ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS SERIES

ENVIRONMENTAL STRUGGLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA:
A RESEARCH AGENDA

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Environmental struggle is increasingly salient in the Arab region. From protests over land use in Egypt or fracking in Algeria, to garbage handling in Lebanon and Tunisia, to water mismanagement in Iraq and Morocco, we have witnessed the rise of environmental mobilization born out of environmental harm and degradation. In some instances, environmental issues have triggered mass protests at the national level or become intertwined with broader demands for socioeconomic and political change. In Tunisia, many of the mobilizations in early 2011 embraced the environmental agenda as a tool of resistance against the political system.[1] Iraq's 2019 Thawrat Tishreen, in addition to its more familiar political and socioeconomic dimensions, can also be seen as an ecological rebellion by Iraq's youth who demanded a sustainable future.[2] Also in 2019, Lebanon's mass uprisings featured environmental grievances not as niche or localized concerns, but as an epitome of widespread indignation at the status quo.[3] During Algeria's Hirak in 2019-2020, activists took up the demands of an earlier anti-fracking movement, linking the issue of shale gas to questions of democracy and national sovereignty.[4]

Environmental nongovernmental organizations, a more institutionalized form, have also proliferated across the region. Other civil society organizations that focus on economic policy or human rights are now more active on the environment, their members campaigning at home and representing the region more regularly and visibly at international meetings on environmental causes.

Moreover, activists and scholars alike are increasingly drawing environmental connections to long-standing political-economic issues that have created social conflict. According to the Global Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas), a collaborative data collection platform launched in 2012, there have been at least 239 cases in 21 Arab countries of contentious mobilizations of civil society actors in which explicit social-environmental claims were made against a specific project or economic activity.[5] Considering that the EJAtlas is non-comprehensive and relies on self-reporting, the number of socio-environmental conflicts in MENA is likely significantly higher.[6] Amid the resistance to Israel's ongoing genocide of Palestinians and its indiscriminate bombing of Lebanon, condemnations of ecocide have surfaced, showing how Israel's warfare also causes severe, widespread, and long-term damage to the natural environment in order to destroy all possibilities of life.[7]

At the same time, the discourse about environmental and climate action at the state level has shifted in the region. Over the past decade, all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) have set net-zero targets and announced

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1   Chiara Loschi, "Local Mobilisations and the Formation of Environmental Networks in a Democratizing Tunisia", *Social Movement Studies* 18(1), 2019: 99.

2   Rijin Sahakian, "Extraction Rebellion: A Green Zone of Hope", *n+1*, 26 November 2019. https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/extraction-rebellion/; Zahra Ali, "Theorising Uprisings: Iraq's Thawra Teshreen", *Third World Quarterly*, January 2023: 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2161359

3   Julia Choucair Vizoso, *Lebanon's Environmentalists and the Fight for Nature: Reflecting on Successes and Failures of Recent Mobilizations*, Arab Reform Initiative, 4 January 2024. https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/lebanons-environmentalists-and-the-fight-for-nature-reflecting-on-successes-and-failures-of-recent-mobilizations/

4   Naoual Belakhdar,"Algeria is not for Sale!" Mobilizing Against Fracking in the Sahara", *MERIP* 296, Fall 2020. https://merip.org/2020/10/algeria-is-not-for-sale-mobilizing-against-fracking-in-the-sahara/

5   EJAtlas: Global Atlas of Environmental Justice. https://ejatlas.org/

6   Leah Temper, Daniela del Bene and Joan Martinez-Alier, "Mapping the Frontiers and Front Lines of Global Environmental Justice: the EJAtlas", *Journal of Political Ecology* 22, 2015: 255-278. http://jpe.library.arizona.edu/volume_22/Temper.pdf

7   "Understanding the Environmental Damage in Gaza", Second Annual Conference on Conflict Climate Change and the Environment in the Middle East and North Africa Region, Arab Reform Initiative, 5 March 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GrdsfTyeMs0&list=PLb2toWDs-mAiSN2yssmKDD7Rmf-sORyCiW&index=3

national development plans and strategies to meet them – though they continue to expand fossil fuel production. Saudi Arabia and the UAE – the world's largest exporters of crude oil and liquified natural gas – are also seizing leadership positions in international climate negotiations and in the new market of carbon offsetting and carbon accounting mechanisms.[8] In North Africa, governments are positioning themselves as champions of sustainability and the green transition with schemes for large-scale production of energy through solar, wind, and green hydrogen. The fact that two Arab cities, Sharm El-Sheikh and Dubai, hosted the last two editions of the largest international summit on climate action, the COP (Conference of Parties), symbolizes the ascendancy of the environment in the political landscape of the region. What these "green and energy transition" shifts at the state level will mean for the conditions that face environmental activists is an open question.

In another development, Green Deal policies introduced by powerful nation-states, particularly in Europe, are raising concerns about a new green colonialism.[9] Arab activists and their Global South counterparts are warning that energy transitions and "green technologies" to power clean infrastructure in the Global North will intensify resource and wealth extraction from nations of the Global South, increasing "sacrifice zones".[10]

Taken together, these trends denote a process of "environmentalization" of the public sphere in MENA, a term that refers to both the adoption of environmental discourse by different social groups as well as the concrete incorporation of environmental justifications to render legitimate specific institutional, political, and scientific practices.[11] Ecological issues are becoming increasingly important in themselves, but are also being used to contest political and scientific structures and practices.[12] Environmental struggle, however, remains an understudied element. Empirically grounded research that delves into the various modes of resistance to environmental warfare, damage, and neglect – particularly among the impoverished and marginalized – is scarce.

