequalities creates a situation in which the environmental demands of different communities conflict with each other. In such a case, the president’s usual national unity and sovereignty discourse means little in practice. That’s because the government has failed to reconcile the clashing demands of the people in Sfax who were suffocated by the waste crisis and the residents of Agareb asking for a more humane environment to live in. While both mobilisations point to an unsustainable environmental situation that puts the climate at peril, they are affected by the crisis differently and do not necessarily envision the same solution. The waste crisis in Sfax can be seen as an end to the people’s suffering in Agareb, whose socio-economic and spatial marginalisation has been long coupled with environmental injustices. Yet, at the very basis of this crisis stands not an inherent conflictual relationship between the two segments of the population but the failure of a government to plan for a long-predicted environmental catastrophe.

**Conclusions**

The climate crisis in Tunisia has become acute in the last 30 years due to the Tunisian state’s inadequate policies that jeopardise the sustainability of natural resources. These include, in particular, water and the continued land exploitation and their erosion and advancing desertification. This crisis has mainly affected the country’s most marginalised areas, those with the most fragile environmental ecosystems. The 2010-2011 uprising opened the debate on the climate crisis, breaking with the former regime’s opacity in politicising the environmental question. The opportunity offered to civil society activists to voice their concerns about environmental crises affecting their regions is a testament to how serious the climate emergency in post-Revolution Tunisia is.

The creation of a diverse and vibrant movement has also shed light on the unequal impacts of climate change at global, national, and local scales while also creating potentially conflictual situations. While Kais Saied’s July 25th “coup” resorted to national sovereignty as a catch-all phrase to rally activists to his ranks, the conflicts arising between public authorities and activists in the recent months showcased how alarmed civil society is. It has been raising the alarm bell about the effect of climate change on Tunisian coasts and lands and struggles to make the state take action for environmental justice.

At the same time, the relationship between public institutions and pro-climate initiatives also includes best practices, as seen in the inclusive process that led to the elaboration of Tunisia’s NDCs or the presence of Tunisian civil society at the Glasgow summit. While the diversity of the mobilisations has so far been an obstacle to its unity, recent initiatives show the potential of creating a sizeable national alliance that will play a crucial role in attaining climate justice. Pro-climate activists could benefit from creating mobilisational alliances that bring together civil society actors focusing on the different aspects of the struggle for climate justice. Such a stance can consider unequal effects of climate change with intersectional lenses and allow
for developing a common framework and roadmap strengthened by the joint know-how of various actors.

While best practices exist with regard to civil society’s involvement in the environmental policy-making process in the global arena, this approach can be further extended by creating schemes for civil society-state partnerships at various levels of decision making. More specifically, implicating Tunisian municipalities in the climate change/emergency/ action in the decision-making process about their localities on the issue, while empowering members of civil society to work in harmony with elected officials on local issues (as part of local governance). The importance of serious consideration of long-term solutions to make Tunisia less dependent on fossil fuels and make effective use of renewable energy (in the same vein as Morocco, which has become a regional leader in that respect), to counterbalance Tunisia’s crisis with the hike in energy resources’ price hike. As the climate crisis affects different groups unequally, the demands of different pro-climate mobilisations can, at times, conflict. The solution to such a scenario should include pre-emptive planning that considers historical injustices caused by class, gender, location, or other elements and reconciles the needs of different segments of the society.

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5. The relationships between matters of good government, governance, human rights and the struggle against the climate emergency. Case study: Egypt

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Journalist in Cairo

5.1. Introduction

On the penultimate day of the United Nations summit on climate change held in Glasgow in November 2021, Egypt was chosen to host on behalf of the African continent the next Conference of the Parties (COP27) a year later in the resort city of Sharm El Sheikh. Environment Minister Yasmine Fouad said at the time that the choice of her country marks a new chapter in Cairo’s leadership to steer the region in its climate action, as well as to unite the world’s efforts to tackle the emergency it represents.

The authoritarian nature of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s regime, its dismal record on human rights, and, above all, its mistrust of civil society and a shaky commitment to environmental action, however, raise serious doubts about the propriety of awarding Egypt with hosting an event such as COP27.

The problem is a matter of the staging, but above all an underlying one. Sharm El Sheikh, the venue for the summit, is a fortified city on the Sinai Peninsula given over to mass tourism and a very long way from Egypt’s major urban centres. It is also one of the government’s favourite places for accommodating its fondness for organising ostentatious international conferences, free from social mobilisation, in which to project an image of leadership and stability both outwardly and inside the country.

Apart from Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt’s track record on environmental policy is hardly exemplary, despite the concern that the Egyptian authorities often express over the effects of climate change. Government policy in this department is inconsistent, guided chiefly by a capitalist logic geared to profit, unfair and contradictory in the distribution of resources, and has a marked class bias. This combination is deeply counterproductive in environmental terms. Closely linked to these shortcomings is the lack of public debate to accompany the decision-making processes, which are authoritarian, centralised, and in which only upper-class or well-connected sectors get to have a voice.

Experience shows that genuine participation by civil society is key to connecting the design and implementation of public environmental policies to the most vulnerable people and the international negotiations on climate change (Reid, 2012). In Egypt, however, social mobili-
sation is viewed with deep distrust on the part of the authorities, civil society is tightly controlled, and voices that are critical of the government are systematically repressed. Given that in Egypt an active civil society on environmental matters is still at an incipient stage, the context is hardly conducive not just to ensuring its effective participation but also to allowing its development.

Against this backdrop, COP27 especially requires the civil society active in this area to strike a difficult balance: trying to make the most of the interest the event generates to make itself known, raise its profile, forge and deepen alliances with regional and official organisations, and improve its funding, but at the same time preventing its action from proving counterproductive and becoming dangerous (Schwartzstein, 2022).

5.2. Environmental crisis

Factors such as Egypt’s location in a predominantly desert region, high population density along the Nile, its deep dependence on the waters of this river, and its dizzying demographic growth exert considerable pressure on its resources and make Egypt highly vulnerable to environmental alterations.

The country’s crisis in this field is linked to two processes. On the one hand, the negative consequences that climate change brings at a local level. These may manifest themselves in the shape of increasingly irregular seasons and temperatures, ocean warming, and rising sea levels, among others. On the other, it is related to direct human intervention, prominent among which are the state’s megaprojects, mass tourism in the Red Sea, or the activity of heavily polluting factories.

Making a distinction between the two processes, while in many situations they overlap, is important for at least three reasons. The first is the shouldering of political responsibilities. While Egypt is obliged to battle climate change, its burden as a country of the Global South cannot be compared to that of the industrialised nations, something of which the authorities are fully aware. On the other hand, Cairo must take responsibility for the harmful impact that its policies have on the environment and human life of its country, something about which it is much less resolute.

The second reason is because if no difference is made between the two processes, we run the risk of confusing present challenges that are not related to climate change with future challenges that certainly are, in terms of the distribution of resources. The most obvious case is the shortage of water. Egypt currently suffers from a chronic water shortage that has not been caused by climate change, but which climate change could aggravate, so passing off the measures taken in this area as adapting to climate change is misleading.

The third reason is because, unlike what might happen in countries of the Global North, most of the social mobilisation for environmental reasons in Egypt is directed at the harmful effects of human intervention on the local environment and life, not at the country’s respon-
sibility in climate change. Whereas the government pays more attention to the effects of climate change, precisely because doing so allows it, on the one hand, to dodge reviewing the impact of its policies on the environment and life in Egypt and, on the other, receive economic aid from the North (Mada Masr, 2021).

As far as the consequences of climate change are concerned, Egypt’s most fragile zone is the fertile Nile Delta, where most of its cultivated land is concentrated. It is considered one of the planet’s most endangered deltas (Al-Monitor, 2018) and one of the three zones of the world whose vulnerability to climate change is most extreme (UNDP, 2018). Hence, the sector most exposed to this process is agriculture (Smith, 2012). In an equally vulnerable position are the coastal cities, such as Alexandria, which is among the world’s metropolises where the risk of flooding is increasing most (Ali, 2021).

The situation is alarming in the Red Sea too. Natural resources such as coral, which is also fundamental to the country’s tourism sector, are under threat from processes such as ocean warming (Mada Masr 2021b). And in the rest of the desert country, which is ill-prepared for rain, an increase in intense precipitation and flooding is predicted for the coming years (IPCC, 2021).

In fact, all these forecasts, which threaten Egypt’s fragile underlying balance, are already having an impact. In 2021 alone, variations in seasonal changes and rising humidity seriously affected multiple crops in the country, with yields falling by up to 50% in some cases (Mada Masr, 2022). In November, an unprecedented wave of torrential rain and flooding in the south, particular in the desert region of Aswan, left three dead, some 500 people treated for scorpion stings, and major material losses (El País, 2021). In December, parts of Alexandria flooded again because of storms (The National, 2021a) and the city even turned white after rare snowfall (The National, 2021b).

