



## Green Voices Challenge

A call for joint action and innovation to respond to climate change threats and opportunities

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### In Brief

Youths are at the forefront of the climate movement that emerged in the 1980s and gained traction in 2019 with the global climate strike organized by Fridays For Future and Earth Strike. Despite the fact that their region is warming at twice the global average<sup>1</sup>, surveys show that youths in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region tend to be less concerned and active. In order to better understand their views on climate change and help make their voices heard, ARDD partnered with RNW Media to implement a project aiming to foster dialogue and encourage MENA youth participation in climate change debates. With the support of the Inclusive Green Growth Department (IGG) of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NL-MOFA) in Jordan, a preliminary research work, a media competition “Arab Youth Green Voices Challenge” and a series of policy labs were conducted with young environmental activists and media makers from six Arab countries. This collaboration resulted in the following key considerations and recommendations:

### Considerations:

1. A sustainable and effective solution to climate change requires a holistic societal transformation.
2. Climate change mitigation is intrinsically linked to the attainment of greatest peace and security.
3. Good governance is essential to supporting communities’ resilience to a changing climate.
4. The struggle for environmental justice is part and parcel of the struggle for social justice.
5. MENA youths are at the forefront of climate action but they lack visibility, support and freedom of movement and association.
6. Media and social media literacy, accessibility and accountability are paramount to raising awareness on environmental issues and countering disinformation

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/impact-climate-change-children-mena-region> According to UNICEF, by 2050, the region could be as much as four degrees Celsius warmer. This is way beyond the 1.5-degree Celsius target set by the Paris Agreement.

## Recommendations:

- Support climate initiatives that build bridges with the development and peace-building sectors, as enhanced safety, education and economic opportunities are paramount to making Arab societies and citizens more protective of the environment.
- Promote a regional approach toward protecting the environment and mitigating the effects of climate change, to foster more effective, holistic and sustainable local solutions.
- Advocate for greater cooperation among Arab countries, by easing travel restrictions for Arab citizens, for example, thus facilitating the exchange of young talents, ideas and resources.
- Engage with and train Arab media on environmental issues to increase visibility, awareness, dialogue and accountability on climate change and environmental protection in Arabic language.
- Disseminate information and narratives that highlight climate action, innovation and promising solutions rather than focus solely on the threats and scientific data.
- Empower and build the capacities of young MENA climate activists in advocacy, digital campaigning, networking, green economy, business management skills and fundraising.
- Establish a MENA regional platform that will enable young climate activists and experts to exchange knowledge, experience, resources and develop joint projects.
- Appeal to business leaders to invest in Green economy and provide financial support to youth initiatives aiming to tackle climate change and protect the environment.
- Encourage local and national authorities, international organizations, donors and media to support greater participation and visibility of MENA youth perspectives, climate action and innovative solutions.

## Introduction

Through its Human and Economic Development Strategy (HEDS), Al-Nahda thought Center intends to contribute to the ongoing debate concerning the enhancement of economic and human development in Jordan and other Arab countries by promoting systems of government committed to the elimination of poverty, inequality, and discrimination, and to the promotion of inclusiveness, as well as to the empowerment of civil institutions and securing decent work conditions. The effects of climate change, among them repeated heat waves, longer periods of drought, more severe and frequent storms, sea level rise, have devastating consequences on biodiversity and human health, safety, food security and livelihoods. The MENA region is among those facing the largest number of ecological threats, together with Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Some of the countries most impacted by high or extreme water stress by 2040 will be Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq, all already made vulnerable by armed conflict<sup>2</sup>. According to UNICEF, young people (0-25 of age) in the MENA region currently account for nearly half of the population (2021)<sup>3</sup>. Together with women and girls, youths are disproportionately affected by the impact of climate change. However, if dealt with effectively by Arab leaders, this crisis can be seized as an opportunity for societal and economic transformation that will generate new job opportunities through Green economy and the adoption of more sustainable and ethical life styles. Conscious of the urgency of the situation and the important role that young people can play to mitigate the impact of climate change and advocate for change, ARDD launched the “Youth in MENA and COP27” initiative. This pilot project was designed to offer safe and creative spaces for environmental analysis, debate, capacity building, and media content production, with young people and experts from six Arab countries participating in it. This policy brief takes stock of the challenges related to climate change in the MENA region and focuses on the role of the Arab youth in mitigating its effects. It is hoped that its main reflections and recommendations will serve as a compass to other Arab organizations and guide future environmental projects of ARDD.