The Developing Inclusive Research through Activism and Informed Advocacy (DIRAIA) is a collaborative research project that explores the dynamics of environmental mobilization in the Arab World. Led by the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), in partnership with the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (MIPA), the project has received funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and will be implemented over three years, starting in November 2023. The project seeks to generate knowledge on the various forms, demands, and expressions of environmental struggle and activism, understand its modes of organization, and how actors find spaces for action in severely asymmetrical power relations. A priority is to link and strengthen trans-regional networks of activists and movements advocating for environmental justice, as well as linkages between activists and multidisciplinary networks of researchers. The hope is that, as we have seen in cases around the world, an alliance between critical scholarship and social struggles can radically reconfigure environmental policies.[13]

To those ends, this paper is conceived as an introductory guide that unpacks conceptual and definitional issues relating to environmental struggle and proposes categories and frameworks for understanding actions, motivations, and threats faced by environmental activists and social movements in the region. The paper also lists questions meant to guide a forthcoming series of country reports and case studies on Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia, to be completed by 2024-2025. Based on original qualitative data collection – including interviews, surveys, and focus group discussions – the country-specific reports will map the landscape of environmental activism in the four countries along

8   Adam Hanieh, "Laundering Carbon – The Gulf's 'New Scramble for Africa'", *MERIP* 311, Summer 2024. https://merip.org/2024/07/laundering-carbon-the-gulfs-new-scramble-for-africa/

9   Ashley Dawson, *Environmentalism from Below: How Global People's Movements Are Leading the Fight for Our Planet.* Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2024.

10   See e.g., Aïda Delpuech, *Who Benefits from Tunisia's Green Hydrogen Strategy?* Arab Reform Initiative, 20 December 2022. https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/who-benefits-from-tunisias-green-hydrogen-strategy-2/

11   Henri Acselrad, "The 'Environmentalization' of Social Struggles – the Environmental Justice Movement in Brazil", *Estudos Avançados* 24(68), 2010: 103-119. scielo.br/j/ea/a/hSdks4fkGYGb4fDVhmb6yxk/?format=pdf&lang=en

12   Leah Temper, Daniela del Bene and Joan Martinez-Alier, "Mapping the Frontiers and Front Lines of Global Environmental Justice: the EJAtlas", *Journal of Political Ecology* 22, 2015: 255-278. http://jpe.library.arizona.edu/volume_22/Temper.pdf

13   See e.g., Elia Apostolopoulou and Jose A. Cortes-Vazquez, eds., *The Rights to Nature: Social Movements, Environmental Justice and Neoliberal Natures*, Routledge, 2019.

the conceptual lines laid out in this introductory paper. Building on these country studies, the second stage (January to December 2025) will identify and research additional case studies of specific instances of environmental mobilization from these four countries and additional ones.

Running concurrently with the research components, and spanning the entire project, ARI will convene diverse activists and social movements across the region through regional conferences, working groups, and participant action workshops with activists. The aim is to collaboratively chart courses of action against environmental harm and towards environmental and climate justice.

2. Who Counts as an Environmentalist in MENA? What Is an Environmental Issue?

Environmental activism, in its broadest meaning, encapsulates non-state actors engaged in a struggle over how the environment is understood and valued, over who has access to, use of, or control over the environment, and over how environmental issues are politicized or depoliticized. This expansive definition encompasses diverse struggles, from those against the negative impacts of large-scale infrastructure projects (dams, highways, pipelines, mines, fracking) to those against the privatization of natural resources such as the commodification of water and the expropriation of green spaces, to resistance to land enclosures and land grabbing in urban and rural areas.

In addition to the diversity of its content, environmental activism is diverse in form, too. For one, it can be either public or private. As we know from feminist political ecology, the household is a central domain for struggles over environmental resources and access.[14] In this research agenda,

however, we limit the scope to struggles that take place in the public realm.

Within the public realm, activism also takes different forms; it can be individual or collective, institutional or informal, overt or covert. Individuals and collectives that engage in overt forms of environmental activism – with varying degrees of institutionalization – are now recognized by the United Nations as "environmental defenders," or "individuals and groups who, in their personal or professional capacity and in a peaceful manner, strive to protect and promote human rights relating to the environment, including water, air, land, flora and fauna".[15] The category of environmental defenders typically includes a broad range of actors: professional environmental advocates employed by transnational or national nongovernmental organizations; other professionals, such as lawyers or journalists who work on environmental issues; or communities threatened by lack of water, land grabs, or large-scale resource extractions, dams, and agribusiness.

Social movements that may not explicitly identify as environmentalists can also become critical environmental defenders. For example, Algeria's anti-fracking coalition, the Popular Committee Against Shale Gas, which emerged in the Sahara city of Ouargla in 2014, originated with a movement of unemployed or precariously employed young men, the National Coordination for the Defense of the Rights of the Unemployed. Though worries about the negative environmental consequences of fracking do not seem to automatically fit the immediate preoccupations of jobless individuals – especially given the fact that fracking could represent a potential source of employment – the public health dangers and concerns over regional marginalization and exploitation mobilized thousands in the movement.[16] Similarly in Iraq, when protestors routinely gather

1998; Julia Carney, "Gender conflict in Gambian wetlands", in *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements*, eds. Richard Peet and Michael Watts, New York, Routledge: 316–336.

15   UNEP, "Who are Environmental Defenders?" 2018.   https://www.unep.org/topics/environmental-law-and-governance/who-are-environmental-defenders#:~:text=The%20UN%20defines%20environmental%20human,land%2C%20flora%20and%20fauna%E2%80%9D.