On top of all that we might add the harmful effects of direct human intervention on the environment. A case in point are the government’s megaprojects, which tend to be announced with a pomp proportional to the lack of public debate on the environmental impact that comes with them, despite the well-founded fears that often surround them.

One example is the huge Berket Ghalioun fish farm in Kafr El Sheikh Governate, hailed as the largest in the Middle East (Al-Ahram, 2017). The government considers it crucial to increasing the country’s food security, in this case ensuring up to 70% of domestic fish consumption. Yet little is known publicly about the impact the project will have on marine ecosystems (Mada Masr, 2018).

Similar concerns exist over major urban development projects such as New Abu Qir (Al-Monitor, 2021), east of Alexandria, the New Administrative Capital, east of Cairo, or New Alamein, on the northern coast. There is little public knowledge about the impact these new cities will have on matters ranging from access to water to marine life or the mountains.

A more complex case, owing to the convergence of multiple factors, is Cairo. The Egyptian capital is among the most polluted major cities in the world, both in terms of air quality and
noise and light (The Eco Experts, 2021). Over 65,000 people are estimated to die each year in Egypt because of problems related to air pollution alone, most of them in Cairo. In its case, there are factors such as the city’s geography and topography, which contribute to its high levels of air pollution without this being down to humans (Mada Masr, 2018b). However, other elements, such as urban planning, largely influenced by security and economic interests (Mada Masr, 2021c), tree felling (France 24, 2012), and the presence of polluting industries (Egypt Independent, 2018) are political decisions, be they by action or omission.

5.3. The relationship between the government and civil society

The scale of the environmental crisis mentioned above highlights the need for urgent action both to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change and to give greater importance to green policies. A key focal point for achieving it is civil society. It plays a central role when it comes to raising public awareness, flagging the lack of public response to climate change, promoting new laws and policies, ensuring greater accountability from the authorities, securing more inclusion of vulnerable sectors, and tying the issue to local development (Reid, 2012).

On this matter, however, Egypt is starting from a far from promising place. Under the El-Sisi regime, Egypt has become a state with one of the worst human rights records in the world. Criticism of the government is barely tolerated, particularly if it concerns sensitive matters and comes from dissident voices. Political prisoners probably run into the tens of thousands. And civil society, particularly the civil society that focuses on monitoring the regime or the government’s action, is tightly controlled and its activities strictly limited by the state.

The Egyptian law regulating non-governmental organisations, passed in 2019, severely limits their creation, funding, and work and, consequently, freedom of association (Human Rights Watch, 2021). For example, the legislation bans work of a political nature and multiple activities, including conducting field research and publishing its results without prior consent from the government. The public’s perception also leans toward believing that the situation in Egypt does not favour civil society performing its function (IEMED, 2020).

On top of that we might add the so-called “anti-protest law” of 2013, which has put a stop to mass demonstrations in the country and makes it practically impossible to legally call this type of mobilisation. While some demonstrations continue to take place, most are strictly confined to the world of work. On the rare occasions that people have defied the law, the state security apparatus has resorted to the excessive use of force and campaigns of mass arrests (Amnesty International, 2019).

This situation has made a mark on civil society that is active on environmental issues, which, despite still being in its infancy in Egypt, has also suffered this repressive environment, particularly when its activities include work geared to having a political impact (Halawa, 2020).

1 See: https://breathelife2030.org/city_data/greater-cairo/
While its case is not comparable to the level of harassment of human rights groups and lawyers and union and political circles, which are more established and have a longer history, this suffocating environment also impedes its flourishing and activity.

The situation is not much different in the case of the press. Egypt is presently one of the biggest jailers of journalists in the world, access to around 500 websites, including news sites, is blocked, and the media outlets that remain independent can be counted on the fingers of one hand. This general climate of restrictions has impacted the coverage of issues related to its environmental crisis. Journalism specialising in the matter is still in its infancy, there are very few specialised journalists, and the major media outlets tend to give it little coverage because, moreover, there is no great demand beyond the illusion that the choice of Egypt as the venue for COP27 might create.

The latitude to cover these issues is also limited, particularly when it comes to sensitive subjects. These include, for instance, the pollution caused by plants linked to the regime, to well-connected businesspeople, and to foreign companies; state megaprojects, such as the Dabaa nuclear power plant, and, according to the context, the shortage of water. While cases have been reported of journalists being attacked for covering environmental issues (The Century Foundation, 2020), there is no case of a journalist specialising in the matter being jailed. As well as the precarious situation of press freedom, another obstacle that limits the development of this type of journalism is the lack of funding.

The human rights crisis in the country, the restrictions on social mobilisation, and the hostility towards civil society and the press, coupled with a highly adverse economic situation for most of the population, help to explain why in Egypt debate and concern over environmental matters take a back seat in the order of priorities of the population in general and civil society in particular (IEMED, 2020). The “survival mode” (Mada Masr, 2019) in which most Egyptians find themselves leaves very little time for addressing problems that do not have an impact in the very short term.

This in no way means there is no interest. Numerous intellectuals, activists, academics, writers, and journalists, among others, have addressed the country’s environmental crisis in independent media outlets and platforms. Prominent among them, for example, are the blogger Alaa Abd El-Fattah (Mada Masr, 2019b), the writer Ismail Fayed (Mada Masr, 2019), or Doctor Maha Khalil (World Crunch, 2019). Beyond these circles, most Egyptians view climate change with concern, even more so matters such as water pollution and air quality (Arab Barometer, 2020). What’s more, young people between 18 and 29 voice greater concern about climate change: nearly half, compared to 35% among the over-30s (Arab Barometer, 2020).

The clearest proof this interest exists is that when there has been the chance and the space to mobilise for a great environmental cause, Egypt has done so. In 2013, after the government, with the backing of heavy industry, began to consider overturning the ban on importing coal

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2 Interview with an Egyptian journalist specialising in climate and environmental affairs.
3 Interview with an Egyptian journalist specialising in climate and environmental affairs.
to tackle the serious energy shortage the country was suffering, the “Egyptians Against Coal” movement arose, which opposed the measure on environmental and public health grounds. The group was very active on social media, where it amassed tens of thousands of followers, organised meetings with the most vulnerable local communities as well as with representatives of industry and the government, staged public workshops, and took legal action. Its action turned coal into a genuine “national debate”, even considered by some to be “the biggest and most public political battle at an executive level in Egypt” in the months following the ousting of former President Mohamed Morsi in the summer of 2013 (Mada Masr, 2017).

While the public debate was under way, the then Environment Minister Laila Iskandar, who also opposed importing coal, maintained close ties with civil society, which helped to invigorate it (Mada Masr, 2014). What’s more, the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency, which reported to Iskandar’s ministry, drafted a report whose preliminary version warned that the costs of using coal on public health and the environment outweighed the savings it represented in the short term. The same report also recommended making industry comply with the rules on efficiency and backed developing alternative sources of energy.

Ultimately, the government ended up approving coal imports into the country for industrial use in 2014. The government go-ahead went hand in hand with a cabinet reshuffle that left Iskandar out and handed her portfolio over to Jaled Fahmy, who was openly in favour of importing coal. Iskandar’s departure marked the end of a powerful and fruitful collaboration with civil society and set a valuable precedent of how things could have been but in the end were not.

Since that experience of rare cooperation and affinity between a part of the government and civil society that arose during the battle over coal, there has been no repeat of the space and influence that the latter enjoyed. What’s more, the laws that have been passed and the way in which the authorities have dealt with civil society since then make it unlikely that this type of synergy will arise again for the moment. The state, in the meantime, has hijacked the narrative and action on environmental matters and sought other allies that prove less uncomfortable.

The Egyptian state in the 1990s was actually one of the first in the region to create authorities and devise environmental strategies at regional and national level, such as ministries and environment agencies and laws on protecting the environment (Bell, 2000). Its interest in capitalising on this space, then, is a longstanding one, be it out of conviction about what is at stake and the need to act, because of the economic rewards it yields, particularly in terms of investment, or for diplomatic benefits.

Government policy on environmental matters, however, is inconsistent and unfair. First, the decision-making processes are highly centralised and authoritarian and are usually guided by capitalist logic geared towards profit (Roberts, 2022), which leads to major environmental costs. Moreover, the country suffers from a general lack of a sound legal basis on environmental issues and when there is legislation, it does not tend to be applied adequately (Roberts, 2022).
For instance, policies on reducing air polluting emissions are addressed separately from climate policies, despite their close relationship (Younes, 2022). State projects undertaken in the framework of sustainable development and climate change adaptation plans, such as expanding the road network and the reform of the irrigation channels, have led to major tree felling (Younes, 2022). Egypt is building its first nuclear power plant as the rest of the world is moving in the opposite direction and when the country is far from meeting its goals on renewable energies (Elgerzawy, 2020). In addition, it still allows the use of coal in heavy industry, it continues to depend heavily on hydrocarbons for domestic consumption and to attract foreign investment, and some of its big companies remain in a privileged position (Orrnet, 2020).