<sup>2</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace, Ecological Threat Register, 2020 - <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Ecological-Threat-Register-Press-Release-27.08-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/impact-climate-change-children-mena-region>

## Why it matters

“Climate change is contributing negatively to all the other issues – war, unemployment, corruption, poverty, diseases etc. Therefore climate change is the priority because it affects us in all aspects of our lives.”

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Nisreen Elsaim – Chair of UN Secretary-General Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change and guest speaker at the project’s closing ceremony

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In April 2022, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released the last report of its Sixth Assessment Cycle, focused on mitigating climate change, and warned the international community that “without immediate and deep emissions reductions across all sectors, limiting global warming to 1.5°C is beyond reach”<sup>4</sup>. Recent years have seen a multiplication and intensification of so-called natural disasters affecting millions of people across the globe and wreaking havoc on wild life, communities and livelihoods. Beyond the ecological disaster and the immediate threat to human lives, these dangerous weather events have severe consequences on access to food, industry supply chains and workers’ productivity. Not only is the economy gravely disrupted, human health is also threatened by worsening air and water quality, increasing the spread of certain diseases and the eruption of pandemics. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an annual average of 21.5 million people have been forcibly displaced by weather-related events since 2008<sup>5</sup>. The number of “climate refugees” is expected to surge in coming decades, with forecasts predicting that 1.2 billion people could be displaced globally by 2050 due to climate change and natural disasters<sup>6</sup>. Mass displacement, loss of livelihoods, increased competition over scarce natural resources can lead to social unrest, insecurity and aggravate the instability of countries already affected by conflict.

**Countries in the MENA region are at heightened risk of environmental disasters** due to extreme temperatures, water scarcity and high population growth. Temperatures are increasing in this part of the world at a faster rate than the global land average. For example, temperatures in Iraq are increasing two to seven times faster than the global temperature rise. It is estimated that the mean summer temperature in Baghdad has risen from 34°C in 1986 to 51.6°C in 2021.<sup>7</sup> Jordan is also severely affected by water shortage; it is considered “one of the driest countries in the world”.<sup>8</sup> These extreme weather conditions have a severe impact on an economy that is heavily reliable on agriculture.

The agricultural sector remains the largest employer in many Arab countries, and 70% of its production is rain-fed<sup>9</sup>. This situation, combined with the high population growth in the region, could lead to food shortages and increased migration. Other threats related to climate change in this part of the world are the sea level rise, which exposes populations to the risk of flooding, land-erosion and salinization, and which could disturb tourism activities and agriculture. It is estimated that “about 20% of MENA’s coastal urban extent is exposed to sea level rise and storm surges, namely, around twice as much compared to the same indicators measured worldwide”.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the effects of climate change, pollution is a major concern in most countries of the region. High population density, poor governance, corruption and lack of awareness are some of the reasons for the serious difficulties faced with waste management. This has led to the poisoning of lands and the degradation of air quality, with severe consequences on the health of communities. These threats highlight the close interdependence between good governance and effective environmental protection.

Across the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the available data reveals the unique toll that poverty, war, social exclusion, climate change, and environmental degradation are taking on young people worldwide. A Pricewaterhouse and Coopers study from 2020 indicates that **the youth in the MENA region is more motivated than older generations to make sustainable behavioral changes**, which is encouraging. At the same time, we see that many young people in MENA think of climate change as a subject far from their daily priorities. Many reasons explain this apparent apathy of the Arab youth, one of them being that they have other pressing priorities. MENA youths are facing the greatest unemployment rate in the world. As a result, one in five young people in this region considers mi-

4 IPCC Press Release, 4 April 2022 <https://www.ipcc.ch/2022/04/04/ipcc-ar6-wgiii-pressrelease/>

5 UNHCR, 2016 – <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/11/581f52dc4/frequently-asked-questions-climate-change-disaster-displacement.html>

6 Institute for Economics & Peace, Ecological Threat Register, 2020 - <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Ecological-Threat-Register-Press-Release-27.08-FINAL.pdf>

7 Shafi, N. (Fall 2021). Young people are leading climate activism in the Middle East. *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*

