

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM IN THE POST-ARAB SPRING: IT IS NOT ABOUT A MERE CLEAN ENVIRONMENT

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Introduction: Long Lasting Environmental Stresses in the MENA Region

The MENA region lacks rigorous environmental institutions and legal frameworks that are essential to reverse the current state of environmental degradation.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region faces major environmental threats. There, geography and arid and semi-arid climatic conditions have led to a concentration of people in coastal zones and little valleys with ensuing environmental pollution, declining per capita water resources, increasing soil erosion, climate change and intensifying desertification, all creating environmental challenges (Tal & Linkov, 2004). In addition, the region lacks rigorous environmental institutions and legal frameworks that are essential to reverse the current state of environmental degradation. Climate change, for example, reveals the institutional inadequacies, as mirrored in policy debates on adaptive capacities and climate change resilience (Hoffmann, 2018).

These environmental challenges have been further aggravated by other socioeconomic processes, which characterise the MENA region and include: the huge population growth, rapid urbanisation process and the high rate of poverty. In this context, it seems that every time governments in the MENA region are faced with an apparent choice between economic development and jobs, on the one hand, and the protection of the environment, on the other, priority is always given to the former (Hilmi, Safa & Ketata, 2015).

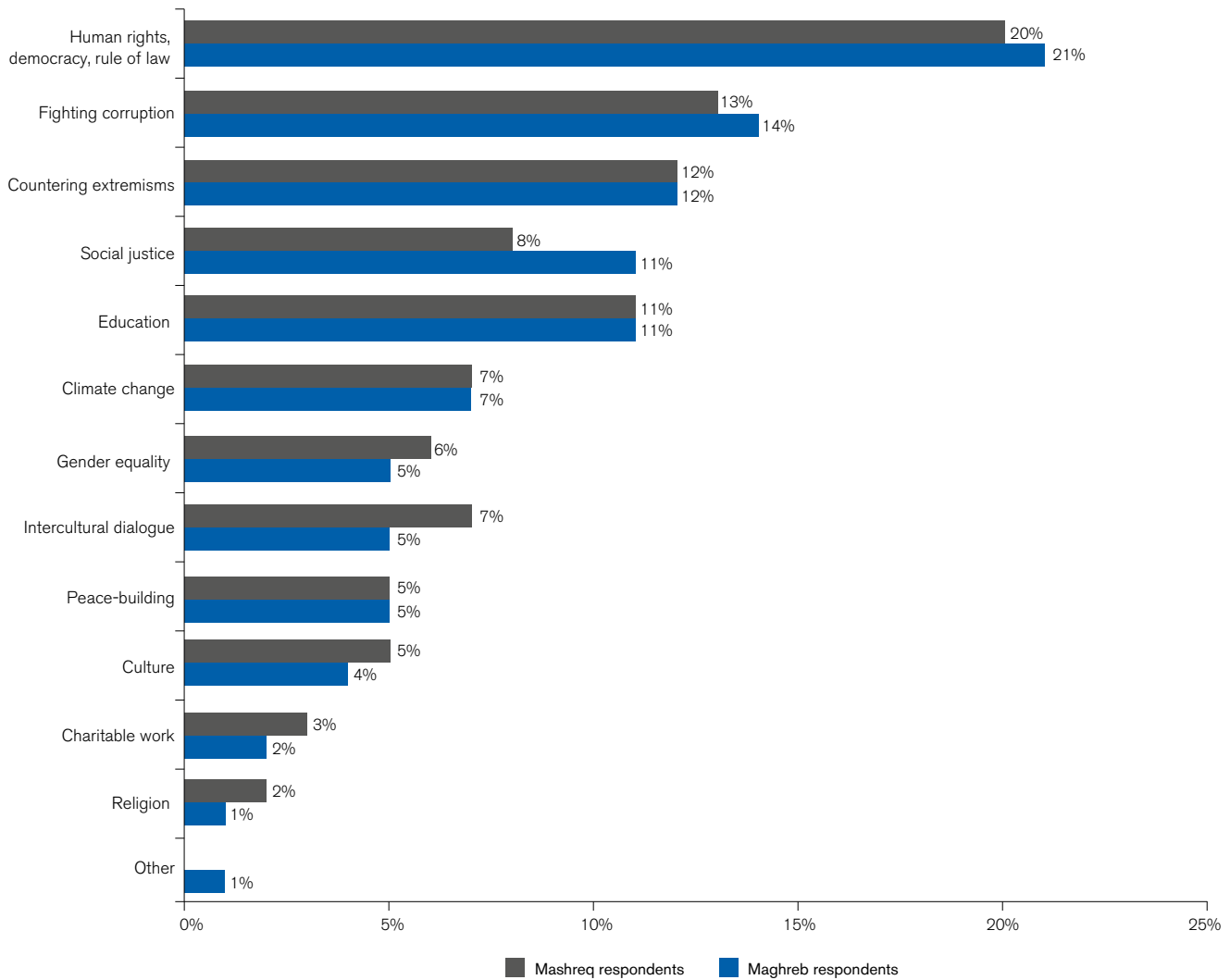
The Post-Arab Spring and the Green Uprising

The Arab Spring could also be described as a “green spring”.