Second, the distribution of the public funds for reparation, adaptation, and mitigation in the face of the effects of climate change does not meet the criteria prescribed by so-called climate justice. In this respect, the National Strategy for Adaptation to Climate Change flags agriculture as the first sector impacted by climate change, followed by tourism, especially in the Red Sea. The projects and distribution of resources in this field are not proportionate and not necessarily aimed at the most affected or most vulnerable zones (Mad Masr, 2021b). The need for many of the state’s megaprojects is also questionable in a context in which a large amount of resources is required for mitigation and adaptation strategies. Research into climate change in Egypt is also underfunded and there are sizeable gaps in terms of participation and publication on the issue (IPCC, 2022).

Third, government policy on the matter has a marked class bias. Thus, the reform of energy subsidies has had an adverse impact on the wellbeing of Egyptian families from the popular classes (Mohamed, 2021). The government, however, has avoided increasing taxes on heavy industry and those with high energy consumption—which also receive subsidies—to help to fund the energy transition (Alternative Policy Solutions, 2020). The case of coal, in fact, illustrates that the tendency has been rather to bow to their interests.

Road and bridge building projects, on the other hand, particularly in Cairo, favour the upper classes increasingly gathered into gated communities around the capital and in new cities economically inaccessible to the majority (AP, 2020). This type of project is often executed at great speed and only those well connected to the authorities can manage to influence the process (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2021). Much less attention, however, is paid to improving the neighbourhoods that already exist, their green spaces, or the public transport network (AP, 2018).

Nor have the international financial institutions been exemplary in their conduct. The development policies promoted by the World Bank in Egypt, for example, have contributed to increasing carbon emissions in the country when they already exceeded the per capita limit in order to remain under 2ºC warming. That, in turn, has aggravated the impacts of climate change, particularly among vulnerable sectors (BIC, 2017). The financial body has also been highly selective in the review of its proposals and has tended to highlight only those that could be positive for the environment, overlooking the ones that are potentially negative (BIC, 2017).
Since the experience of the battle over coal, the government too has sought new players with which to cooperate that are better attuned to its interests. A key piece here has been the emergence of investors and entrepreneurs (Mada Masr, 2016) as major allies in tackling the environmental crisis. Both are much less politicised and accommodate Cairo’s commitment to climate funding, green technology, and an ostensibly technocratic management of environmental policy, instead of a socially just political framework that includes civil society (Roberts, 2022).

Cairo also sees the climate crisis as an opportunity to reap diplomatic rewards, as illustrated by the staging of COP27 and the nomination of its foreign minister, Sameh Shoukry, a career diplomat, as the president of the conference, instead of Environment Minister Yasmine Fouad, a prominent climate scientist.

5.4. Types of social mobilisation

The limited space that Egyptians in general and civil society organisations in particular have to mobilise for the environmental cause leaves very little scope for action, both in terms of demands and the type of action available to them, two factors that we can take into consideration together.

Organising to push for structural changes or tackle reforms on a national scale, particularly if they involve openly questioning government policy or are detrimental to the interests of the regime, is completely out of the question. And action that involves some sort of protest, with legal proceedings as one of the only exceptions, is also off their list of possibilities.

Primarily during the period of greatest opening-up that Egypt experienced between 2011 and 2013 and until the consolidation of the El-Sisi regime more or less a year later, the country was the scene of major social mobilisation over environmental matters, including protests (Abdel Hamid, 2011). In this context, the campaign against the importation and use of coal was just the most prominent example, but there were others.

In 2011, British Petroleum (BP) proposed the construction of a natural gas processing plant in the town of Idku after discovering a major offshore deposit. However, local residents mobilised against it and staged several protests, including popular assemblies, occupying the site in a sit-down protest, and blocking roads until they forced BP to halt the project and move to another place (EIPR, 2013). Between November 2011 and January 2012, residents of Dabaa also mobilised against the plans to build Egypt’s first nuclear power plant and carried out action such as demonstrations and occupying land (Environmental Justice Atlas, 2018).

However, since 2015 this community action has been highly unusual as it entails a very high risk. This does not mean that it does not happen, as highlighted by the protests of the people of the island of Al-Warraq, in Cairo, against the threat of eviction on the part of the authorities,
which have drawn up development plans that threaten their access to the land (Environmental Justice Atlas, 2017). But these are an exception⁴.

That is why current forms of mobilisation over environmental matters in Egypt, except for a few rare cases, are markedly less combative in nature, more local, and focus on raising awareness and promoting reform, particularly in collaboration with the government. Social enterprises, NGOs, union groups, and groups of locals mobilised sporadically via social media stand out.

First, one of the most active players in mobilising society over environmental issues are green social enterprises, many of them created in the last five years. Among the more prominent examples are Greenish, focusing on promoting sustainable development through educational activities and supporting local vulnerable communities, among other means. Another example is Banlastic, whose efforts are geared to tackling pollution caused by single-use plastic, which is widespread in Egypt. VeryNile, promoted by the Bassita social enterprise, also focuses on campaigns to raise awareness and reduce the consumption of plastic.

Greenish, for example, has trained several dozen people and bodies that work on raising awareness and environmental activism in various governates of Egypt, an important task given the vast majority of young Egyptians’ poor knowledge of environmental issues, partly because of the scant attention that both school programmes and policies on the matter give to education (Faragallah, 2016). Banlastic and VeryNile, along with other organisations, have put banning single-use plastic on the political agenda. They have succeeding in getting the Environment Ministry to launch tentative initiatives (Al-Ahram, 2020), some regions, such as the Red Sea, to embrace the ban (The National, 2019), and some members of parliament to urge the government to speed up the process (Egypt Independent, 2019).

Second, a prominent case among the NGOs that are active on environmental issues is the Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association (HEPCA). Founded in 1992, the organisation focuses on the protection and conservation of the Red Sea. During its 30-year history as a lobbying group, HEPCA has won notable victories, including the designation of certain protected marine areas in 2001 and a ban on shark fishing in 2006. More recently, in 2018 HEPCA successfully pressed for the opening of a solid waste management plant, as well as a ban on single-use plastics in the Red Sea.

Halfway between these two are organisations that, while they are not focused on environmental issues, they do incorporate this viewpoint into their areas of work. One example is the interdisciplinary group of architects and urban planners 10 Tooba, particularly its Built Environment Observatory. This promotes spatial justice and access to decent housing through the production of open knowledge, with direct attention to climate change, the development of sustainable environments and disaster response, as well as issues such as public transport and green spaces. Another case is the Association for the Protection of the Environment,

⁴ See the monitoring of the labour and social protests carried out by the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information until the end of 2021. https://www.anhri.info/?cat=14&lang=en
which focuses on the development of environment-friendly waste management and recycling techniques in collaboration with Cairo’s efficient informal garbage collecting community.

Third, the Farmers’ Union of Egypt also provides a platform for organising and channelling demands. It is often overlooked by analysts, among other reasons because of its proximity to the government and its presence outside Cairo. The union, however, has over 2 million members and is particularly active in the defence of the rights of farmers affected by the consequences of climate change.

Making the most of its relations and its access to ministries, as a matter of fact, the union acts as conduit of information for its members and of problems and demands for the government. One of its greatest battles at present is the creation of a farming solidarity fund to support farmers that have suffered losses because of climate change. The fund has a clear intention to provide security and protect the socioeconomic situation of farmers, since in general the year’s season is bankrolled by the debt that they incur with dealers and which they pay off after the harvest. If the harvest is affected, farmers are in an especially vulnerable situation and can even face prison sentences. El-Sisi passed a law in 2014 to set up a solidarity fund, but it is not up and running yet.

Fourth are the human rights organisations that are active on environmental matters. This is the case of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR). Unlike the previous organisations, the EIPR is in a much more vulnerable position in the face of the authorities for openly focusing on the defence of human rights and for its work as a watchdog of the government.

As far as its green action is concerned, the EIPR opts for strategic environmental litigation, against both companies and the government, partly with a view to setting legal precedents. However, it is action that is particularly slow, costly, and laborious. Corporate responsibility in Egypt, particularly for environmental damage, is practically non-existent. It is action that often takes years, both to prepare and then to try, and usually tackles new legal questions on which, moreover, there is very little training in the country’s judiciary. This work is even harder to carry out against a backdrop marked by the obstacles to working on the ground and to gathering information, because it requires community collaboration, and because of the general inaction of the authorities in the face of infractions in this area (EIPR, 2018).

Nonetheless, the EIPR has won some important victories. In 2018, a court of appeal in Dakahlia Governate, north of Cairo, found the Egyptian subsidiary of the TITAN cement firm, with headquarters in Greece, guilty of violating the Law on the Environment and the Egyptian Penal Code because of the dangerous emissions released by one of its plants (EIPR, 2018). International regulations require a buffer zone for safety between cement factories and residential communities, but the TITAN plant is located next to the Wadi El Qamar community, whose residents had been protesting in vain for years about the negative effects of the plant (Environmental Justice Atlas, 2017b).

