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Environmental Justice In The Arab World



Environmental justice in the Arab world

"A fair transition or a passing trend"

Ghadi Qandil
MA in Political Science

Introduction:

Environmental challenges have intensified as a result of the social and economic changes that characterize the Arab world, including; The massive population growth, the rapid urbanization processes and the high rate of poverty, which created a great challenge for the countries of the Arab world to choose between economic development and environmental protection; that's why the current crisis is that most of these governments always give priority to the first choice.

Needless to say, the climate change repercussions are exacerbated by environmental degradation and the depletion of natural resources resulting from a development model based on extractive industries in the Arab countries; Those excessive activities in the exploitation of natural resources with the aim of exporting them to global markets, such as oil and gas in Algeria, Libya, Iraq and the Gulf countries, and to a lesser extent in Tunisia and Egypt; phosphate mining in Tunisia and Morocco; The extractive approach is not limited to minerals and oil, but also extends to agriculture, forestry, fishing, and even tourism whose activities depend on heavy water consumption, such as the water-intensive agricultural industry associated with tourism in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt.

Hence, it is not possible to deal with the environment as a set of natural resources only, but also as a common public space, public health field, and one of the political economy fields, and then it was necessary to build a concept to protect the environment from forms of extremism and encroachment on it; Therefore the concept of Environmental Justice emerged, which means the fair treatment and the effective participation of countries and citizens in the development and implementation of environmental laws, regulations and policies, and this will be achieved when everyone enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health risks and equal access to the decision-making process for a healthy environment to live, learn and work.

3Jeannie L. Sowers, "Environmental Activism in the Middle East: Prospects and Challenges", The Franklin Humanities Institute, November 1, 2018, available at: <https://cutt.ly/nZuPYqO>

4 May Jurdi, Reem Fayyad, "Environmental Degradation in the Arab World: The Challenge to Sustaining Life," Arab Future Magazine, p. 419, January 2014, available at: <https://cutt.ly/BZuPn9P>



It's clear now that environmental justice usually focuses on the local community needs, as it assumes that citizens are an integral part of the environment, it holds the fossil fuel industry and other major industries accountable, and it calls for the pursuit of a sustainable relationship with nature, as it recognizes the impossibility of separating the destructive effects of the environment from the devastating effects on people's lives, and rejects the exploitation of the poorest communities, those most affected by the environmental damage.

Therefore, addressing the environmental justice's issue in the Arab countries aims to strengthen trans-regional links between activists and movements calling for the environmental justice, as well as to present the experiences of societies in facing environmental grievances, which raises questions about the nature of environmental activity in the Arab world countries, and how the political systems in the region deal with the environmental justice's concept? And what is the role of the community organizations' various forms in protecting the environment in the Arab countries? And to what extent do conflicts and wars affect the protection of the environment in the countries of the region? Finally, do international institutions enhance the efforts of environmental justice for the Arab world countries?

Understanding the Environmental Activity in the Arab Region:

There is a vital and noticeable activity in the Arab world on environmental issues. Recently, most Arab countries have witnessed the campaigns' escalation of environmental activity, such as waste treatment in Lebanon, bad water management in Iraq, standing against phosphate pollution and toxic waste dumps in Tunisia, as well as confronting manifestations of the environmental threat resulting from the scarcity of water resources and the limited arable land in Egypt.

Despite all the demands and movements demanding attention to the environment and its protection, it is still necessary to study the environmental activity in the region in the context of a broader process than those movements that seek to change the political and economic system in the region, because the specific environmental challenges facing Arab countries have intensified in contemporary decades, implying a number of risks to the livelihood of future generations, and the high costs of mitigating negative environmental impacts.

2Munhi Warda, "Achieving environmental justice within the framework of activating the requirements of sustainable development: a study of some models of pioneering countries in the field of environmental justice empowerment", Human Resources Development magazine, Vol. 16, Vol. 2, 9/1/2020, p. 340, available at the following link: <https://cutt.ly/cZuPj0C>

Despite the steady awareness and the improvements witnessed over the past years, the countries of the region are facing threats resulting from the decline in the per capita share of water resources, the decline of the agricultural area, the health problems associated with environmental pollution, the degradation of coastal areas, and the scarcity of marine resources.