Given the aforementioned ecological and economic challenges, environmental activism – typically around issues affecting public health and livelihoods – has been on the rise in the region over the past few decades (Sowers, 2017). More recently and following the Arab Spring, environmental activism has been intensifying in the region. The Arab Spring could be described as a “green spring” as it brought not only political issues to the forefront of the public sphere but environmental issues as well (Loschi, 2019). According to the Euromed Survey, the causes that should be advocated by civil society in the MENA region include human rights, fighting corruption, social justice, education, and climate change. It could be said that people are taking advantage of the political opening that resulted from the Arab Spring to organise at grassroots levels and to enforce their political, social, economic and environmental rights.

Graph 1: What should be the main focus of civil society in SEM countries:

(respondents were asked to choose 3 options out of 12)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

For example, in Ain Salah, in the heart of the Algerian Sahara, a collective movement erupted in order to protest against shale gas exploration by the French oil company Total since 2013 (Petitjean & Chapelle, 2016). The campaign claimed that Algerian citizens were confronting not only the environmental and health hazards of fracking but also a form of neocolonialism. In this regard, the movement declared that while France has banned Total and other companies from using fracking in its territory, it is still pushing for it in its former colony Algeria and for these multinational companies to monopolise exploring and exploiting shale gas in Algeria in the future (Hamouchene, 2015). Two years later, the campaign has fostered a formal coalition representing local councils, the energy minister was forced to resign, and fracking operations remain stalled (Kinninburgh, 2015).

Ain Salah, in the heart of the Algerian Sahara protesting against shale gas exploration; the “We are not Trash” campaign and “Egyptians against Coal” are examples of environmental activism.

In Morocco, an environmental campaign called “We are not Trash” was formed in the wake of the government decision to import trash from Italy as a cheap alternative to fossil fuel (Miller, 2016). In particular, the controversy broke out when local media reported that cement firm Lafarge Maroc had imported 2,500 tonnes of Italian rubbish to burn for energy (Yaakoubi, 2016). The campaign managed to make the political corruption hyper-visible by not only investing in the symbolic capital of importing garbage from Italy as a cheap alternative to fuel but also by insisting on a notion of citizen efficacy grounded in a collective demand for an inclusive political system and subject to the rule of law.