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5 Interview with Saddam Abu Hussein, president of the Farmers’ Union of Egypt.
It was a particularly important sentence because current laws and regulations on environmental matters allow polluting industries, like cement, to operate in residential zones, which poses a serious threat to the health of neighbouring communities (EIPR, 2018). Yet the EIPR action was only possible thanks to the perseverance of the residents impacted by the plant. The rights organisation, which is one of the few groups capable of coordinating this type of action in Egypt, also has other litigation under way for compensation for illnesses and for tree felling in the affluent neighbourhood of Heliopolis in Cairo, among others. It is also one of the most active organisations in the fields of research and political advocacy.

The EIPR was instrumental too in one of the few instances of cooperation with international organisations to tackle environmental issues. In the framework of its battle against the Alexandria cement works, the body filed a complaint in 2015 with the Office of the Compliance Advisor, which investigates the complaints of those affected by projects supported by the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the private sector arm of the World Bank, since the IFC had funded the factory. Following a six-year probe, the office confirmed the legitimacy of the complaint, as well as the plant’s responsibility for the negative impact on the environment, the health of the residents, and the human rights violations of its workers (EIPR, 2022).

Fifth are the sporadic campaigns of groups of residents mobilised above all on social media. Social media are, in fact, one of the chief means of environmental activism in Egypt, largely owing to the lack of alternative spaces. They play an important role when it comes to providing a platform for activists and members of the public interested in environmental issues, allowing them to form a community, air opinions, and issue specific demands. Surveys suggest that many –if not the majority (IEMED, 2020)– of Egyptians consider social media to be the means through which it is most likely that their country’s civil society will achieve the goals it pursues, followed by taking part in action at a subnational level.

An example arose as a result of the Ministry of Transport’s plans, announced in June 2021, to build a new axis highway development that could impact the vegetation of the upscale Maadi neighbourhood, in south Cairo. Residents of the district and sympathisers with their cause took to social media (Egyptian Streets, 2021) to demand that the government halt the project in order to preserve the zone’s green spaces. The hashtag “Maadi Refuses the Axis” (#روحملاضفرت_يدياعلا) was created and a Save Maadi page was even set up, managing to gather nearly 14,000 signatures in a petition. The pressure forced the Ministry of Transport to issue a statement in which it provided a brief overview of the project and said that there were no plans to cut down any trees. This type of action, however, tends to take place only in middle-class or upmarket neighbourhoods.

**Conclusions**

Egypt is highly vulnerable to environmental alterations and is already beginning to suffer the effects of a crisis that in its case is linked, on the one hand, to the negative consequences that climate change brings at a local level and, on the other, to the impact of direct human intervention, the result, above all, of state policies.
However, the Egyptian context is not very conducive to facilitating addressing this challenge in an effective manner. The government’s record on environmental policy is inconsistent and often contradictory, guided by a capitalist logic geared to economic gain, its distribution of resources at a local level does not meet the criteria prescribed by so-called climate justice, and has a marked class bias. One of the reasons for these shortcomings is the lack of public debate to accompany the decision-making processes, which are authoritarian, highly centralised, and where only upper-class or well-connected sectors of society can exert an influence.

Experience shows that civil society is key to connecting the design and implementation of public environmental policies to vulnerable sectors of society. While the Egyptian people have shown their concern and interest in the issue on repeated occasions, social mobilisation in Egypt is perceived with great distrust by the authorities, voices that are critical of the government are systematically repressed, and civil society is tightly controlled. Given that the country’s civil society that is active on environmental matters is still at an incipient stage, this context is hardly conducive not just to ensuring its effective participation but also to allowing its development.

The limited space that Egyptians in general and civil society organisations in particular have to mobilise for this cause leaves very little scope for action, both in terms of demands and the type of action. This is usually local and less combative and tends to focus on raising awareness and promoting reform, particularly in collaboration with the authorities. The standout players are social enterprises, NGOs, unions, and, sporadically, groups of residents mobilised on social media.

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6. Climate mobilisations in Lebanon. An interview with Christophe Maroun and Joey Ayoub

What are the precedents of climate mobilisations in the country? And the turning point

Christophe Maroun (CM): Between the mid-2000 up until the mid-2010s, many of the local organisations that have tackled climate-change-related issues (Such as IndyACT, Arab Youth Climate Movement, Greenpeace - MENA) focused their efforts on advocacy campaigns targeting governmental entities tasked with representing the country at the COP and planning for Lebanon’s climate-resilient future. Activists from such organisations often attended different COPs to pressure the Lebanese delegation and advocate for a substantial deal on climate change.

However, what is happening at the government level couldn’t be farther away from the lived reality. There is a substantial gap between what is being done by local and international organisations at the government level and the needs on the ground. The latter stem from the impacts of climate change and years of corruption and mismanagement. The potential repercussions of the climate emergency on the Levant, particularly Lebanon, are well documented and are arguably already being felt. We are already observing a higher frequency of forest fires, droughts, and heatwaves, affecting water resources and food production systems. In addition to the country’s specific socioeconomic upheaval, it is within this specific environmental context that climate mobilisations are taking place. In other words, climate change is rarely central to the environmental discourse in Lebanon, which tends to focus on specific demands which are often closely linked to climate change, such as just and transparent access to resources.

Despite the centrality of climate change to understanding the country’s current predicament, the multiple problems facing the average resident of Lebanon often eclipse this matter. The climate emergency is still perceived as distant, and perhaps too abstract. Indeed, the fact that climate change has yet to become a top priority in most activist circles, let alone the wider population, is understandable. Ever since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to the port of Beirut explosion in August 2020, a majority of the population has been struggling to survive, a situation worsened by one of the worst economic crises in modern history. A few months before the October 17th protest movement, which saw thousands of Lebanese mobilise against rampant corruption in the country, in March 2019, the local chapter of Fridays for Future was launched. Its goal is to bring climate change from the margins into the centre of the political and economic conversation, shedding light on how Lebanon owes much of its woes (those caused by climate change included) to the political system and establishment that has been in place since the early 90s.
What are their current main demands and needs?

**CM:** Given that it is not a top priority to many, what does climate activism actually look like in Lebanon today? We can highlight two examples, the Save Bisri Campaign and Buzuruna Juzuruna.

The Save Bisri Campaign was created to oppose a World Bank-funded dam project that threatened the entirety of the Bisri valley, located around 35 km southeast of the capital. The campaign to save the Bisri valley underlined the importance of preserving the valley and the livelihoods it provided. It also propositioned less destructive dam-building alternatives, which remains a significant element of the Lebanese government’s national water strategy. For many of the activists involved in the campaign, the momentum created by the October 17th revolution and its demands played a crucial role in propelling the Save Bisri Campaign into the limelight. It allowed highlighting how dams can be turned into tools for the political class to maintain their clientelist networks. It similarly cast light on broader issues related to water management, the politics behind dams in Lebanon, as well as international financing. The campaign organised talks and discussions in the squares and public spaces of Beirut and Sidon, where protests were taking place, as well as in the Bisri Valley at the construction site of the dam itself. Taking advantage of the momentum of national contestation that had swept the country, these talks centred around the demands for more transparency in the decision-making process, as well as the reclamation of public spaces.

As for Buzuruna Juzuruna, it is a Lebanese association created by a network of farmers, agricultural engineers, and activists, whose goal is the promotion of sustainable agricultural practices in Lebanon and the region. They provide short or long training courses on their farm-school, awareness sessions, and regional exchanges. Over the years, the association has gathered an essential collection of peasant seeds from the Middle East and the Mediterranean, coming from other farms in the region, seed networks and European seed banks. The farm has also focused on multiplying local seeds that are better adapted to the local climate - namely droughts and sustained periods of heat - and testing their resistance and quality. Their farm in Saadnayel in Lebanon’s Bekaa valley serves as a large-scale proof of concept, an agricultural laboratory aimed at experimenting and helping disseminate both local varieties and more sustainable techniques and expertise. In an import and aid-dependent nation like Lebanon, Buzuruna Juzuruna’s practices highlight the importance of self-sufficiency and sustainability, and offers a much-needed alternative to the dominant modus operandi of the Lebanese agricultural and food production sector.

These two initiatives have shown how years of mismanagement and corruption have brought about short-sighted local policies that damage Lebanon’s natural resources and leave Lebanese people vulnerable to climate change.
What has been the influence of the political system? What is their actual margin of manoeuvre? Have there been instances of repression? Do ideological/sectarian divisions play a role in this matter?

**Joey Ayoub (JA):** It is virtually impossible to avoid sectarianism in Lebanon, because it is one of the main ideologies of the Lebanese regime. Consequently, it plays a considerable role. As such, even problems that should, in theory, be national can be used for polarisation purposes. For example, during heavy wildfires in October of 2019, Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) politician Mario Aoun claimed that the fires were primarily affecting Christian areas (even though much of the damage, as it happens, occurred in Druze-majority areas). Others even started blaming Syrian refugees for the wildfires. The fact that the country was dealing with severe wildfires didn’t stop elements of the sectarian regime from attempting to play on pre-existing divisions.