16   Naoual Belakhdar, "When Unemployment Meets Environment. The Case of the Anti-fracking Coalition in Ouargla", *Mediterranean Politics* 24(4), 2019: 420-442.

14   See e.g., A. Fiona D. Mackenzie, *Land, Ecology and Resistance in Kenya, 1880–1952*, Heinmann, Portsmouth,

outside the major oilfields in Basra to demand jobs in the sector, they do so on the basis that they, as residents of the area, are vulnerable to the pollution and public health hazards of the industry and therefore especially deserving of being employed.[17] They also demand access to clean water.[18] By including social and distributional conflicts that have an ecological content, the concept of environmental defenders recognizes the material context of much environmental mobilization, or what is sometimes referred to as the "environmentalism of the poor".[19]

Adopting an expansive definition of environmental activism is critical. For practical and strategic reasons, scholars often focus on a narrow research area, and movements coalesce around specific struggles. Yet, the broad definition adopted here purposefully connects different environmental struggles for three reasons. First, from a knowledge production perspective, these struggles are analytically connected; underlying them is an opposition to how current politico-economic models treat nature and the impacts on everyday life, from subsistence to health to quality of life. Second, environmental activists across issue spaces have not engaged with each other as thoroughly as needed. We hope that a broad understanding of what constitutes the content of environmental activism can encourage a greater exchange of theoretical analyses and practical experiences about agendas, demands, and successful strategies.[20] Third, adopting a wider lens helps identify less-publicized organizations and movements that are battling for local environmental issues. As the case study literature shows, focusing on too narrow

a concept or discursive narrative of what constitutes environmentalism can miss environmental struggles in impoverished rural areas,[21] and it can miss socio-environmental struggles and conflicts that engage with ecological elements primarily as socio-economic rights.[22] In a highly urbanizing context such as MENA, it is especially crucial "that definitions of environmentalism include urban residents' everyday experiences and struggles with their own definition of the environment," as geographer Noura Wahby argues.[23] There, like in marginalized rural areas, marginalized residents resort to informal strategies, social networks, and social relations to respond to environmental negligence and damage, to reassert their relationship to nature, and to resist and build alternatives.[24]

Table 1 offers a categorization of environmentalist non-state actors and their motivations. These categories are not mutually exclusive, with many defenders being associated with several of them.[25] The categories are also likely not exhaustive and will be updated with the case study research as the project unfolds.

17   Taif Alkhudary, "Iraq's Enduring Challenges: Environmental Damage and Public Health in a Post-Conflict Landscape" [Webinar], *Arab Reform Initiative*, 16 July 2024. https://www.arab-reform.net/event/iraqs-enduring-challenges-environmental-damage-and-public-health-in-a-post-conflict-landscape/

18   Reuters, "Iraqis Protest at Oilfields to Call for Jobs and Basic Services", 12 July 2018, available at https://www.reuters.com/article/world/iraqis-protest-at-oilfields-to-call-for-jobs-and-basic-services-idUSKBN1K21NS

19   Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South*, Earthscan, 1997; Juan Martinez-Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation.* Northampton, MA, Edward Elgar, 2002; Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2011.

20   This discussion borrows from the arguments in Apostolopoulou and Cortes-Vazquez: 3.

21   Hopkins, N., Mehanna, S. and el-Haggar, S, *People and Pollution: Cultural Constructions and Social Action in Egypt*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2001.

22   Hamza Hamouchene, "Fighting for Environmental Justice in North Africa", in *Environmental Politics in the Middle East and North Africa: Proceedings from First Inaugural Conference*, ed. Julia Choucair Vizoso, Arab Reform Initiative, 23 September 2021.

23   Noura Wahby, "Urban Waterscapes in Egypt", in *Environmental Politics in the Middle East and North Africa: Proceedings from First Inaugural Conference*, ed. Julia Choucair Vizoso, Arab Reform Initiative, 23 September 2021: 22. https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/environmental-politics-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-proceedings-from-first-inaugural-conference/

24   Noura Wahby, "Egyptian Environmentalism and Urban Grassroots Mobilization", in *The Right to Nature: Social Movements, Environmental Justice and Neoliberal Natures*, ed. Elia Apostolopoulou and Jose A. Cortes-Vazquez, Routledge, 2018; Noura Wahby, ¨Urban informality and the state: Repairing Cairo's waters through Gehood Zateya.¨ *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 4(3), 2021: 696-717.

25   This table is adapted from Philippe Le Billon and Päivi Lujala, "Environmental and land defenders: Global patterns and determinants of repression", *Global Environmental Change*, 65, 2020: 6-7. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2020.102163

Table 1. Varieties of Environmentalism in MENA

Identities of environmentalists	Main motivations
Participants in mass protest	Demand access to clean water. Demand accountability for public health harms (from air pollution, landfills, etc.)
Rural community members Farmworkers Landless peasants Pastoralists	Demand access to water. Access and sustain land (including grazing land) and livelihoods. Protect resources and arable land. Prevent forest fires. Demand equitable agricultural and livestock policies.
Urban marginalized groups	Access water and energy. Avoid public health harms from polluting sites (factories, landfills, oil refineries).
Coastal communities	Access the sea, resist privatization of coastline. Conserve marine biodiversity. Avoid harm from polluting activities.
Indigenous communities	Protect territory, culture, and ecology. Decolonize biodiversity conservation.
Professional environmental activists Social movement activists Artists Public intellectuals, scientists, engineers	Defend equitable and sustainable management of resources (water, land, natural resources). Prevent environmentally destructive activities: oil extraction - open burning of garbage - air, earth, water pollution - deforestation - fracking - coal mining - Advocate for: environmental and social justice - food sovereignty - public green space (municipal parks or gardens) - open-access shared space (seafronts) - equitable and sustainable agricultural policies Promote: agroecology - clean energy - public transportation - recycling - ecotourism - green construction
Journalists	Report on environmental and social rights. Disseminate environmentalist findings. Investigate polluting industries like oil. Publicize the repression and human rights violations of environmentalists and social movements.
Lawyers Judges	Defend rights of affected communities. Defend against human rights violations of environmentalists and social movements. Enforce environmental laws.