8 Al-Jaafreh, O. & Nagy, I., 2018. The environmental challenges, problems, and management: A case study of Jordan. *ZbornikradovaDepartmanazageografiju, turizam i hotelijerstvo*, (47-2), pp.53–70. <https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/young-people-are-leading-climate-activism-in-the-middle-east/>

9 Borghesi, S. and Ticci, E. (2019). *Climate change in the MENA region: Environmental risks, socioeconomic effects and policy challenges for the future*. IEMed. Mediterranean Yearbook 2019. <https://www.iemed.org/publication/climate-change-in-the-mena-region-environmental-risks-socioeconomic-effects-and-policy-challenges-for-the-future/>

10 Ibid

grating; in some countries, this is as high as 50%<sup>11</sup>. There is also a lack of awareness about the issue of climate change and limited financial support, as the issue does not figure high on the agenda of governments and media. Moreover, youths in Arab societies are often regarded with suspicion or contempt, and are rarely given a voice in public matters. Political leaders tend to view them as part of the problem rather than the solution. Youths themselves are reluctant to engage in a public sphere and political processes that they deem ineffective and corrupt. Most countries in this region are affected by civil unrest, armed conflict, occupation and are governed by authoritarian regimes or dictatorships that violently cracked down on reform movements and protests that erupted during the Arab Spring. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm displayed by the young participants throughout this project, their strong commitment to the protection of the environment and their bold and innovative initiatives are a testament to the potential that is untapped in this region and that can blossom if given adequate space, consideration and means for action.

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Youth in MENA and COP27 project engaged with young media professionals and environmental activists from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) and Yemen. Through dialogue with journalists and environmental experts, these young people enhanced their knowledge on climate action, shared experience and participated in the COP27 summit that took place in Sharm el Sheikh in November 2022. The following considerations and recommendations are the result of these discussions and joint reflection:

### **A sustainable and effective solution to climate change requires a holistic societal transformation**

According to Habib Maalouf, a journalist and environmental philosophy expert, “the beginning of the environmental problem goes back to the perceived scientific notion that human beings are the center of existence and all other species are to be used some way or another, which we did to the point of extinction”. The dominant liberal and capitalist model promotes a culture of competition between human beings, the control and exploitation of natural resources, and a consumption-based growth. Not only is this model not sustainable, it is also an existential threat to living beings and will lead to a global environmental disaster if not addressed through a radical holistic societal change. “We have to understand that climatic phenomena are destructive and environmental costs exceed the benefits of development progress in its current approach [...]”, insists Maalouf.

“A new global philosophy must be promoted. We need to support the scientific environment, focus on green technology, and we shall return to the common frameworks of living under the umbrella of one family.” It is urgent, then, to rethink our relationship to the environment and move away from a culture of individualism and endless consumption towards a societal model that promotes social justice, sufficiency and solidarity.

### **Climate change mitigation is intrinsically linked to the attainment of greatest peace and security**

Countries affected by armed conflict are at heightened risk of environmental hazards as their governments are weakened, their resources depleted and their infrastructures damaged. Populations displaced by armed conflict are also more vulnerable to the effects of natural disasters. Moreover, military actions can cause significant air, soil, and water pollution, which worsen already dire living conditions. MENA countries are the most affected by conflict, with 45 situations of armed violence identified that amount to an armed conflict under international humanitarian law<sup>12</sup>. The MENA region is also the largest region in terms of producing and hosting refugees. The effects of climate change are an additional threat to peace and stability, as lack of water and scarce natural resources can contribute to increased tensions and violence. According to the Ecological Threat Register report, “over the past decade, the number of recorded water-related conflict and violent incidents increased by 270 percent worldwide. Since 2000, most incidents have taken place in Yemen and Iraq”<sup>13</sup>. A supporting leadership that prevents and ends conflict and transcends humanitarian, development and peace building divides, as enshrined in the Agenda for Humanity, is therefore paramount<sup>14</sup>.