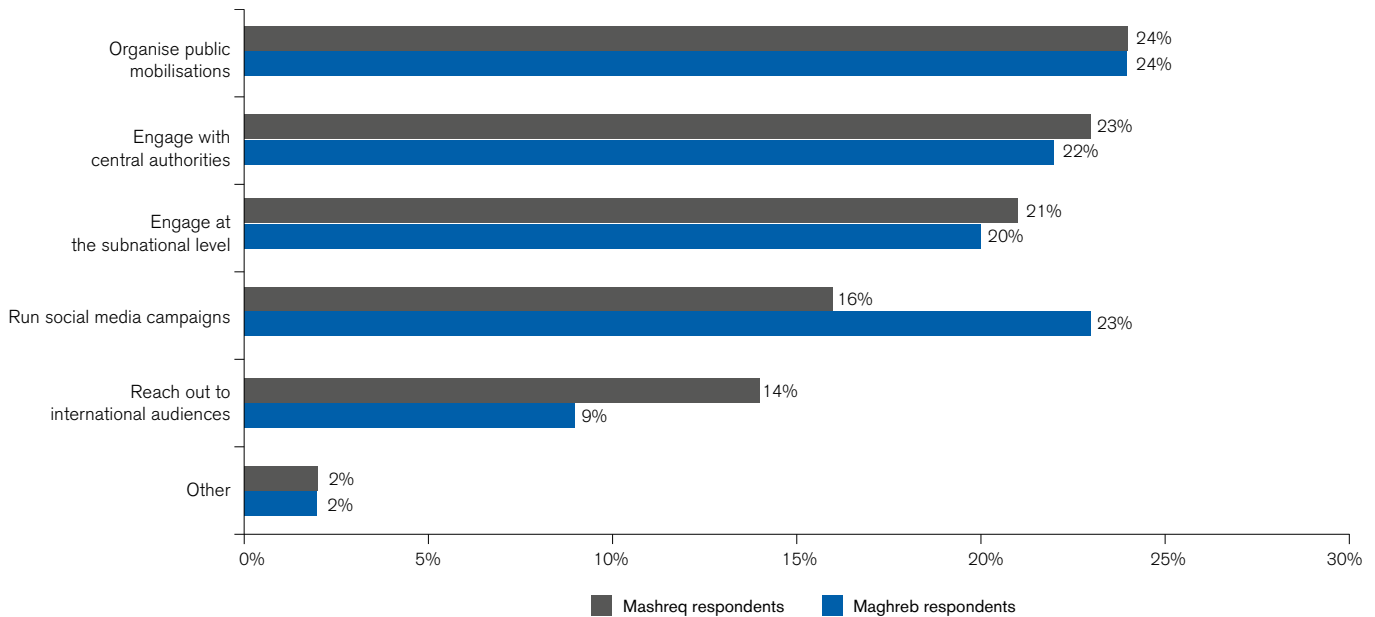
In Egypt, the “Egyptians against Coal” campaign was formed in the wake of the Egyptian government's decision to lift a long ban on using coal in Egypt. The movement managed to publicise the negative impacts of coal and attract sympathisers (Sowers & Zayed, 2014). For the environmental activists, the coal trauma is not only connected with adverse environmental and health impacts or entrenched socioeconomic injustices but is viewed as a battle to be waged against unsustainable energy sources. Moreover, climate change was found to be perceived as one of the most detrimental environmental impacts of coal (Moneer, forthcoming). This finding is very interesting as political discussions on the scientific legitimacy of climate change tend to ignore the enormous short-term consequences of relying on fossil fuels (including coal) for the most of energy consumption (Geels, 2014). It is true that Egypt is committed to the ambitious long-term goal of the Paris climate change agreement in 2015 to hold the increase in the global average temperature to below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels but the government has allowed for the import of coal into Egypt to generate electricity for both industry and households. This means that Egypt would be left stranded with a coal-reliant infrastructure for its energy needs without fulfilling its commitment to reduce Co₂ emissions (Bottom, 2016).

Environmental Movements in the MENA Region: The Quest for More than Shades of Green

The social media played a key role in providing a platform to environmental activists and concerned citizens.

Despite the different goals and mobilisation practices of the aforementioned environmental movements, they share a number of features: first, the social media played a key role in providing a platform to environmental activists and concerned citizens to voice their views and express their shared grievances. This result is in accordance with the outcomes of the Euromed Survey 2019, and in particular with the responses from Maghrebi respondents that are particularly keen on considering social media campaigns as the most efficient means to achieve civil society's objectives. It could be said that the social media spurred a type of alternative communication that does not occur through the mainstream media. This alternative communication allows those who are affected by, for example, a cement factory to share their experience and create their media content away from the censorship of the mainstream media (Blakeman, 2011).

Graph 2: Through which means is civil society in your country more likely to achieve the objectives it pursues?
(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 5)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

Second, these movements are far more significant in their political, social and cultural implications than it might otherwise appear. These movements are not calling for a mere clean environment. Rather the movements express the people's frustration and discontent with bad governance, low quality of life, corruption, and marginalisation. Such movements have in large part been a response to, and a rejection of, the extreme forms of inequality and dispossession that have flowed from the shift to neoliberalism, particularly in the global south (Kapoor, 2007). Therefore, these struggles and their practices can be significant in shaping our understanding of nature-culture relations in the MENA region.

Third, the significant role of youths in these environmental mobilisations reflects their increasing awareness of environmental problems. It also denotes youths' agency and willingness to enforce urgent and ambitious actions as a way to address not only the different environmental controversies in their respective countries but to contribute to a global dynamic environmental justice movement (Moneer, forthcoming). This conclusion contrasts with the stereotypical image of youth activists in the MENA region as being empathetic to environmental concerns, and adopting reasonable positions and predictable behaviours in relation to activism's expected outcomes (Rice, 2006).

Fourth, the consistent pressure of these movements challenged the discourse of the state and its apparatuses whereby the economic growth was conceptualised as a priority. In this regard, by advocating for environmental causes, the environmental activists managed to challenge established power relations and question a lot of the current policies, such as the economic system of corporate capitalism, which is driven by patterns and practices of large-scale capital accumulation and fossil fuel extraction, and its inability to achieve the levels of decarbonisation necessary to avoid dangerous irreversible environmental impacts (i.e., climate change) (Bebington, 2007).