This example, as well as the experience of previous movements, are indicative of how this instrumentalisation might play out in the context of climate-related mobilisations. Another example is how something as neutral-sounding as the 2015 waste crisis was heavily sectarianised as well, with rival politicians using the crisis to point fingers at other parties. Back then, we saw the seeds of the 2019 revolution in the protesters’ willingness to blame the entirety of the political establishment for the crisis. The 2015 uprising was called ‘You Stink’, a reference to both the waste crisis and the political establishment, which itself laid the grounds for the ‘all of them means all of them’ slogan of the 2019 uprising, as well as the Arab Spring-inspired ‘the people want the downfall of the regime’.

The regime’s reaction to protests is not uniform. It is easiest to think of it this way: there is a red line that we, activists, protesters, and so on, cannot cross. The problem is that we do not always know what counts as a red line. It could be trying to enter parliament square, insult the president, or block the Bisri dam project. This makes it more challenging to organise, but it also means that we are more room to manoeuvre than most Arab countries.

The Lebanese regime should be seen as a war-era regime that continues into the ‘post-war’ period. This means that there is a clear generational gap, and the seeds planted by the youth today will take some time to grow but are nonetheless crucial for the country’s future.

**Have there been climate mobilisations at the national and local levels? What about the transnational dimension?**

**CM:** From the local to the national, the Save Bisri Campaign used the momentum of the nationwide protest movement not just to mobilise against the dam itself but also to criticise Lebanon’s national water strategy and its reliance on international donors and development agencies for funding it.
Buzuruna Juzuruna’s strategy also relies on a multiscalar approach. Their practices highlight the importance of self-sufficiency and sustainability, and offer a much-needed alternative to the dominant *modus operandi* of the Lebanese agricultural and food production sector. However, Buzuruna Juzuruna is also a platform for regional exchange. Through its projects, it creates a space where food sovereignty activists from the region (Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and Egypt) can meet, network, learn about each other’s practices, exchange heirloom and climate-adapted seeds and, more importantly, understand the mutual challenges and attend practical trainings to tackle them.

There have been very few and scattered mobilisations at the regional and transnational level, such as the Arab Youth Climate Movement, which was created in the lead up to the UNFCCC COP 18 in Qatar across 15 MENA countries to assess and support the establishment of legally binding agreements to deal with climate change issues within international negotiations. Such initiatives approach climate issues from a technical perspective, focusing on climate negotiations, targets and agreements rather than tackling the issue from its root and creating linkages with other environmental and social justice movements.

This is something that the Lebanese chapter of Fridays for Future (FFFL) is trying to achieve. Created in March 2019 - prior to the October 2019 protest movement in Lebanon - and stemming from the global Fridays for Future movement, it looks to unite global youth to mitigate the impact of climate now, just by addressing social inequities of emissions to meet the goal of carbon neutralisation by 2030. Although established more recently and in a context of significant social and economic instability, one can argue that FFFL were more successful in integrating climate and environmental issues into the mainstream conversation, especially at the youth level. By focusing on matters such as workers’ rights, economic inequalities etc., they aim to tackle the root cause of those issues.

**Can we speak of intersectionality? Are demands for climate justice linked to other demands for social justice (socioeconomic generally, women, racism)?**

**JA:** As it happens, we are replying to this around May 1st, Labor Day in Lebanon. FFFL, which is, of course, inspired by the global Fridays for Future movement started by Greta Thunberg in 2018, called for a protest in front of the National Federation of Trade Unions and Employees in Lebanon (FENASOL) to protest against the racist Kafala system which governs the lives of migrant domestic workers in the country, a women-majority workforce primarily from Ethiopia, Sri Lanka and the Philippines among others. Their calls also include opposition to capitalism and slavery and for workers to seize the means of production. This intersectionality is a legacy of the 2019 uprising and the many smaller-scale movements that happened before then. In 2019, we saw numerous feminist groups link up broader demands against the Lebanese regime with their opposition to the patriarchy and solidarity with migrant domestic workers. They also expanded their vision to declare solidarity with protest movements from Hong
Kong to Iran to Chile. While these instances are still not a numerical majority in Lebanon, they indicate a shift in political visions, which is likely to continue in the coming years, including in the climate justice world.

**What are the main drivers of/obstacles to (formal and informal) environmental engagement?**

**CM:** There needs to be a more holistic understanding of the problem, so that mobilisations and initiatives such as the Save Bisri Campaign and Buzuruna Juzuruna can flow into a unified climate movement that considers intersectionality as one of its central tenets.

On the one hand, and as mentioned earlier, the multiple socio-economic problems plaguing the country often eclipse environmental issues. On the other hand, the example of the Bisri dam campaign and its success in showing that “the environment” cannot be considered an isolated category, divorced from socio-economic considerations and political decisions, shows that the discourse around it is slowly changing.

Unfortunately, this is still not enough and far from a consolidated environmental and climate justice movement *per se* in the country. As mentioned by the Lebanese minister of environment in a recent webinar around governance in the Lebanese waste management sector, the environmental programs of groups and coalitions running for the upcoming parliamentary elections are fragile and sometimes inexistent, even among the groups stemming from the October 17th protest movement, which considered environmental issues as central. The programs mainly focus on socioeconomic reform, accountability, security, sectarianism and corruption, showing where the priorities of the local political scene lie thus far.
7. Climate Mobilization in the Turkish Republic

Brian Obach and Ş. İlğü Özler

7.1. Introduction

Turkey has a relatively small and politically marginalized climate change movement. There are a number of environmental civil society organizations, ranging in size, structure, and focus. These groups typically include combating climate change among their agenda items, and they have at times acted in concert to draw attention to the issue and to mobilize the public. There have also been a handful of mass protests in the last two decades, often carried out in conjunction with international climate developments or coordinated global actions. Often working alongside these environmental NGOs, a core of respected scholars and public intellectuals have organized conferences and written reports in an effort to keep the issue in the public spotlight. Yet, overall, public engagement in climate activism is relatively low, and the Turkish government’s response to the climate crisis has been correspondingly lackluster. Its modest climate measures are attributable more to international considerations than to domestic political pressure. The increasingly autocratic regime has decisively prioritized economic development over environmental protection, a pattern not very different from previous governments in Turkey.

Opinion polls indicate that among the general public environmental issues rank low compared to other priorities such as economic conditions and national security (Çarkoğlu 2017; Üzergün and Şahin 2016). Yet there is some promise in that concern for environmental protection is widespread and awareness of climate change and its impacts is on the rise (Konda Barometer 2018, p. 46). Some recent climate-related disasters have elevated public concern, potentially creating the conditions for nascent environmental consciousness to take root. There is also the possibility that isolated struggles against development projects in rural areas could coalesce and join with the urban based environmental community around an encompassing climate change agenda. Yet, as it stands today, climate mobilization in Turkey is minimal.

The reasons behind the lack of greater political action on climate change are complex, involving a host of political, economic, and social factors (Baykan 2013, Özler and Obach 2018, 2019). Below we detail the current status of the Turkish environmental movement in general and the climate change movement in particular, followed by an analysis of the social forces that act as barriers to popular mobilization. In the end we conclude with an assessment of the potential for greater popular mobilization around the climate crisis. First, we provide a brief overview of Turkey’s vulnerability to climate change impacts and the policy measures that have been taken to date.

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1 University based research centers and some media outlets have specific focus on climate change examples: https://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/tr/iklim-degisikligi, https://acikradyo.com.tr/kategori/cevre-ekoloji-ve-iklim, http://climatechange.boun.edu.tr/
7.2. The Climate Context in Turkey

Turkey is vulnerable to a number of climate change effects. Warmer temperatures and decreased precipitation threaten water resources and food production, while coastal areas are subject to flooding, erosion, and the salinization of aquifers (UNDP). In 2021 Turkey experienced catastrophic floods in the Black Sea region as well as its worst ever wildfire season, which primarily affected Mediterranean coastal areas (Barak and Yanarocak 2022). In response to these disasters and to pressure from Europe and the world community, Turkish officials have taken some minimal provisional steps to deal with the climate crisis.

Turkish leaders have long resisted commitments to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, opting instead to prioritize economic growth. Turkey was among the last countries to sign the Kyoto Protocol in 2009, and it refused for years to ratify the Paris Agreement, finally doing so in 2021. Turkish officials had delayed ratification of the Paris Agreement as it sought the recategorization of Turkey as a developing nation so as to reduce its obligations to reduce emissions and to make the country more eligible for financial aid to meet its climate commitments (Altaeb 2021). Turkey was among a small handful of countries that had not ratified the treaty, and it was the last G20 nation to do so. In a sign of continued resistance, upon ratification the Parliament attached an addendum stating that they were doing so as a developing nation and would not implement measures that would harm Turkey’s economic and social development (Sariyuce and Hu 2021).

