

THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA REGION'S GREENISATION: A COMPARATIVE OUTLOOK

ARTICLE

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In the last two decades, an institutional *greenisation* process has incrementally made its way into the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. *Greenisation* is understood here as a policy shift that incorporates environmental ideas and ideals into the state fabric by crafting ad hoc regulatory, administrative, financial, and knowledge structures and encompasses both domestic and foreign policy arenas (Cimini, 2024). Despite much earlier yet scattered environmental initiatives, a more committed and distinctive openness and receptiveness to green standards and goals is indeed a recent endeavor representing a noteworthy change of pace in a well-known history of resistance and obstructionism to climate action.

National strategies prioritizing renewables and energy efficiency supported by official discourse, the proliferation of environment-devoted laws and institutions (from ministries to agencies to foundations and councils), and a proactive engagement on the international stage such as hosting the Conference of Parties (COP) and forging new partnerships, provide compelling evidence of an ongoing transformation. As in previous environmental actions, this process is also far from linear and without contradictions, featuring some key traits.

The first is a reversed historical trend in global emissions and emissions per capita. The MENA region's greenhouse gas (GHG) footprint is lower than in other regions worldwide, standing at around 8 percent. However, if we turn to the emissions per person, since the mid-1990s, the regional average has consistently exceeded the world average (Climate Watch Data, 2025a). Moreover, global emissions have tripled in the past three decades, with a growth rate almost equal to those of East Asia and the Pacific. This troubling pattern enhances (some) Arab countries' 'negative' environmental power internationally, making their engagement towards environmental sustainability even more needed.

Second, energy transitions take the lion's share in MENA's *greenisation*, discursively and through flagship initiatives already in place or in the making. Noor I, the world's largest single-site concentrated power plant located on the Sahara's doorstep in Morocco, smart cities like Abu Dhabi's pioneering Masdar City, or NEOM on the Red Sea are the best-known examples meant to embody a heavily touted green turn. Remarkably, these 'visionary' initiatives are firmly rooted under the aegis of the state's highest ranks. Saudi King Muhammad Bin Salman, Emirati President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and Moroccan King Mohammed VI are particularly

vocal in sponsoring environmental sustainability. In other words, mainstream environmental narratives and projects, mainly equating with renewables and mega-projects, are heavily top-driven and focused on investment in new technologies and facilities. Against this shining backdrop, however, it is especially the dimension of social justice with fairness and equity that, while being a fundamental pillar of ecological transitions, remains largely overshadowed, if not completely missing.

Thirdly, *greenisation*, net of some common trends, is proceeding at different speeds from country to country, mirroring different interests, capacities and capabilities. It is never trivial to reaffirm that thinking 'regionally' should not lose sight of profound internal heterogeneity in environmental policies and politics, as indeed is the case for strikingly diverse colonial histories, unique local cultures, distinct political systems, and disparate economic characteristics. Although the twenty-two members of the Arab group usually act and negotiate together at the COPs, every country is at a different point in its journey towards sustainability and green transitions. So, whereas in the 'east' a regional heavyweight such as Saudi Arabia aims at frontrunning the green transition in competition with an earlier environmental advocate like the United Arab Emirates (Zumbrägel, 2022), in the 'west', Morocco plays its cards through its green diplomacy, leveraging on consolidated relationships with Europe and pivoting to Africa. The others follow or lag behind. According to the Arab Future Energy Index monitoring and analyzing sustainable energy competitiveness in the Arab region, the countries' cumulative target of 190 GW of renewable energy capacity set by 2035 is expected to account for as much as 30 percent of global growth in renewable energy. Zooming in on the many countries, however, one learns that individual renewable energy targets for overall electricity generation vary, with Bahrain setting a target as low as 5 percent by 2025 – which is second only to Qatar in terms of emissions per capita (Climate Watch Data, 2025b) – and Morocco aiming for as high as 100 percent by 2050. Likewise, only seven countries, mainly in the Gulf, have committed to achieving net-zero goals by (UAE, Oman, and Tunisia) or around mid-century (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Morocco).

That said, what are the drivers of such a policy change? Economic profitability, yet motivated by environmental protection and sustainable development, is the general reading of the MENA region's policy shift. Diversification aimed at maintaining competitiveness in what is often referred to as a 'post-oil' era is an asset for major Arab fossil-fuel producers. Indeed, it is explicitly acknowledged and deemed 'vital' for the economy's sustainability in national strategies or 'visions' like that of Saudi Arabia (Vision 2030). Likewise, for hydrocarbon resource-poor countries, renewables might be profitable alternatives to lowering extremely high levels of energy dependency. Again, Morocco is a case in point because, despite significant efforts in the last fifteen years, it remains a net energy importer (91 percent of the total energy supply). This underscores how *greenisation* takes time to bear fruit, should it need to, beyond the spotlight.

Changing international attitudes toward climate action had its own influence as an exogenous factor. The push to reduce the global demand for hydrocarbons worked as both a threat and an incentive. In this regard, the European Union (EU)'s green calls and policy orientation across

the 'wider' Mediterranean, not least following the adoption of the European Green Deal (EGD) in 2019 and the REPowerEU strategy meant to be the new roadmap to overcome dependency on Russian fossil fuels rapidly after the outbreak of the war on Ukraine, are indicative. Albeit amid increasing competition, the EU remains a key trading partner for many Arab countries. European or bilateral initiatives of individual member states with MENA countries on energy issues are the order of the day. However, in October 2022, ahead of COP27, the EU and Morocco signed an unprecedented Green Partnership to advance the external dimension of the EGD. The agreement, which provides a political framework rather than new financial tools, is the first such initiative to be signed with a non-EU country, thus a harbinger far beyond the MENA region, and is expected to become a model for similar partnerships with other countries.

Shifting domestic needs and global energy markets, coupled with the sense of urgency associated with a high vulnerability to the effects of climate change, all play a role, as does the extrinsic value of 'greening' the country to increase regional and international leverages. In this respect, the quest for international prestige and modernity also drives this shift towards a greener state architecture.

A mixture of constraints and consideration of political and economic opportunities thus lies at the heart of *greenisation*, which is gradually expanding geographically in the region. However, it is worth wondering to what extent this shift is broadening to domains other than decarbonization to embrace wider environmental protection and deepening domestically to include bottom-up priorities and local communities' needs. Likewise, whether we can talk about a norm-diffusion effect, which also implies the interiorization of green standards and principles as a norm with intrinsic value, is far from evident.

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