Acknowledging the diversity and fragmentation of environmental activism is a necessary first step not just for mapping the identities and motivations of activists, but for understanding how they are likely to face different threats and to interact with the state and other power holders in distinct ways.

Categories of Environmental Action

Like other activists and social movements, environmentalists have diverse tools and actions available to them. This section offers two foundational questions to create a typology of environmentalist action, which can be seen in Table 2.

First, does the action unfold in the direction of power – state, regime, or government – or orthogonal to power? Not all environmental activism is oriented towards power and seeks to engage the state – be it as an interlocutor, partner, or foe. Instead, environmental action can also be orthogonal to power, directing its gaze and energy elsewhere. Some environmentalists seek to develop new social norms through personal changes in the attitudes and behaviors of individuals. For example, the goal might be to change consumer behavior towards greater sustainability; as such, the action is organizing recycling campaigns or product awareness campaigns. For others, the target is a change in the nature-society relationship at the level of individual transformation; they plan activities such as educational programs, scouting, and eco-tourism, like hiking or camping. This type of repertoire can also include small-scale community actions like beach clean-ups, tree planting, and community gardening.

Though the actions mentioned can seem less political and more individualistic, they need not be. Action that is orthogonal may also envision radical, collective change, and still pose challenges to prevailing political, economic, and environmental norms. For example, environmentalists may seek to "create new public spaces that provide a forum for alliances of solidarity with marginalized members of the local community, potentially encouraging collective agency and promoting progressive

political activities."[26] They may be committed to cultivating a new kind of political community and "alternative sources of dignity and meaning-making that could sustain political and social movements," or a "bottom-up taking back of cities and public spaces as a strategic node in a wider, long-term project of societal transformation".[27] Through these propositional (rather than oppositional) actions, this type of activism can offer plausible alternative orientations, practices, and social arrangements, and even corrode the status quo by generating options and alternatives that dilute the reach of the dominant ideology.[28] For example, marginalized actors such as small agricultural producers challenge and renegotiate the structures that condition their relationship to natural resources in covert and often uncoordinated ways – what Jim Scott refers to as "everyday resistance".[29]

The second guiding question is: Does the action unfold within or outside the existing institutional spaces of power (the state, the government, the law)? Some actions unfold through existing political, economic, and legal institutions. They include, among others: lobbying legislators, ministers, and international donors; participating in governmental commissions, consultations, or advisory committees; participating in town hall meetings; and strategic litigation and legal activism.

Working through institutions does not necessarily mean that actors seek to accommodate power rather than confront it or dissent from it (as some of the literature conflates). Environmentalists may use legal and policy channels to challenge unfair or unjust institutionalized practices, or they may pursue strategic litigation against powerful actors to try to bring about change. Yet, although institutional action can represent resistance to the status quo, it is important to recognize that it also "adheres to the 'script' of current institutions, hegemonic powers, and economic systems … it remains dutiful to their logic and existence".[30] This dutiful approach

26 Crossan, J., A. Cumbers, R. McMaster, and D. Shaw, "Contesting neoliberal urbanism in Glasgow's community gardens: the practice of DIY citizenship", *Antipode* 48(4), 2016: 937-955. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/anti.12220

27 Chamas 2022.

28 Ann El Khoury, *Globalization development and social justice: a propositional political approach*, Abingdon, UK. Routledge, 2015.

29 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Yale University Press, 1985.

30 Karen O'Brien, Elin Selboe, and Bronwyn M. Hayward,

carries limitations and risks if it does not disrupt the underlying causes of environmental harm and climate injustice and instead legitimizes unjust institutions. Moreover, it can be counterproductive to the goals of environmentalists if this type of repertoire begins to locate the possibility for change solely within state institutions, closing off other forms of activism that may be more strategic in certain conditions.[31]

By contrast, actions that operate outside the bounds of existing institutions – what is often referred to as "direct action" – include protests at specific sites, mass demonstrations, road blockades, strikes, sit-ins, hunger strikes, media campaigns, and acts of refusal (like refusing to pay energy and water bills).

What is the orientation to prevailing power relationships?	Does the action unfold within or outside existing institutional spaces of power?	
	Direct action	Institutional action
Actions that engage the dominant powers	• Assert collective presence in a particular space (protesting in front of municipalities, car processions, marches, rallies, mass demonstrations) • Disrupt economic life (road blockade, burning tires on highways, shut-down strike) • Stop work at specific sites or targets (sit-in) • Disrupt policy meetings • Refuse to pay water/energy bills • Resist formalization procedures • Chase water collectors out of neighborhoods • Apply moral pressure on the state (hunger strike) • Defy censorship laws • Appear in media to report harms • Glue bodies to roads • International solidarity campaigns • Boycott campaigns	• Lobbying of legislators, ministers, and international donors • Participating in governmental commissions, consultations, or advisory committees • Participating in town hall meetings • Negotiating with public and private actors • Strategic litigation and legal activism • Letter writing campaigns to national or local administrators