Turkey remains primarily dependent on oil, gas, and coal, and recent decades have seen the rapid expansion of fossil fuel development and other environmentally harmful energy projects, such as nuclear plants and massive hydroelectric dams. There has been some progress in the development of renewable energy sources (International Energy Agency 2021), but on the whole, independent scientific assessments of Turkey’s climate policies and goals have been found “critically insufficient” in all respects (Climate Change Tracker 2022). A strong coordinated popular campaign is needed to pressure officials to take more concerted action. We will now turn to the status of the environmental movement in Turkey and that of climate mobilization.

7.3. The Environmental Movement in Turkey

Although environmentalism took hold relatively late in Turkey, it now has a number of environmental civil society organizations that work directly or indirectly on climate change issues. These include large national professional organizations, some of which are affiliates of international organizations, in addition to smaller, grassroots-based groups (Baykan 2013; Paker, et. al. 2013). A small team of public intellectuals, academics, and journalists are very active in keeping the climate change issue on the agenda through reports, conferences, and research. At some crucial junctures the environmental NGOs and these thought leaders have successfully mobilized mass actions on climate change, but these events are relatively rare and, for reasons discussed below, their impact on climate policy are minimal.
The organizational infrastructure is in place for environmental mobilization in Turkey. Environmental NGOs began to form starting in the 1990s. TEMA, the acronym for the Turkish Foundation for Combating Soil Erosion, for Reforestation and the Protection of Natural Habitats, was founded in 1992 and is one of Turkey’s oldest and most important domestic environmental organizations (TEMA). While initially focusing on voluntary non-controversial actions like tree-planting campaigns, it has since moved into political advocacy, including climate change policy. TEMA has a network of “climate ambassadors,” volunteers who advocate for sound environmental policy at the local level while its professional staff conducts research and advocates on national climate policy (Kadirbeyoğlu et. al. 2017; Özler and Obach 2018).

Doğa Derneği is another important domestic environmental organization, focused primarily on wildlife conservation and protecting bird habitat. It, too, has a network of volunteers engaged in research and wildlife monitoring, but, like TEMA, Doğa Derneği has at times mobilized its members to join in collective climate action. Both groups maintain a dues-based membership that provides resources and a measure of autonomy that allows them to challenge state policy (Kadirbeyoğlu et. al. 2017). Other professional environmental NGOs in Turkey are affiliates of international parent organizations. There is a Turkish branch of Greenpeace Mediterranean, a chapter of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and a 350.org affiliate. All of these organizations advocate for climate policy through such actions as providing testimony at public hearings and advising lawmakers on policy matters. They coordinate national action in Turkey in association with global campaigns organized by their international affiliates. Their leaders also commonly act as spokespersons to the media on environmental issues, and they carry out education campaigns to bring their message to the broader public.

Beyond these and a few other professional environmental organizations that retain paid staff and have a national structure, there are also a number of smaller grassroots environmental organizations in Turkey. Similar to the professional NGOs, these groups tend to be based in major urban centers, and they address a variety of issues from sustainable agriculture to climate change. Unlike the larger organizations, they are unincumbered by the need for significant resources to pay staff and maintain offices, and they are therefore more at liberty to take confrontational positions. But this also means that they lack capacity to carry out sustained campaigns, especially if the issues they seek to address are national or global in scope (Kadirbeyoğlu et al. 2017; Özler and Obach 2018). They also tend to be less stable with activity rising and falling depending on the involvement of volunteer coordinators. Nonetheless, they help to raise awareness about environmental issues, and their engaged membership can provide important support for occasional mass mobilizations.

7.4. Climate Action in Turkey

The organizations described above provide the infrastructure for popular mobilization around climate issues. The first significant actions focused on climate change in Turkey began in the mid-2000s. This was at a time when the Kyoto Protocol was going into effect, although Tur-
key had still not signed onto the international agreement. In 2005 nine Greenpeace activists
scaled the cooling tower at the state owned coal fired power plant in Çanakkale in northwest
Turkey in order to draw attention to climate change and to demand a shift to renewable ener-
gy². Months later, on December 3rd, several thousand people participated in demonstrations
in Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir as part of a global day of action against climate change. Actions
in Turkey were coordinated by the Global Action Group, a coalition of Greens, environmental
organizations, and activist-intellectuals. Attention to the cause was bolstered by Open Radio, a
program on a community radio station in Istanbul which continues to regularly feature climate
issues and which serves as a source for climate news and analysis for other media outlets
(Uzelgün and Şahin 2016). The 2005 demonstrations were part of an international call for
action timed to correspond with the climate negotiations taking place in Montreal, Canada³.
The focus of the Turkish environmentalists was to get Turkey to sign onto the Kyoto Protocol.

In 2007 Greenpeace and the Turkish Greens launched a petition demanding that Turkey sign
the agreement. The petition ultimately garnered 170,000 signatures (Uzelgün and Şahin 2016).
Although Turkey did eventually sign the agreement in 2009, the impact of public pressure on
this decision is unclear. Most reports and analysts attribute the concession by Turkish officials
to international pressure⁴. As discussed below, the economic implications of being out of step
with the European Union and the international community on this issue likely carried greater
weight than domestic dissent on the part of environmentalists.

In the following decade Turkish environmental organizations continued to carry out research
and public education campaigns on the climate issue. The WWF chapter organized Earth Hour
events, asking individuals and public agencies to turn off lights to raise awareness about ener-
gy use and climate change. TEMA and the Turkish Marine Environment Protection Association
(TURMEPA, another professional environmental organization) carried out a touring “Don’t
Let Our Future Melt” educational campaign. A number of conferences and public forums
were held through which the environmental community strengthened internal ties, and the
professional environmental NGO’s continued with their climate advocacy directed at elected
officials and public agencies.

Yet, mass action on climate change remains relatively rare in Turkey. A few hundred marched
in Istanbul in 2014, again in association with an international call to action. This one was timed
to correspond with the UN Climate Summit held in New York City, where over 300,000 par-
ticipated in the largest climate march in history. In recent years some Turkish students have
generated media attention by participating in Fridays for Future school strikes, part of an inter-
national movement inspired by Greta Thunberg, the young climate activists who launched the
campaign in Sweden. But overall participation in climate action in Turkey is muted. The rea-
sons for this are multi-faceted. As discussed below, economic, social, and political factors act
in concert to inhibit climate change mobilization and broad participation in the environmental

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³ https://www.campaigncc.org/international/GDA/GDA_history
movement generally. This is not to suggest that mass political action is entirely absent, even in regard to environmentally related issues. Resistance to development projects, including coal mines and fossil fuel power plants, is actually quite common. Yet the connection between these actions and efforts to address the global climate crisis is rarely made, even though, as one of the largest economies in the world, Turkey is a major contributor to climate change. We will return to the unrealized potential embodied in these anti-development actions later, but first we will review the unique facets of Turkish society that inhibit a more vibrant climate movement.

7.5. Impediments to climate mobilization and movement growth

Due to its unique history and current position in the world, there exist a number of economic, social, and political impediments to popular mobilization around climate change in Turkey. Economic development has been a core mission of all leaders since the founding of the Turkish Republic. This drive for growth, embraced by much of the population, hinders climate action. Deep cultural polarization also complicates the pursuit of universal goods, like environmental protection, and these social divisions are manifest in political institutions in ways that further inhibit climate mobilization. Below we review how factors in each of these three realms, economic, social, and political, inhibit climate change mobilization.

7.5.1. Economic Barriers to Climate Mobilization: The Drive to Develop

In policy debates everywhere the value of economic growth is commonly pitted against environmental protection (Goodstein 1999; Kazis and Grossman 1991; Obach 2004). Immediate material interests must always be weighed against long term ecological stability. Although there are hopes that technology will eventually allow a “decoupling” of resources and energy use from economic advancement, as it stands today, some trade-off of resource use and conservation is inevitable (Parrique et al 2019). Since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923 following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, leaders have universally placed a premium value on the economic development side of the equation. It was seen as vital to achieve the same level of development as the leading European powers of the time, in part to guard against them. Economic and military might have been considered essential to the survival of the Republic since the Allied victors of World War I attempted to dominate Turkey, if not prevent its establishment altogether between 1918-1922. Thus, policies throughout its history have been geared towards Turkey achieving the same level of development as the most advanced European economies.

