



## Just Environmental Transitions in Arab Politics

The Arab Political Science Network ([APSN](#)) and the Arab Reform Initiative ([ARI](#)) organized a webinar on April 11, 2023, titled: “Just Environmental Transitions in Arab Politics”.<sup>1</sup> This webinar brought to the forefront several topics related to the politics of the environment and climate change, the power dynamics at play, and the politics and politicization of climate action for economic gains. Additionally, it shed light on the significant contributions of Arab researchers in this context.

Furthermore, the discussion provided an overview of the concept of a just environmental transition and its various forms. It analysed the meanings and practices of a just transition approach to environmental issues and discussed the political challenges and opportunities related to promoting environmental sustainability in the region, particularly in the areas of food and energy. A panel of experts took part in this discussion, Hamza Hamouchene, a researcher-activist in the field of environmental and climate justice; Zeina Shahla, a journalist specializing in environmental issues; and Hajar Khamlichi, a sustainability expert and climate advocate. The discussion was moderated by Sarine Karajerjian, Director of the Environmental Policy Program at the Arab Reform Initiative.

The current reality that the region and the world are experiencing as a whole raises important questions about how to develop a conceptual framework for addressing environmental and climate crises that directly impact the peoples of the region. The results of the 2021-2022 Arab Barometer Wave VII highlight that citizens in the region are concerned about the environmental challenges. The results indicate that people in MENA societies recognize the responsibility of both citizens and the government to tackle these challenges. As a response to tackle and combat climate risks, regional movements have been developing different strategies to raise awareness, promote a just transition plan, and challenge both governments and multinational corporations. While the concept of a just transition has a long history dating back to the 1970s, it has regained traction in the MENA region due to worsening environmental conditions.

In the context of exploring the concept of a just transition, *Hamza Hamouchene* pointed out that the origins of this concept can be traced back to the United States in the 1970s. That period witnessed the formation of exceptional and unprecedented alliances between labour, environmental, and indigenous movements. They united in their fight for environmental justice against the destructive chemical industries. This concept gained significant prominence due to its ability to represent the demands of labour and environmental movements, as well as its concern and support for the most marginalized groups. It looked to unify various forms of

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<sup>1</sup> This commentary reflects only the speakers’ views and does not represent those of APSN or its policies. *To watch the recording of the discussion, click [here](#).*

resistance, particularly against the economic and political model that contributes to the exploitation of workers and environmental destruction.

Hamza added that a just transition represents a framework aimed at achieving environmentally sustainable and socially equitable economic development for all segments of society. It relies on restoring and revitalizing people's livelihoods, rights, and dignity. He emphasized that solutions attempting to address environmental disasters or climate crises in isolation from the political, economic, and cultural structures that led to their emergence will inevitably remain superficial or partial solutions. Therefore, Hamza believes that the green and just transition must fundamentally transform the global economic system, which is neither socially, environmentally, nor biologically sustainable, as revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic. It should also put an end to the colonial relationships that continue to subjugate nations. He concluded by stating that he believes the issue of a just transition, especially in our region, is closely linked to the issue of democracy. Therefore, in his opinion, the struggle for a just transition and climate justice should align with the revolutionary demands of the Arab uprisings that occurred in multiple waves from 2011 to 2019. These demands encompassed dignity, freedom, and social justice.

*Zeina Shahla*, approaching her intervention from a journalistic perspective, emphasized that few countries in the region place significant emphasis on environmental issues. It's rare to see public debates around water crises, genuine attempts to combat overfishing and deforestation, developing new environmental frameworks, or even an effective enforcement of existing regulations. In the field of journalism, specializing in environmental reporting is still uncommon in the region, both in terms of education and professional practice.

Regarding the concept of a just transition towards a green economy, Zeina believes that it has not yet received the attention it deserves, despite its importance. She stresses the necessity of engaging in serious and ongoing discussions about the concept and its implementation among all relevant stakeholders. These measures are aimed at achieving a rapid transformation in various sectors, with a focus on land use and energy consumption, especially for the most marginalized and disadvantaged groups.

Zeina believes journalists play a crucial role in conveying the voices of the people in an attempt to incorporate their views in the economic and environmental transition toward a better and safer future. This includes sharing the collected opinions and knowledge with policymakers and contributing to monitoring and evaluation efforts, alongside civil society and other relevant stakeholders. Neglecting this role will exacerbate environmental problems rather than solve them.

In terms of the Arab region, which has been plagued by conflicts for decades, affecting both the environment and population, Zeina explained how ongoing and protracted conflicts have led to the neglect of vast agricultural lands and deforestation. Furthermore, the costs of agricultural and environmental protection have increased significantly due to rising fuel and

energy prices, continued uncertainties, climate change, and human casualties from wars, including internally displaced populations and the loss of qualified human resources.

*Hajar Khamlichi* addressed the environmental justice movement as a response to environmental racism, which disproportionately impacts low-income communities. These communities are more vulnerable to climate change and pollution, and hazardous industrial practices that deny them access to a cleaner community and environment. She also highlighted the importance of aspiring to a "qualitative leap" in light of global climate threats to ensure justice for all segments of society, especially the marginalized. She emphasized that the issue of climate change is not just an environmental concern; it's also a social and economic issue. Environmental challenges create deep imbalances, which can lead to conflicts and increase people's suffering. Therefore, addressing the diverse and growing challenges requires implementing appropriate mitigation and adaptation strategies.

Hajar pointed out the disparities in the environmental situation among Arab countries, where some have made significant progress towards a more sustainable path, with a focus on environmental infrastructure investments. While others suffer from lack of imagination, policies and mired in political and economic corruption and instability. She stressed that governments in the region have not done enough to address these challenges despite it being a fundamental pillar of sustainable development. Hajar pointed at the weak performance of environmental institutions and the insufficient government spending on the environment. It's worth noting that sustainable natural resource management has been integrated into the development agenda in many Arab countries as part of efforts to tackle environmental challenges. Arab countries must translate policies and strategies into concrete programs. Regional cooperation among Arab countries, including joint projects in water, energy, and food production, as well as support for research, education, and capacity building, is essential.

Regarding the role of civil society organizations, Hajar sees their work fall between participation in consultations and consensus-building to partnerships, evaluation, and management. She emphasized the importance of providing mechanisms for civil society organizations and youth to engage in discussions related to these matters and prioritize their concerns. However, she returned to point out that authorities and the people in the region, in general, have not given due consideration to climate change and environmental health issues as urgent matters. This is because more pressing threats, such as wars, poverty, unemployment, and human rights violations, have taken precedence.

Finally, this discussion provided valuable insights into defining a just transition in the Arab context and proposed strategies to support its success. It also addressed how to build and strengthen research and policy networks to achieve environmental sustainability in the region. The speakers' perspectives and observations focused on environmental and climatic conditions, as well as the overall impact of ongoing conflicts. Furthermore, the issue of some Arab governments' engagement in what is known as "greenwashing" was discussed, where these governments seek to exploit environmental issues and movements to undermine and manipulate the discussions around just transition. It is essential to emphasize the importance

of active participation by Arab scholars and researchers in discussions surrounding various forms of just transitions in the Middle East and North Africa region. They play a prominent role in supporting environmental issues, influencing public opinion, and contributing to the development of solutions and policies that will serve as the foundation for such transitions.