"Exploring youth activism on climate change: dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous dissent", *Ecology and Society* 23(3), 2018: 42. https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-10287-230342

31   Chamas 2022. See also James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

Actions orthogonal to the dominant powers	• Networks of mutual aid • Neighborhood committees • New public spaces • Non-state dispute resolution mechanisms • Narrative networks • Localized popular consultations • International solidarity campaigns • Co-managing the Commons • Cultural content on the environment • Public education campaigns through social media • Beach clean-ups, tree planting, or community gardening • Targeting consumer behavior toward sustainability • Citizen science (independent pollution testing)	• Working with ministries to promote eco-tourism • Working with ministries, governors, municipalities, or local environmental offices on awareness campaigns • Requesting official permission for environmental actions

In studying the universe of actions possible in the interest of environmentalist goals, we are interested in the following questions:

• How do environmentalists choose between actions?

• What are the conditions that make some types of action more likely than others?

• Under what conditions have specific actions garnered greater success?

4. Defining the Contentious Space: Challenges and Threats

As the discussion implies so far, environmental struggle, far from being a marginal or narrow issue space, strikes at the heart of political-economic structures and questions. How natural resources are extracted, managed, and distributed; who benefits from infrastructure projects; how harms are distributed; who shapes dominant environmental narratives; what space is allowed for alternative narratives and visions – all are determined by the configuration of power between states, capital, and social movements. As such, to understand environmental struggle, we must understand the specific power configurations and associated threats environmental action faces.

We know that environmental defenders operate in a challenging environment. According to the EJAtlas dataset, the Middle East and North Africa region saw the lowest level of "success" for environmental and land defenders, along with Sub-Saharan Africa. Only 8% of cases of environmental struggle were successful in MENA, 31% of cases were inconclusive, and 61% of cases ended in failure.[32] By contrast, success rates in island states or Western countries were 25% and 23%, respectively.

Systematic efforts to document repression against environmentalists globally are in their initial stages and focus primarily on documenting killings of prominent defenders and members of their community, which represent only a small portion of coercive actions and therefore only a partial indicator of the level of repression. According to former UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment John Knox, "for every 1 killed, there are 20 to 100 others harassed, unlawfully and 349 lawfully arrested, and sued for defamation, amongst other intimidations".[33] Even identifying the killing of environmentalists around the world is a major challenge because of little local monitoring and reporting,[34] and perpetrators of the killings are often anonymous, and therefore rarely prosecuted.[35]

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32 Philippe Le Billon and Päivi Lujala, "Environmental and land defenders: Global patterns and determinants of repression", *Global Environmental Change*, 65, 2020: 8. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2020.102163
33 UNEP 2018.
34 Nathalie Butt et al., "The Supply Chain of Violence", *Nature Sustainability* 2, 2019: 742-747.
35 Global Witness, "Standing Firm", September 2023, https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/land-and-environmental-defenders-annual-report-archive/

Moreover, there is little research on the impact of repression on environmental struggle in terms of mobilization and outcomes.

Figure 1 offers a preliminary list of threats to environmentalism, which will be updated with the results of the case study research.

Table 3. Threats to Environmental Action

Privatization of public space and resources (water, coastal lands, the Commons)

Economic and political interests of ruling elites, business owners, and armed groups (e.g., in infrastructures (energy, water, and waste) and polluting industries (oil, textiles, phosphates))

Investment in large-scale infrastructure (dams, solar, and wind farms)

Real estate development

Agribusiness

Processes of appropriating and enclosing land

The conservation industry

Dispossession by extraction

Violent repression (by state and non-state actors)

Judicial repression: repressive laws, censorship, and lawfare

Discursive repression: securitizing environmental issues, promoting unfounded environmental narratives, using media to discredit activists or to divide them

Cooptation and patronage: bribing bureaucrats and policymakers, paying local groups to defend corporate interests, cloning organizations, offering environmentalists jobs as a means of silencing them

Other coercive measures: threatening phone calls, targeting laptops of activists that might have sensitive environmental information on them, infiltration of university spaces by militias as a means of surveilling any university-based activism

The following is a list of questions intended to guide an analysis of environmental power configurations at the national level.

- What is the role of the business sector?

- How dominant are business tycoons in heavily polluting sectors?

- How do business actors resist the formulation of any environmental policy they perceive as threatening to their interests?

- How do business actors obstruct the implementation of and/or violate existing environmental laws?

- Do small businesses have adequate resources and/or the technology to comply with environmental regulations?

- How involved is the business sector in suppressing the civic space for environmental activism?

The role of business in determining the success of environmental action cannot be underestimated. As Mohamed Ismail Sabry´s research on Tunisia shows, business actors negatively impact sustainability efforts, "directly through their outsized influence on the formulation, enactment, and implementation of environmental policies as well as indirectly through their hindering of innovation adoption and technological upgrading."[36] In sectors where tycoons were less dominant, more effective civic resistance to actions damaging to sustainability was possible. In Egypt, Jeannie Sowers traces how, despite a small number of large state-owned and quasi-privatized firms, their entrenched, privileged position in the country's political economy allows them to engage in drawn-out negotiations over compliance with environmental regulations rather than facilitating coordination with pollution networks.[37] Zooming out of the region, in its defense of environmental defenders, the United Nations environmental programs and its resolutions repeatedly call on business enterprises, along with states, to respect

36   Mohamed Ismail Sabry, "State-society relations and industrial sustainable growth: The case of post-Revolution Tunisia", *Sustainable Development* 32(3), 2024: 1806.