The early years of the Republic were characterized by state-led economic development, but in recent decades Turkey has sought to integrate with the capitalist economies of the west (Barkey 2000). In particular it has long sought membership in the European Union (EU). Eventually granted “candidate” status in the EU in 1999, Turkey has undertaken a series of political
and economic reforms in order to meet the conditions necessary for full membership. As new applicants from eastern Europe were moved to the head of the line, the drawn-out application process for Turkey has been interpreted by some as sign that membership may never occur, and that Europeans are not open to a predominantly Muslim member. Nonetheless, Turkey continues with reforms designed to meet EU standards, a process that has accelerated since the turn of the millennium (de la Cámara 2021). Various environmental protection measures are among these reforms (Adaman and Arsel 2005). The government passed laws protecting water resources and adopted a series of action plans, including risk management for industrial pollution and capacity building for environmental regulation and enforcement. Thus, ironically, Turkey’s pursuit of economic development has ultimately resulted in improved environmental policy measures. For reasons described below, these international economic considerations hold more weight with government leaders than does domestic political pressure from environmentalists.

Despite the implementation of some needed environmental reforms designed to address EU requirements, since the early 1980s Turkey’s economic policies have been increasingly neo-liberal with a strong focus on growth and privatization (Adaman, Akbulut, and Arsel 2017). This has allowed many ecologically destructive development projects to advance virtually unchecked. This trajectory has only accelerated under the leadership of the former prime minister and now president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his conservative Justice and Development Party (Turkish acronym: AKP). The Turkish economy has grown rapidly since 2002. GDP has more than tripled in the last twenty years and Turkey now ranks among the twenty largest economies in the world.

Although the economy has grown rapidly since the turn of the millennium, Turkey still lags behind most of its aspirational peers in Western Europe in terms of living standards and poverty alleviation. This period has also been punctuated by economic crises, including an extreme bout of inflation that threatens to undermine the gains of the last two decades. This economic instability and unfulfilled aspirations to achieve parity with the most developed economies of Europe have kept economic issues at the forefront of the public mind, even in the context of an overall growth trajectory. Opinion polls consistently show economic concerns superseding environmental protection in importance. This intense focus on economic development on the part of both political leaders and the public at large has left environmental protection, especially global climate change, low on the policy agenda. In some instances, environmental advocates are seen as opponents of Turkey’s economic and social advancement, a challenge that will be discussed further in the political barriers section below.

7.5.2. Cultural Barriers to Climate Mobilization: Social Polarization

Survey research does not indicate significant differences in environmental attitudes or climate change beliefs across demographic groups in Turkey. Yet, no issue in Turkey can be fully understood without considering the strong social divisions that characterize Turkish society.
Turkey is 98% Muslim, but this homogeneity hides profound differences in levels of religiosity and associated cultural attributes. For decades a secular elite dominated Turkish society, politically, economically and culturally. Secularism is a pillar of Kemalist ideology established by Turkey’s revered founder, Atatürk. Religious practice was largely placed under state bureaucratic control as westernization and secularism were advanced.

Until the transition to the most recent AKP regime starting in 2002, domination by Turkish secular elites hid cultural divisions under a veneer of national unity. Yet life in the rural countryside differed significantly from the more westernized urban areas. In Anatolia traditional lifestyles remained entrenched, including conservative, patriarchal religious ideology. But such beliefs and practices were largely confined to private life. Any efforts to expand the role of religion in public life beyond limits set by the state, especially any political manifestation of religious sentiment, were aggressively suppressed. Political parties that emphasized religious beliefs were banned, and the military, considered the guardians of Kemalist secularism, stepped in when these principles were threatened or violated. Even symbolic religious expressions were highly regulated. For example, women were forbidden from wearing a traditional Muslim head covering in public buildings.

Strict government oversight of religion was loosened somewhat starting in the 1980s (Toprak 1996). This allowed Islamist leaning political figures to capitalize on the voting power of religious rural migrants who made up a growing percentage of the urban population (Özler 2000). The secular elite had long relied on the support of the judiciary, the state bureaucracy, and on occasion, the military, to maintain their power (Mardin 1973). In contrast, the Islamist AKP, used highly effective organizing techniques and well-developed local patronage networks that rewarded recently migrated urban squatters, to build a grassroots power base (Özler 2000). First gaining influence in local elections and building steadily from there, they effectively took power nationally in 2002.

Environmentalism was still only a marginal concern at this time and these issues received little or no attention in national political competition. However, given that the small number of environmental organizations were populated with members of the educated urban professional class, environmental action came to be associated with the secularists in a society increasingly characterized by sharp political divisions grounded in the Islamist-secularist cultural divide (Özler and Obach 2019). As discussed below, this has very significant consequences given the current political conditions in the country.

The other main social fissure in Turkey has less relevance to environmental politics, but it also complicates prospects for environmental mobilization. Since the founding of the Republic, the Kurdish minority concentrated in the southeast corner of the country has been oppressed through policies designed to foster a united Turkish identity. The Kurdish language and Kurdish organizations were largely prohibited until the 1990s. Fighting between Kurdish separatists and Turkish forces that occurred through most of the 1980s and 90s has since subsided and

(Sarkissian and Özler 2013).
some restrictions on Kurdish rights have been loosened, but expressions of Kurdish identity are still viewed with suspicion by nationalist Turks, and official mistreatment persists.\(^5\)

Programs to develop the relatively poor southeastern region of Turkey and better integrate the Kurdish population into the national economy have been in place for decades. Currently the federal government’s Southeastern Anatolia Project (Turkish acronym GAP) includes plans for 20 dams and 19 hydroelectric plants on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The GAP has archaeological, cultural, geopolitical as well as environmental implications for the region. The most controversial of these projects is the Ilisu Dam that would damage aquatic ecosystems, displace communities, and flood the ancient city of Hasankeyf. This has been met with opposition from Kurdish organizations (Fandaee and Broncoloni 2019) as well as from environmentalists in Turkey and globally.

Similar to being caught between the secular-Islamist divisions, environmental groups who oppose GAP projects for ecological reasons cannot do so without being drawn into the human rights issues and associated ethnic tensions. In some instances, western aid and financing has been halted due to the human rights controversies that have emerged around GAP development projects (Warner 2012). The withdrawal of funding and its impact on the progress of these ecologically destructive projects is grounds for celebration by environmentalists, but from the perspective of nationalist Turks suspicious of Kurdish aspirations, this creates a link between environmentalists and what they perceive as a threatening ethnic separatist movement. It also stands in the way of developmentalist aspirations. Thus, this is another way in which the Turkish environmental movement is hampered by cultural divisions that manifest themselves in problematic ways in the political sphere, a subject we turn to next.

7.5.3. Political Barriers to Climate Mobilization: Partisan Environmentalism and Government Repression

Addressing climate change and other environmental threats is ultimately contingent on policy reform, thus an examination of political and policy making institutions is crucial for understanding Turkey’s environmental trajectory. The economic and cultural forces described above: the entrenched economic developmentalist orientation and the sharp cultural divisions that characterize Turkish society, both manifest themselves in political dynamics that make significant environmental policy reform unlikely. This is compounded by an increasingly autocratic state leadership that is willing to repress opponents of its neoliberal developmentalist agenda.

Given the preeminent role of the state since the founding of the Turkish republic, Turkey has a very weak civil society tradition (Erdoğan Tosun, 2001; Toprak, 1996). Civil society organizations have always been highly regulated and steered towards state approved goals.

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Any organization perceived to be threatening to state interests has been met with repression. This might include banning organizations outright or rendering them ineffective through close monitoring and bureaucratic harassment. Human rights violations have been common throughout Turkey’s history and dissidents of many stripes have been imprisoned, all in the name of maintaining national security and unity.

Given strict state control in the early years of the Republic, civil society organizations, including environmental groups, lacked independence and tended to adhere closely to state sanctioned activity. Gardening clubs and neighborhood beautification organizations were the closest thing that Turkey had to environmental organizations through the 1960s (Adem, 2005). Sporadic popular environmental mobilization began to appear in Turkey in the 1970s (Atauz 2000). There were local protests against industrial developments that threatened agricultural land in Artvin and Samsun during this period (Bozkir 2018, 162). Turkey’s first proposed nuclear power plant, Akkuyu, drew a surprising level of national opposition (Atauz, 2000; Duru, 2013).

Despite a handful of cases of temporary popular mobilization, the organizational development of the environmental movement that is essential for sustained effective advocacy remained hampered by state restrictions for most of the country’s history. As described above, Turkey’s leading environmental organizations were founded in the 1990s or early 2000s, aided in part by reforms required by Turkey’s EU accession process (Bikmen and Meydancoğlu, 2006). But this opening was relatively short lived. Although reforms placed the military more firmly under civilian control, thus reducing their influence and the risk of coups, the AKP, which won control of Turkey’s highly centralized national government in 2002, has since consolidated its power and taken on an increasingly authoritarian approach to dissent. A 2007 constitutional referendum endowed much power in the presidency, a reform pursued by the then prime minister Erdoğan, the head of the AKP. This enabled Erdoğan to assume the presidency and, with effective control of government by the AKP, a number of other legislative measures were passed that further weakened independent civil society. Most recently the Turkish parliament passed a law enabling the government to replace governance of civil society organizations and to limit their ability to raise funds. Such restrictions have hampered the work of environmental groups and all civil society organizations.

