Arab Reform Initiative

, 22 April 2022

Origins and prospects of climate change activism in the Arab region: Rethinking the development and market economy model

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The 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit triggered global interest in tackling environmental challenges in general, and a particular interest in climate change in the Arab region. During this summit, the Framework Convention on Climate Change was signed for the first time after a series of international conferences and reports that addressed climate change at the global level. After 1992, many environmental organizations and ministries in charge of the environment were established in the Arab region, such as the Lebanese ministry of environment which was set up in 1993. During the same period, the first Arab environmental publication was released under the title "Environment & Development" and addressed pressing local environmental issues (Environment & Development, 1997-1999). At the time, efforts were focused on setting up associations concerned with natural reserves in Arab countries, rather than associations focusing on climate change, as a result of the Rio Earth Summit. A funding agenda to support the establishment of nature reserves, also known as Agenda 21, was also agreed.

In short, the issue of climate change was not taken seriously in the Arab region in the early 1990s, mainly for "financial" and other reasons. it was sidelined at the official, community, and media levels. One of the main reasons for this lack of interest in climate change was the fact that the Framework Convention itself, and the subsequent 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which extended it, considered industrialized countries "historically responsible" for global climate change. These instruments also considered that the Industrial Revolution, which took place in the West, was the original trigger of climate change, and tasked major industrialized countries with reducing their emissions first. Meanwhile, developing countries were given 10 years to continue to adopt the same development model that enabled western countries to advance and prosper. This allowed developing countries generally, and Arab countries in particular, to maintain the status quo with no sense of urgency, considering that they had no international obligation to change and that they are not the primary contributors to emissions and the climate problem (at the global level), compared to industrialized countries, although per capita emissions in developing countries were equal to or exceeded those of industrialized countries in some cases. It is worth noting in this regard that the positions of governments and organizations differed in oil-producing countries (which cast doubt and fought against the climate cause at first) and non-oil-producing countries (which did not consider the climate cause a priority). This was because

the primary suspect behind climate change and emissions according to international reports is the combustion of fossil fuels.

This reality did not change until emerging countries, such as China, decided to adopt the same development model as the West and started burning massive amounts of coal to promote their development and competitiveness, without abiding by the obligations and requirements to reduce emissions. As a result, in 2007 China became the first country globally in terms of economic production as well as emissions, even surpassing the United States. In response, the US rolled back its commitment to the Kyoto Protocol and called for its amendment in late 2008, under extensive pressure from oil companies, heavy industries, car manufacturers, and others.

The efforts to amend the Kyoto Protocol failed and many countries reneged on their commitment to it and began calling for a new, truly global convention that requires all countries around the world to reduce their emissions, in line with the UN "Common But Differentiated Responsibilities" principle. This later led to the 2015 Paris Agreement, which was considered more inclusive and more global, but less ambitious and less binding to states than the Kyoto Protocol.

The Paris Climate Agreement reach a compromise between all parties under the main title of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) – that is, it gave each state the freedom to reduce national emissions as much as possible, without any binding or universal criteria or timeframe. The term "contributions" itself marks a fundamental shift from the more binding "commitments" and does not entail any sanctions in case of non-compliance. This encouraged states to sign the Paris Agreement at record speed, but it also led to the degradation of the climate in record time, as the outcomes and commitments fell short of expectations.

The states that took part in the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Change Conference had also failed to agree on the fundamental principles of a new global climate agreement. This was the case even though the conference brought together many organizations, activists, and government delegations (with an estimated 15,000 participants), in addition to nearly 5,000 journalists covering the event. Nevertheless, the efforts to urge states to make more ambitious commitments failed, to the displeasure of the thousands of young protesters who gathered

outside the conference venue (The Cause of Global Climate Change, Dar Al Farabi, 2016).

In addition to urging China and developing countries, in general, to commit to the measures necessary to reduce global emissions, the US and the West also pressured wealthy oil-producing countries, particularly in the Arab region, to reduce their emissions and to partially fund the transition and adaptation efforts. As a result, several non-governmental networks of activists in the Arab region were funded to act as pressure groups. Moreover, start-up companies emerged in the field of renewable energy and energy conservation using new technologies and began to promote these new methods in universities, research centres, relevant ministries, and the media. This led to the inclusion of renewable energy in the so-called "energy mix," which explains the increased interest in the issue of climate change, whether directly or indirectly, in the governments and societies of the Arab region.