37   Jeannie L. Sowers, *Environmental Politics in Egypt – Activists, Experts and the State*, Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Politics, 2013: 158.

the rights of environmental defenders.[38]

- What is the role of international financial institutions in shaping the environmental ecosystem?

- What is the role of political parties? What are the connections between political parties and the business sector's interests in polluting sectors?

- Are there armed groups that benefit from environmentally harmful activities?

5. Mapping Environmentalism

5.1 Narratives

In addition to grounding environmental movements in their political-economic context, we must pay attention to the discourses, narratives, and motivations that give life to movements. As Wolford and Keene (2015) summarize:

Movement narratives represent an amalgam of origin stories, principles, goals and visions that animate the movement and provide direction for political action. As such, movement narratives articulate specific notions of justice, modes of political participation and engagement, and collective identities. Such narratives – particularly when backed by a broad spectrum of participants – provide the ideological space to reconsider power relations, economic organization, land tenure, social relationships and rights (to name a few). In other words, movement narratives provide the impetus (and possibility) for meaningful social change.[39]

Environmental narratives within countries and across them are highly fragmented. Environmental activists have class and regional divisions among themselves,

different theories of how change can come about in a particular politico-economic context, and different understandings of what the environment is in the first place.

One of the most salient cleavages in environmentalism around the world is whether the fight against inequality is or is not related to the content of environmental struggles. Environmental justice, as a concept and movement, captures the dissatisfaction with the weak connection between environmental and economic issues during the initial phase of the constitution of civic entities that were dedicated to environmental protection. How movements articulate their notions of environmental justice also affects the evolution of environmental struggle. A comparison of anti-megaproject campaigns in Europe, for example, argues that the distributional dimension of environmental justice is insufficient if it neglects two other sources of injustice: lack of recognition and participation.[40]

In mapping the landscape of environmental action, it is therefore critical to take stock of the different motivations and ideologies animating its protagonists.

- Where does the impetus for the mobilization around nature originate?

- Can the mobilization be characterized as a distributional conflict?

- Is there a perceived conflict between environmental and social (e.g., job loss) or developmental (e.g., costly green technology, mining practices) objectives?

- Do the actors call simply for a change in attitudes towards the natural world, or for a change in the economic systems of production or distribution?

- Do they articulate specific notions of justice?

- Do their visions for environmental justice include gender dimensions?

- What do the actors think can and cannot be

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38   UNGA 2019.

39   Wendy Wolford and Sara Keene, "Social Movements," in *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*, eds. Tom Perreault, Gavin Bridge, and James McCarthy, Routledge, 2015: 578.

40   Alfred Burballa-Noria, "Environmental Justice Claims and Dimensions in Antimegaproject campaigns in Europe", in *The Right to Nature: Social Movements, Environmental Justice and Neoliberal Natures*, ed. Elia Apostolopoulou and Jose A. Cortes-Vazquez, Routledge, 2018.

changed about the socioeconomic and political structures?

- Do they articulate paths towards a less exploitative and alienating relationship between society and nature?

- How do they characterize the state? What is their theory of the state?

  - Do they believe there are potential allies among policymakers and policy implementers?

  - Is engagement with politicians viewed with suspicion?

- How do they characterize other powerful actors, like businesses?

- Does the mobilization identify specific antagonist/s?

Differences in the answers to the above set of questions matter in formulating strategies for political action, and whether environmental activists will invest in a disruptive approach to the ruling regime and political institutions or instead one of accommodation and collaboration. If activists believe, for example, that the main hurdles are corrupt bureaucrats in the state, then they might have hope that "there must be government officials and agencies…interested in helping people"[41] and therefore expend resources and political capital in trying to identify and cooperate with them. In her ethnography of community organizers´ views of the Lebanese state, Sophie Chamas argues that many hold a fantasy or ideal of the state that clashes with their own critical and astute analyses of the contemporary Lebanese state, but which they nevertheless hold on to in ways that condition their strategies and modes of action. More specifically, the stubborn idealization of the Weberian state positioned the ruling regime as "not doing its job rather than uninterested in doing what opponents see as its job." This understanding in turn inspired an optimistic belief that the state could be pressured to do "its job by lobbying it out of dormancy … despite the evidence these activists themselves provided for its inherent limitations and

likely pitfalls."[42]

Differences in responses to the above set of questions can also complicate coalition-building among environmental activists. The distance between activists who believe that environmental struggle is only one component of "the fight against the social exclusion, violence, and authoritarianism of neoliberalism and its elites"[43] and those who believe environmental goals can be met without significant changes in economic structures can be insurmountable.

Even when environmental coalitions succeed in bringing together social and political actors from diverse backgrounds and ideological orientations, ideological cleavages can make it difficult to develop new, distinctive collective identities, undermining the survival of coalitions and networks. In her comparison of two environmentalist networks during Tunisia's transition (2011-2014), Chiara Loschi argues that the network in Djerba, in contrast to the one in Tunis, disintegrated because it could not overcome the ideological, political, and sectoral cleavages among its members for an extended period of time.[44]

Beyond coalition-building, such differences even place actors in direct opposition to one another. For example, rural communities may support forest clearings to create farmland and assert land rights to secure agrarian livelihoods, while conservationists may evict rural communities and undermine traditional livelihoods in the name of protecting species and habitats.[45] Amita Baviskar's work on "bourgeois environmentalism" shows how urban, propertied, and professionalized elites can force their aesthetic imaginaries of "clean" cities onto urban planning projects in ways that not only exclude the impoverished and marginalized but also position them at the receiving end of violent demolition and clearing modes.[46] Noura Wahby's

41   Akhil Gupta, "Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State", *American Ethnologist* 22(2): 391.

42   Sophie Chamas, "Community Organizing and the Limits of Participatory Democracy in Lebanon", in *Altered States: The Remaking of the Political in the Arab World*, eds. Sune Haugbolle and Mark LeVine, London: Routledge, 2022: 68.