What raises concerns about the repercussions of environmental risks is the significant increase in the economic costs of environmental degradation in the Arab region, as these costs vary, according to World Bank studies, between 2.1% of GDP in Tunisia to 7.1% in Yemen. The effects of these high costs are transmitted to the public financial system, household budgets, and the competitiveness of the region's economies, in addition to their impact on justice and fairness toward successive generations. At current rates, many of the resources that exist today will not be available for the future generations.

Hence, the environmental threat due to climate change will exacerbate in the Arab world, which is one of the most vulnerable regions to being affected and suffering as a result of global warming, low rainfall, and rising sea levels. Water scarcity will increase, climate-sensitive agricultural activity will be affected, and coastal urban areas will be more vulnerable to flooding, as well as the possibility that competition for these dwindling resources will exacerbate violence and political unrest that could extend beyond the region's borders.

³Jeannie L. Sowers, "Environmental Activism in the Middle East: Prospects and Challenges", The Franklin Humanities Institute, November 1, 2018, available at: <https://cutt.ly/nZuPYqO>

⁴May Jurdi, Reem Fayyad, "Environmental Degradation in the Arab World: The Challenge to Sustaining Life," Arab Future Magazine, p. 419, January 2014, available at: <https://cutt.ly/BZuPn9P>

Environmental justice at the national level:

The institutional and political structure that regulates decisions at the national level regarding the environment in the Arab world is surrounded by ambiguity. Budget lines, functions, terms of reference, and regulatory authorities on issues that affect the environment are largely confidential and opaque.

The issue of environmental justice has been ignored in most Arab countries. This is due to the fact that these countries rarely want to make a structural change in their policy, especially in issues related to the environment; because any structural change in those public policies of the state requires similar and interrelated political, economic and social changes.

Environmental issues are not just a matter of energy transformation; it is a question of profound political and socio-economic transformation. It is about disabling the current status and planning for a different future. Therefore, it is easy to understand why the political regimes in most Arab countries don't welcome making a real and tangible difference in environmental justice.

In fact, the land is a mirror of the policies of the regimes in the Arab countries that preferred the policy of extraction, it is worth noting that climate change exacerbates the already existing problems, which are deepening and rooted in environmental exploitation, enduring economic inequality, mismanagement, and violence increase. On the other hand, national and international responses to environmental problems neglect their social and economic reflections and repercussions.

Despite this, Arab countries that didn't sign the Paris climate agreement, such as Iraq and Yemen, which are accused of neglecting environmental issues, began to take clear measures regarding environmental justice, especially recently. While in the Gulf countries, where the economies of petroleum regimes have been highly criticized by the environmental movements, the country is still highly dependent on the exploitation of hydrocarbon fuels.

However, some Gulf countries are trying to get out of this crisis by diversifying their economy, for example, the United Arab Emirates launched an environmental strategy until the year 2050, through which it aims to increase the share of clean energy from 25% to 50% and reduce

5 Hamza Hamouchan, "What Development in the Middle East and North Africa? Extractive Environmental Justice and Sustainable Development", Al-Monadil Newspaper, 24/10/2018, available at: <https://cutt.ly/GZuPeXk>

6 Michael Young, Will the Middle East Remain Habitable? Carnegie Middle East Center, 19\11\2020, Available at: <https://cutt.ly/R-ZuPfx3>

7 Rory Quick, "How Activists Can Better Advance Environmental Reform in the Middle East and North Africa?", Arab Reform Initiative, 8/31/2021, available at: <https://cutt.ly/OZuPavk>



the carbon footprint of electricity production by 70%. Following its example, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia announced its intention to reach carbon neutrality by 2060. This comes in addition to the efforts of most Arab countries to create international cooperation, hoping for coordinated efforts with greater regional impact. This vision has been translated into a form of climate diplomacy that is already in force among the Arab countries in recent years.

Protecting the environment in the Arab countries through society:

In the Arab world, the local area often plays the largest role in responses and solutions to environmental issues, and from a grass-roots perspective, we see an increasing use of adaptation and mitigation strategies to address the myriad of social, economic, cultural and environmental problems facing local communities. Decentralization in most Arab countries has provided new tools and capabilities for environmental action at the subnational level. While local governments, especially municipalities, adopt new regulatory authorities, and move to new policy areas, their role in environmental issues is emerging.