Environmental movements also have significant political, social and cultural implications.

The significant role of youths in these environmental mobilisations reflects their increasing awareness of environmental problems.

Fifth, these environmental mobilisations underpin broader thinking about the relationship between the state and national and transnational corporations within a market-based economy. For example, while Egypt is committed to combat climate change and reduce its carbon emissions, the government decided to expand coal use in order to secure heavy industries' investments and related revenues. This is among capitalism's anti-ecological aspects whereby there is a potential for conflict and contradiction between ecological protection and the state's role in ensuring conditions for continued capital accumulation. Within the capital system, the state depends on business investment to provide the tax revenues and employment opportunities necessary for legitimacy and re-election; hence the business demands for new investment opportunities typically trump ecological concerns when the two are in conflict (Newell & Paterson, 1998).

Environmental Contestation in the MENA Region: What Does it Mean for Europe and How Should Europe React?

The aspirations of young citizens in the MENA region to keep abreast with the ambitious international goals of abandoning fossil fuel and using green energy have significant ramifications on EU relations with its MENA neighbours in a number of ways.

Decarbonising economies that are heavily dependent on fossil fuel revenues will not be an easy task.

First: As fossil fuel prices stagnate and European demand declines, Europe's main suppliers – many of which are in its immediate neighbourhood in the MENA region – will face increasing pressures and domestic needs. These could put them at risk of economic and ultimately political instability, especially in the absence of strong financial buffers that mitigate lower fiscal revenues (Bergamaschi, Mabey, Ga Venta & Born, 2016). Achieving such transition and decarbonising economies that are heavily dependent on fossil fuel revenues will not be an easy task. It is also difficult to envisage how the EU will want to engage meaningfully in energy transition in its neighbouring countries while showing ongoing support for this fossil-dependent development model in the region, for example through the promise of new gas import infrastructure investment that might become stranded or lock in dangerous emissions (Bergamaschi & Sartori, 2018).

The experience of the last few years suggests that cooperation between the EU and the MENA countries has been done on the basis of a Eurocentric approach.

Second: The experience of the last few years suggests that cooperation between the EU and the MENA countries has been done on the basis of a Eurocentric approach. In other words, MENA countries frequently complain that the EU is engaged in a quick grab for large-scale renewable projects oriented toward exporting energy to European markets rather than in a genuine partnership to maximise renewables' potential for host societies as well (Youngs, 2014). For example, the initiatives of Desertec and the Mediterranean Solar Plan – that were funded by the EU in the early 2000s – failed in less than a decade, largely because of a lack of commercial feasibility and political realism (Schmitt, 2018). More recently, in 2015 €38 million was provided through the Neighbourhood Investment Facility (NIF) for the construction of the Ouarzazate solar power plant (Noor III project) in Morocco with ambitious goals to not only diversify Morocco's energy mix but also export energy to the EU (Bianchi et al., 2018). TuNur solar project in Tunisia is a joint venture between Nur Energy, a British-based solar developer, and a group of Maltese and Tunisian investors, and plans to transmit electricity from the North African coast to Malta, central Italy and the south of France using submarine cable by 2020 (Neslen, 2017). However, obstacles that led to the failure of Desertec and the Mediterranean Solar Plan initiatives should be taken into consideration, notably the regulatory and commercial aspects of these projects.

The EU should work together with fossil fuel producing countries in the MENA region to help diversify their economies and to make them more resilient to future climate shock.

Third: Observers also indicate that Europe's domestic and external decisions need to avoid building in instability by promising import demand that will not materialise as Europe cuts its dependence from fossil fuels in the long run (Umbach, 2010). Instead, the EU should work together with fossil fuel producing countries in the MENA region to help diversify their economies and to make them more resilient to future climate shocks. In this regard, in November 2015, the European Commission (EC) launched a €1.8 billion "Emergency Trust Fund for

stability and addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa” (Oxfam, 2017). The Trust Fund should avoid investing in fossil fuel projects in Africa – including North African countries – and prioritise sustainable investment and resilient infrastructure.

Fourth: Equally important, if Europe wants to succeed in staving off disorder in its neighbours and prevent future mass displacement of people, more needs to be done to shift investment priorities from high carbon to low carbon and resilient projects (Bergamaschi, Mabey, Ga Venta & Born). For example, between 2003 and 2012 the fossil fuel and non-tradable sectors of the MENA countries received twice the level of Foreign Direct Investment (FDIs) than the non-fossil fuels and commercial sectors (World Bank, 2013).

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