43   Hamouchene 2021.

44   Loschi 2019: 6.

45   Philippe Le Billon and Päivi Lujala, "Environmental and Land Defenders: Global Patterns and Determinants of Repression", *Global Environmental Change*, 65, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2020.102163

46   Amita Baviskar, "Between Violence and Desire: Space, Power, and Identity in the Making of Metropolitan Delhi",

research on water use across settlements in Cairo argues that a particular definition of nature put forth by a new bourgeois class and co-opted civil society movements – focused on goals such as upcycling and cleaning up the Nile – serves to undermine localized grassroots forms of contention against state damage and negligence in water provision. Returning to the example of Lebanon, Chamas shows how professional activists' fantastical belief in the power of lobbying the Lebanese state clashed with the residents of affected neighborhoods in "their repeat calls for a disruptive approach to demanding their rights (closing off and occupying the street, boycotting municipal taxes)."[47] In Basra, as Taif Alkhoudary notes, in a move to ¨clean up¨ the city and create ¨green spaces¨, the local government has demolished informal settlements which themselves arose from migration from other cities in the south due to climate-induced stressors and the destruction of 47 million acres of farmland since 2012.[48]

5.2. Organizational Features

Organizational structure is critical to mobilization and to navigating serious power asymmetries in the quest for political and economic change, as a voluminous literature on Social Movement Theory shows. During the Arab uprisings that started in 2011, the question of organization was crucial to the long-term success of the mobilizations. Horizontal networks of activism, especially the absence of centralized organizational structures, were well-suited to the phase of mass protests in the lead-up to the ousting of Mubarak. However, they proved restrictive in later phases, as groups became "event organizers for rallies and marches rather than venues for building long-term, mass-based strategies".[49] The different organizational structures of workers in Egypt and Tunisia may explain the differential outcomes in transitions to procedural democracy.[50]

In the literature on environmental movements, scholars have emphasized the need for organizational fluidity, which involves being able to network and build alliances with other social movements, nationally and internationally, or enhance the participation of community members.[51] Several cases of specific campaigns show the utility of going beyond local protests to seek international solidarity. Organizers of Lebanon's Save the Bisri Valley Campaign credit protests by the Lebanese diaspora at the headquarters of the World Bank for its announcement of its suspension of a loan to the Lebanese state for the construction of a dam in Lebanon's Bisri Valley. This lesson repeats itself throughout. Anti-extractivist movements in Colombia say that connecting with activists in the UK allowed them to organize protests in London to make the voice of local communities heard at the headquarters of mining multinational companies.[52]

At the same time, other case studies demonstrate how thick networks of social relations created social power and enabled the mobilization of environmental protest movements, despite other factors not conducive to mobilization.[53] Balancing between maintaining thick networks that facilitate trust – much needed in repressive contexts – and needing to grow a coalition, is a common challenge for movements. This challenge can create paradoxical situations. For example, in Lebanon, small activist networks with strong ties carefully cultivated over time were critical to keeping activism alive because of the sense of fulfillment, gratification, and pleasure their members derived. Yet these same dynamics also made coalitional work across weaker ties and in less intimate spaces less enjoyable and seen as an invasion or disruption.[54]

International Social Science Journal 55, 2003: 89–98; Amita Baviskar, *Uncivil City: Ecology, Equity, and the Commons in Delhi*, SAGE, 2020.

47   Chamas 2022: 68.

48   Taif Alkhoudary, communication with the author on 11 July 2024.

49   Maha Abdelrahman, "Social Movements and the Question of Organisation: Egypt and Everywhere", LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series 8, September 2015. https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/63903/

50   Joel Beinin, "*Political Economy and Social Movement Theory Perspectives on the Tunisian and Egyptian Uprisings of 2011*", LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series 14, January

2016. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/65291

51   See e.g. Denisse Rodríguez and Julia Loginova, "Navigating State-led Extractivism in Ecuador and Russia", in *The Right to Nature: Social Movements, Environmental Justice and Neoliberal Natures*, ed. Elia Apostolopoulou and Jose A. Cortes-Vazquez, Routledge, 2018.

52   Charlotte Christiaens et al., "Self-determination as resistance: re-asserting control over natural resources in Colombia," in *The Right to Nature*, 2018.

53   Jeffrey Broadbent, "Movement in Context: Thick Networks and Japanese Environmental Protest", in *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action*, eds. Mario Diani and Doug McAdam, Oxford University Press, 2003. https://doi.org/10.1093/0199251789.003.0009

54   Sophie Chamas, "Activism as a Way of Life: The Social World of Social Movements in Middle-Class Beirut", Parte-

Mapping environmental action should therefore also account for organizational questions, such as:

- What types of networks of organizations underlie an environmental movement or action?

- What are the antagonistic forces to organizational fluidity (e.g., rigid funding structures)?

- To what extent is the environmentalist ecosystem fragmented organizationally?

- Under what conditions have environmentalists been able to form coalitions with other progressive networks, from feminist networks to human rights groups?

- Under what conditions have environmentalists been able to form coalitions with professional associations, unions, or syndicates?

- In cases where environmental demands clash with job preservation, how have environmentalists engaged with labor unions?