In Morocco, some communities have resorted to old ways of sharing water to deal with growing shortages and address water-related grievances, while in Tunisia; local activists are calling for new concepts of food sovereignty and seeking to include the concept of sustainable agriculture in the state's strategy. This comes in addition to the framework of cooperation and cross-border work through which societies in the Arab world have succeeded in implementing a number of projects to protect the environment, such as; The Strategic Action Program for the Red Sea, the Technical Assistance Program in the Mediterranean, and, more recently, the Strategic Partnership on the Large Marine Ecosystem in the Mediterranean.

The continuous climatic disturbances has become a growing awareness in the turbulent Arab region, where multiple conflicts and persistent geostrategic tensions have forced NGOs to intervene to protect the environment, and from this it is clear that the issues that civil society in the Arab world should support recently include human rights, anti-corruption, social justice and change climatic. We can say that peoples take advantage of education and political change to organize themselves at the grassroots levels and to activate their political, social, economic and environmental rights.

8 Muhammad Abdel-Hadi Shantir, "Environmental Cooperation and Confronting Climate Change in the Middle East: Prospects and Challenges," *International Politics magazine*, 7/2/2022, available at: <https://cutt.ly/bZuPupl>

9 Muhammad Abdel-Hadi Shantir, "Environmental Cooperation and Confronting Climate Change in the Middle East: Prospects and Challenges," *International Politics magazine*, 7/2/2022, available at: <https://cutt.ly/bZuPupl>



In this regard, an environmental campaign was launched in the city of Tunis in 2015 to close the largest controlled waste dump in the country, which is the Burj Chaker estuary in the municipality of Sidi Hussein, a southern suburb of the capital and includes a number of neighborhoods inhabited by the working class, the campaign did not focus only on endangering the health of residents near the estuary, or the dangerous environmental impacts of waste disposal there, but also focused on the rampant corruption in the country's solid waste management sector.

In Morocco, an environmental campaign called "Mashi zebel" has been formed, following the government's decision to import garbage from Italy as a cheap alternative to fossil fuels, and a major controversy erupted when local media indicated that the Lafarge Morocco cement company imported 2,500 tons of Italian garbage for incineration to gain energy. The campaign was able to expose political corruption.

In Egypt, the "Egyptians Against Coal" campaign has been formed following the government's decision to lift a long-standing ban on the use of coal in the country. The campaign was able to spread the negative effects of coal and attract a number of supporters, especially since the issue of coal isn't only related to negative environmental and health impacts, but also to social and economic grievances. It's true that Egypt is committed to the ambitious long-term goal of the 2016 Paris Agreement on Climate Change, by maintaining the increase in global average temperature below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels; However, this contradicts with allowing the import of coal to generate electricity, which means that Egypt will remain stuck with an infrastructure that depends on coal to meet its energy needs without fulfilling its commitment in the Paris Agreement.

Environmental protection in conflict countries in the Arab world:

The conflicts and disputes that most Arab countries have witnessed since 2011 and the changing political, economic and social conditions and restructuring in many countries of the Arab world have led to profound environmental impacts. The armed conflict in Yemen, Syria, and Libya has directly contributed to causing severe environmental damage, by targeting the infrastructure of these peoples, which makes the ability of those communities to protect and preserve the environment weaker, and hinders the adoption of the changes required to mitigate the damages of climate change. This raises the question about the relationship between conflict and environmental justice in the region.

Contrary to what was happening in the countries of conflict in the Arab world in the past, the explicit and clear effects on the environmental infrastructure were the destruction of dams, agricultural lands, grain stores and other environmental systems that support the sustainability of these societies, which falls under the name of intentional damage to the environment. But now, indirect effects on the environment have resulted from long-term conflicts in the region, such as pollution in military sites resulting from the presence of high-level military concentrations that may last for a long time to resolve the existing conflict in those countries, and the use of weapons in all its illegal forms that cause environmental destruction, especially in areas populated, in countries such as Syria, Yemen, Gaza and Libya, this comes in addition to the risks of using artificial intelligence to destroy environmental infrastructure, which raises controversy about the environmental wars industry in the Arab region.