There have also been instances of violent repression. All opposition demonstrations are heavily policed, often with officers fully armed or equipped with riot gear. When protests are disruptive, violence often ensues. For example, several busloads of police and gendarmerie used tear gas and truncheons against villagers seeking to block the construction of a power-plant near Gerze in 2011. One of Turkey’s most tumultuous recent civil conflicts arose out of another struggle over development in 2013. This was a government plan to re-build Ottoman era barracks as a shopping mall at the site of a small public park at the heart of Istanbul.

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Opponents engaged in a peaceful sit-in to block the construction were attacked by the police. Others protesting the brutality joined in, and the conflict escalated into running street battles. Solidarity protests elsewhere in the country were also met with violence. The Gezi Park protests embodied a series of grievances, including many calling for the government to resign. But the fact that it was touched off by a struggle to preserve a park solidified the regime’s perspective that environmentalists are their opponents (Özler and Obach 2018). The conflict was also used as a pretext for further government restrictions on civil society, measures that were strengthened even more following a failed coup attempt in 2016. This led to a declaration of emergency rule and a steady deterioration of civil rights. Human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have decried the abuses by Turkish state agents who have imprisoned numerous journalists, scholars, opposition figures, and other critics of the AKP regime.

These threats to independent civil society organizations have a chilling effect for all critics of AKP policies. Since coming to power the AKP has aggressively advanced a neoliberal developmentalist program including a number of ecologically damaging development projects. Massive hydro-electric development in the east and in the Black Sea region has devastated aquatic ecosystems. Coal and gas expansion has led to steady increases in CO₂ emissions despite some corresponding increases in renewable energy. Mining is another sector that has been on the rise. Transportation infrastructure from superhighways to airports have opened undeveloped wilderness areas to resource extraction. There are plans in the works to dig a massive new canal through protected forest land and rural communities linking the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara, a project that will cause ecological devastation according to environmentalists (Farooq 2018).

Environmental organizations challenging the ecologically hazardous developmentalist agenda have met with little success. In the highly polarized political context, environmentalists are portrayed as tools of the secular opposition, not as legitimate advocates for sound policy. Due to the association with European environmental standards and funding, they have also been characterized as foreign agents bent on preventing Turkey from reaching its economic development destiny (Özler and Obach 2019). And action on environmental issues in the east becomes bundled with ethnic polarization, further complicating the position of environmentalists within Turkey’s fractured social terrain. Given these political dynamics, environmentalists have at times been framed as terrorist sympathizers and traitors, labels that instill caution in the context of a repressive regime.

Instrumentalist opposition parties have indirectly reinforced these unfair characterizations of environmental action. Developmentalism has been advanced by all major political parties, and environmental impacts were given meager consideration when secularist parties held power. Analyses of political party platforms indicate that the major opposition parties on the left, the Republican People’s Party (Turkish acronym: CHP) and the Peoples’ Democratic Party (Turkish acronym: HDP), do have somewhat more ecologically focused positions (Sipahi and Dinçer 2019), but that economic growth is still fundamental (Mutlu 2002). Nonetheless,
seeking any opportunity to undermine the AKP’s hold on power, opposition leaders have given voice to environmental concerns, despite their own weak record on environmental issues. This reinforces the AKP’s charge that environmentalism is merely a ploy used by the opposition seeking to discredit their development plans. It also incentivizes the ruling regime’s efforts to suppress dissent and rapidly advance these projects with the hope that economic returns will blunt their critics.

7.6. The Prospects for Future Climate Mobilization in Turkey

Given major economic, social, and political barriers, the prospects for any significant popular climate mobilization in Turkey are dim. The ruling party is determined to advance economic development using whatever means available. Even pledges to make modest improvements should be viewed with skepticism. Leaders have shown little reluctance to suppress opposition if it were to arise. In addition, public opinion polls show that environmental concerns are low on the list of priorities even for the AKP’s opponents. Despite this generally dismal outlook, there are small glimmers of hope that a broad and vibrant climate change movement could arise and that real policy reforms could be implemented.

Given that deep cultural polarization has fostered political divisions that make action on environmental issues difficult, developments that bridge this divide provide opportunity for progress on climate change. Although climate action has been fairly muted in Turkey, there have been many instances of local mobilization against specific development projects. The EnvJustice research project, which documents resource-related struggles worldwide, identified sixty such campaigns in Turkey. Many of these grassroots actions are important in that they have occurred in more rural provinces outside of the major urban centers and involve farmers and working-class people more so than the urban-based middle-class environmental groups. While these efforts vary in size, some of the larger campaigns have included an effort to stop a foreign owned gold mine in Bergama, a coal power plant in Gerze, a hydroelectric dam in Yusufeli, and a nuclear power plant in Sinop (Çoban 2004; Özen 2009). Other power plants, dams, mines and industrial development projects have met with such opposition throughout Turkey (Aksu, Erensü, and Evren 2016; Erensü 2016; Hamsici 2010; Şendeniz 2016). In a recent example, in August 2019 an estimated five thousand marchers gathered near a small town in the Çanakkale province to protest a proposed gold mine that threatens to contaminate water sources.

While not initiated by established environmental groups, such organizations have at times lent their support, resources, and expertise to these grassroots campaigns, creating a vital link between rural populations and the urban-based environmental movement. Professional associations representing engineers, lawyers, medical professionals, urban planners or others have

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9 EnvJustice http://www.envjustice.org/
also provided support to these grassroots initiatives (Özler and Obach 2018). These groups are especially important when community activists are contesting development proposals on technical grounds through the regulatory or legal processes for environmental impact. Although these popular movements are rarely successful in completely preventing development projects, they have provided important opportunities to unite diverse constituencies and for environmentalists to build ties between rural and urban areas.

Some environmental organizations have actively sought to foster such cooperation. For example, in 2010, the Ecology Collective, a small Ankara-based environmental NGO, joined with local environmentalists to organize an environmental justice conference in the Black Sea town of Gerze in the midst of a local struggle to oppose a coal power plant in that community (Üzelgün and Şahin 2016). Network ties between urban based environmentalists and rural community activists strengthened as a result of these campaigns would be important to the development of any broad-based climate movement in Turkey. The environmental justice frame associated with local struggles can be broadened to expose the larger threat posed by climate change. Yet, thus far ongoing mobilization or the formal structures needed to maintain it have failed to emerge out of these local struggles (Kadirbeyoğlu et al 2017; Özler and Obach 2018). In the future, capitalizing on local environmental threats to unite diverse constituencies may be the best hope for building a broader climate movement in Turkey.

Another basis for hope can be found in the growing awareness about the climate crisis among the Turkish population. This is a product of the educational work carried out by environmental organizations that have built capacity over the years despite challenges presented by the state. And, given Turkey’s vulnerability, actual climate induced environmental disasters, like the fires that plagued the Mediterranean region and the flooding that afflicted the Black Sea coast in 2021, also serve to raise public consciousness about the issue. Even though Turks place less priority on environmental issues relative to those in most other countries, when asked specifically about the environment, there is still widespread knowledge and concern. Fifty-five percent of Turkish respondents in the World Values Survey state that protecting the environment should be given priority, even if it causes slower economic growth and some loss of jobs (Haerpfer, et. al. 2020).

There is also potential for greater climate mobilization if there were to be a change of regime in Turkey. There are some indications of a weakening of the AKP’s control, especially in light of the most recent economic crisis. Policies implemented by the current leadership have resulted in spiraling inflation and economic turmoil. The secularist Republican People’s Party is the strongest party among the opposition and, should they come to lead a coalition government, it would, at minimum, create greater opportunity for environmental mobilization. Efforts to build an effective Green Party have for the most part floundered, but should the latest attempt yield a functioning organization, there would at least be a visible platform through which environmental concerns can be brought to the public. It is unlikely that such a party would clear the threshold necessary to win seats in the parliament, but if that were to happen and if a coalition government was necessary, it could provide for greater environmental influence.
Lastly, should Turkey make real progress towards entry into the European Union, improvements in environmental policy would necessarily continue. As it stands, domestic advances to date have been facilitated through the EU processes. In addition, European foundations have provided funding for environmental organizations and sustainable development projects. Most of the major environmental marches and protests in Turkey have been held in conjunction with actions coordinated at the international level. Thus, despite a potential reaction from nationalists who view any foreign influence with suspicion, the greater the integration of Turkey into global climate movement, the more likely progress will be made domestically. Barriers to mass mobilization and the implementation of effective climate policy in Turkey are substantial. A complex economic, social, and political milieu all work against the progress that is desperately needed in this vital country. At the same time, there is a great deal of unrealized potential for a Turkish climate change movement. Environmental concern cuts across the cultural schisms that have enabled political leaders to divide the country and draw attention away from the existential threat posed by climate change. But thus far there is no sustained popular mobilization that could ensure real progress in addressing the climate crisis.

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8. Biographies

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SOCIAL MOBILISATIONS AND CLIMATE EMERGENCY IN THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD AND TURKEY

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