- To what extent are formal environmental groups connected to broader constituencies?[55]

6. What is "Success" for Environmental Movements?

How should we assess the impact of the various environmental movements? The following list of questions – which emerges from a critical analysis of the environmental movement in Lebanon[56] – identifies distinct categories of success at the country level.

- Has environmentalism become a central axis of popular mobilization?

- How have discourses and narratives on nature, the environment, or development changed in the context?

- Have new environmental laws been enacted?

- Have existing laws been amended towards greater environmental protection?

- Has there been a change towards greater enforcement of environmental protection laws?

- Have plans for laws or bills that would create environmental harm been blocked?

- Are institutions that govern environmental policy more inclusive and participatory?

- Have policy changes that affect the environment been made either at the local or national levels?

- Have specific development or infrastructure projects that posed environmental threats been stopped?

- Do movements model an alternative engagement with nature – based on reciprocity, or stewardship? This question is meant to capture a notion of success beyond winning or losing and, instead, measure environmental movements by whether they model alternative ways of engaging with nature.

- Have environmentalists been able to produce strategies to protect themselves?

In addition to recognizing that environmental success can take different forms depending on the political context, it is also important to understand success or failure not in a static but in a dynamic way. For one, as many case studies show, actions that initially seem successful can be temporary and reversed at a future date. This was the case, for example, of the protests by anti-fracking activists in Algeria, which only temporarily halted shale gas extraction.[57]

cipazione e conflitto 14 (2), 2021: 538.

55   Jeannie L. Sowers, *Environmental Politics in Egypt – Activists, Experts and the State*, Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern Politics, 2013: 37.

56   Choucair Vizoso 2024.

57   Miriam R. Aczel, "Public Opposition to Shale Gas Extraction in Algeria: Potential Application of France's

Moreover, some environmentalist demands that are met by authorities or policymakers may not be operative without additional institutional changes. For example, a movement can succeed in pushing for participatory mechanisms, but these can be severely constrained if the necessary human resources to make them operative are not made available (such as staff to respond to citizen information requests on environmental indicators, or mechanisms to preserve the anonymity of whistleblowers on environmental harms).[58] Therefore, assessing environmentalism's success requires a longer time frame than the end of a specific campaign and attention to the broader institutional framework within which seeming advances are made.

Another implication of understanding environmentalism as dynamic is recognizing that some strategies can also have unintended consequences that reveal themselves later to work against a particular movement´s goals. For example, in Mozambique, communities and activists against land evictions connected to extractive corporate interests used existing law to secure larger financial compensation and greater participation in the process. Yet by not disputing the broader goals of mega-projects being pursued in Mozambique, and as land acquisitions intensify, such activist strategies also legitimize economic development norms that underpin corporate claims to exploit the land as well as logics that in the end facilitate relocations of local communities.[59] In other cases, activists have also warned that monetary compensations for environmental damage or loss of access to resources, for example, extend a colonial logic of commodification of nature and often result in further distributional conflicts among (un)compensated communities and households.[60]

How to work towards reforms in the short term that improve conditions, ameliorate harms, and bring some gains, but that also do not hinder the goals of the movement in the long term is a strategic challenge for all social movements that seek the holistic change needed for a more socially just and environmentally sustainable world. In confronting this challenge, in recent years, abolitionist social movements and activists have revived and operationalized the concept of "non-reformist reforms." Originally coined by French economist-philosopher André Gorz in the 1960s, non-reformist reforms have become a popular framework for conceptualizing change that does not undermine key goals of the struggle or hinder it at a later stage by reifying and empowering harmful structures. The following is a list of criteria that scholars and activists have offered for identifying when a reform may be non-reformist:[61]

• Does it provide material relief or improve material conditions?

• Does it legitimize or expand a system we are trying to dismantle?

• Will we have to undo this later?

• Does it mobilize the most affected for an ongoing struggle?

• Does it leave out an especially marginalized part of the affected group?

• Does it, in some way, acknowledge past harm?

• Does it seize space in which new social relations can be enacted?

• Does it spread awareness of its ideas? (participatory, not passive)

• Has the tactic been effective in exposing or confronting a specific point within the system by either diminishing its moral legitimacy or undermining its functions?

'Duty of Care Act'." *The Extractive Industries and Society* 7(4), 2020: 1360-1368.
58   Camila Nobrega Rabello Alves, "Access to information and the construction of sustainability discourse: the case of the Bus Rapid Transit Transolímpica, in Rio de Janeiro," in *The Right to Nature*, 2018.

59   Kate Symons, "Land Rights and Justice in Neoliberal Mozambique: the Case of Afungi Community Relocations", in *The Right to Nature*, 2018.
60   Philippe Le Billon, "Environmental Conflict", in *The Routledge Handbook of Political Ecology*, eds. Tom Perreault, Gavin Bridge, and James McCarthy, Routledge, 2015: 600.

61   Harsha Walia, "Overgrowing Hegemony: Grassroots Theory", *Undoing Border Imperialism*. AK Press, 2014; Mariame Kaba, *We Do This ´Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, 2021; Dean Spade, "Mainstreaming of Trans Politics and Mainstreaming of Criminal Punishment System Reform", *The Evergreen State College Productions*, 4 May 2016; Marbre Stahly-Butts, "Abolition is Liberation: Marbre Stahly-Butts & Rachel Herzing in Conversation with Cory Lira," *Critical Resistance*, 14 May 2020.

- Does it shift any power or resources into the hands of communities demanding change?

- Does it create space for experimentation?

- Are we able to try something new or different as a result?