The international effort to consolidate the foundations of environmental justice in the Arab countries:

The foregoing highlights the international community's role in laying foundations for environmental justice, especially under the Arab governments' awareness of the need for international cooperation and support to confront environmental crises based on the international community's political responsibility, which created new and far-reaching prospects for cooperation in the Arab region.

11 "It's a blessing in disguise": When climate change pushes Middle Eastern Countries closer," France 24, 4/11/2021, available at: <https://cutt.ly/LZuO6QU>

12 Abeer Abdulkareem, Amgad Ellaboudy," Climate Justice in Saudi Arabia", Climate Scorecard, 11\3\2022, Available at: <https://cutt.ly/3ZuPPy1>

13 Hamza Hamouchan, "What Development in the Middle East and North Africa? Extractive Environmental Justice and Sustainable Development", Al-Monadil Newspaper, 24/10/2018, available at: <https://cutt.ly/GZuPeXk>



For example, the alliances among the countries of the Mediterranean basin have been strengthened after the launch of the "Union for the Mediterranean" initiative in July 2008, with a special focus on depollution in the Mediterranean in the context of the "Horizons 2020" programme.

In addition, bilateral or multiple cooperative programs between some countries of the region under the Reimbursable Technical Assistance Program of the World Bank, came with a main objective to enable the dealing country to implement institutional strengthening reforms in the environment sector. Progress has been made for Algeria and Egypt in solid waste management and the Clean Development Mechanism.

Similarly, the Gulf countries' cooperation has emerged through the Gulf Environmental Action and Partnership Program (GEPAP), which aims to maintain, protect and promote the long-term sustainable development of waterways in the Gulf region. This program will enhance cooperation among governments, the private sector and the civil society about the environment, through knowledge development and investment promotion.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia also launched the "Green Saudi Arabia" forum and the "Green Middle East Initiative" summit, in October in 2021, with global and regional participation.

This initiative is a new beginning for a unified approach to preserving the environment on a participatory and cooperative regional-global basis.

However, despite the effort made by the international community to encourage Arab governments to implement the foundations of environmental justice, there are still some doubts about the goals of international institutions concerned with environmental protection such as the German Agency for International Cooperation and the European Union agencies that organize environmental events and publish reports, highlight the climate change's dangers and call to take urgent actions such as promoting renewable energy and developing adaptation plans. Where some governments accuse it of providing a limited and inaccurate analysis of the environmental crisis in the region, and even see its failure to address the crisis from its roots, and that international institutions have helped to further pollution by granting licenses and subsidies to multinational industries and extractive industries.

3Jeannie L. Sowers, "Environmental Activism in the Middle East: Prospects and Challenges", The Franklin Humanities Institute, November 1, 2018, available at: <https://cutt.ly/nZuPYqO>

4 May Jurdi, Reem Fayyad, "Environmental Degradation in the Arab World: The Challenge to Sustaining Life," Arab Future Magazine, p. 419, January 2014, available at: <https://cutt.ly/BZuPn9P>



Conclusion:

In sum, many forms of uncertainty will surround the environmental change's impact on the stability of Arab countries; however, recent events show the potential for rapid and noticeable climate change to exacerbate political instability in the poorest Arab regions, according to the reports of the Mediterranean Experts Organization on climate and environmental change, which represents an additional factor in destabilizing the Arab world, the countries of the region will not bear to pay its expenses at the current stage.

This is due to the fact that climate change is a disruptive force for political systems in general, and for the regimes of Arab countries in particular. It may lead to a violation of the sovereignty and authority of the state in favor of the influence of civil society organizations, which are more prepared to implement the foundations of environmental justice, then climate change is linked to politics in the region directly, and it will have tremendous impacts over the coming years.

From the above, it becomes clear that the biggest challenge in all parts of the Arab world is to rebuild the environmental integrity. Thus, preserving human activity again. Which requires two types of change, adaptation and transformation. In terms of adaptation, climate-related disasters are already confined to the planet's system due to harmful emissions and environmental degradation. The most important is transformation by anticipating where and how disasters will occur and preparing accordingly, which entails ensuring a continuous relief capacity and absorbing future shocks, which requires pooled resources internationally and regionally.

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