Parallel summits were often held simultaneously with official climate summits, with the participation of groups opposed to states' approach to tackling climate change issues. While the UN later accommodated some of these forces, especially funded organizations and associations, and gave their representatives and those speaking for the "youth" a platform to voice their opinions in official conferences, the more extreme opponents refrained from participating. For instance, during the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Change Conference, two parallel summits took place: The official conference organized by the UN (at the Bella Center) and a parallel conference, dubbed the "People's Climate Summit" (at Klimaforum), held 6km away and focused on the need to change the entrenched systems to save the climate. However, this trend took a downturn in the past few years, and opposition activities have been limited to activist protests around climate summit venues. This is due, in part, to the lack of international funding, as well as to the fact that the Paris Agreement led the world to believe that all countries are now willing to take steps to counter climate change. The task of the UN and relevant organizations was, therefore, to monitor countries' contributions and progress in achieving the Paris Agreement's goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

The impact of governments and NGOs in the Arab region on annual climate

negotiations has historically been negligible. However, there is now a growing interest in climate change, especially amid international efforts to include all countries around the world in climate commitments in the past few years, and given the record temperatures and the higher frequency of extreme weather events, floods, droughts, wildfires, etc. This growing interest did not entail an accurate diagnosis of the problem or specific demands, which have historically been aligned with those of the Group of 77 + China.

Today, as two climate summits are expected to be held in the Arab region (in Egypt at the end of 2022 and in the UAE in 2023), it is no longer enough to reiterate the need for developed countries to be the first to take action and assume their historical responsibility. Rather, more realistic demands should be set, based on the belief that saving the climate requires shifting away from the current civilization model, which is based on the idea that "development" is synonymous with increasing production and consumption without limits. In reality, however, the entire world is paying the price for this "increase," regardless of the type of government, people, social class, skin colour, or belief.

Developing countries should have demanded early on (i.e. since the first Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992, after advanced and wealthy industrialized countries recognized their historical responsibility for increased emissions) that developed countries abandon their destructive civilization model first and offer compensations to developing countries to fund the transition towards an alternative model, less focused on development, as many environmental philosophers had suggested, rather than demanding an opportunity to benefit from the current development model. Had this been the case, the world might not have reached the point of no return today, and it could have been possible to address the catastrophic climate changes that will abolish all the achievements of modern development known to humanity.

The most recent estimates indicated that the cost of addressing three climate disasters (floods, wildfires, and an increase in global warming by only 1 degree Celsius) was $150 billion in 2020 and exceeded $170 billion in 2021, which is double the amount that developed countries were supposed to contribute to the climate fund annually but never did. The Paris Agreement stipulated that developed countries should inject $100 billion annually into the climate fund as of

the agreement's entry into force in 2020. Two years have passed since, and these financial commitments have yet to be fulfilled, as was evident during the Glasgow COP26 at the end of last year, at a time when disasters and their material and human costs are reaching all-time highs with each passing year.

Based on the above, the question arises: What can Arab societies, organizations, and media outlets do to ensure the success of the COP27, to be held in Egypt (Sharm el-Sheikh) at the end of this year? The League of Arab States and Arab ministers of environment issued a statement of principles for negotiators, but it mainly focuses on what is required from other parties, particularly developed countries, rather than what Arab countries can do. We must therefore ask: What is required of developed countries? And what is required of Arab countries and community forces active in the area of climate change?

The **primary demand** should be to reconsider the current civilization model, including the development model in place.

Second, developing countries should reinstate their original demand (which they abandoned after the Paris Agreement) of transferring environmentally-friendly technologies to developing countries outside the framework of WTO rules and intellectual property laws, as well as considering modern science and technical achievements an asset owned by humanity as a whole, as the best possible compensation that developed countries can offer.

Third, the market economy system driven by competitiveness should be abandoned or amended. A world restricted by a market economy system driven by competitiveness cannot resolve a destructive global issue such as climate change, which requires cooperation rather than competitiveness.

Finally, there is a need to change economic systems in the world as a whole and in developing countries, with more focus on conservation rather than development. Health systems should also be modified to adopt policies that protect natural resources, prevention, and the promotion of health, rather than hospitalization policies subject to the control of pharmaceutical companies and medical technology. Educational systems should also be freed from the dominance of competition-based markets; fast food diets should be reconsidered in favour of

more vegetarian diets; organic agriculture should be supported and should replace chemically-dependent agriculture; sustainable tourism should be supported at the expense of traditional tourism; water consumption should be rationed and water resources should be protected; public transport policies should be reinvigorated to counter to spread of private transport and the rampant use of private cars; decentralized, renewable, and clean energy should be encouraged and supported, under a new, modest, and common slogan: less, but greener and more sustainable energy for all.

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