11 <https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/impact-climate-change-children-mena-region>

12 <https://geneva-academy.ch/galleries/today-s-armed-conflicts>

13 Institute for Economics & Peace, Ecological Threat Register, 2020 - <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Ecological-Threat-Register-Press-Release-27.08-FINAL.pdf>

14 [www.agendaforhumanity.org](http://www.agendaforhumanity.org)

## **Good governance is essential to support communities' resilience to a changing climate**

Although laudable, individual and private initiatives are not sufficient to tackle the root causes of climate change in a speedy and large-scale manner. Actions aiming to address environmental threats need to be framed within national policies and plans, and further supported by adequate laws and enforcement measures. Arab governments shall elevate the debate and action related to climate change to the level of national priority. Good governance also implies that people enjoy freedom of association and expression, which means that climate activism is not criminalized or sanctioned by state authorities. Wael Hmaidan, a climate activist and one of the founders of the Lebanese environmental movement IndyACT, considers that “although the word “activist” has become loaded with negative connotations in some countries or by some people, it is still a positive term because it means “someone who is being active to make a difference”. “We shall not shy away from being active on matters that are crucial to the common good,” he asserted. Hence, transparency, inclusion, participation, responsiveness and accountability shall be the driving principles that underpin national authorities' attitude and action toward environmental challenges.

## **The struggle for environmental justice is part and parcel of the struggle for social justice**

Geographic disparities, wealth inequalities, gender and racial discrimination, poor governance and lack of accountability have a direct impact on vulnerability to climate change and access to natural resources. Many studies show that “climate change and biodiversity loss aggravate all types of gender-based violence against women and girls”.<sup>15</sup> Social habits and cultural behaviors also play a major role in our attitude toward the environment. Hence, a human-centered and rights-based approach is crucial to the effective and ethical management of this existential issue. The climate agenda and policies should not be dominated by rich Western countries that bear most of the responsibility for global warming and environmental degradation. Instead, it should be dealt with in an inclusive, participatory and accountable manner in order to “safeguard the rights of the most vulnerable while sharing the burdens of climate change equitably and fairly”<sup>16</sup>. Rusul al Shihab, climate activist and MENA Director for Earth Day 2020, stresses that “climate activists should cooperate with their governments, as the true role of advocacy and activism is to build dialogue, ties, and bridges with policymakers. Activists are the main link between citizens and local governments”.

## **MENA youths are at the forefront of climate action but they lack visibility, support and freedom of movement and association**

The 13th Annual ASDA' A BCW Arab Youth Survey revealed that more than half of young Arabs (56%)<sup>17</sup> are concerned about climate change. They seem to be particularly preoccupied by issues related to access to water, energy and waste management. MENA youths may not take to the streets as much as other countries, but they use different strategies and channels to express themselves in order to educate, raise awareness, mobilize and advocate for this issue. These actions, however, rarely make it to mainstream media, as Arab voices tend to be underrepresented in the media, and in particular the youth.

“The climate movement in the Middle East started long before the Western movement, yet was hardly covered by the Western Media [...]”, explained Neeshad Shafi, an environmentalist and social change advocate. “The tendency of the media to present only the Global North climate movement is problematic, especially for those activists from the MENA region whose media invisibility leads to them not being noticed by organizations whose help they could greatly benefit from.”<sup>18</sup> Youths in the MENA region have limited access to higher-level platforms or mechanisms established to tackle the issue of climate change on the national and international scenes. Accreditation to attend high-level summits such as COP conferences is very restricted. Moreover, freedom of movement for Arabs, and particularly Arab youths, is severely constrained not only to Western countries but also within the MENA region. The participants in the Green Voices project encountered many challenges to travel to Sharm el Sheikh due, among others, to difficult exit procedures imposed by Israeli occupation forces, in the case of Palestinians, armed conflict in their country of origin, or entry restrictions placed by Egyptian authorities on certain Arab citizens. Despite these obstacles, Nisreen Elsaïm, chair of the UN Secretary-General Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change, believes that “working together is the number one guarantee for success. Young people should try to establish coalitions, organizations, movements. Work on yourself and build your capacities and at the same time come together and create alliances!”

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15 Alsalem, R. (2022). Report on violence against women and girls in the context of the climate crisis, including environmental degradation and related disaster risk mitigation and response. <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A/77/136&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>

16 Mary Robinson Foundation. (2011). Principles of climate justice. <https://www.mrfcj.org/pdf/Principles-of-Climate-Justice.pdf>

17 <https://arabyouthsurvey.com/en/findings/>

18 Shafi, N. (2022, January 18). As UN climate summit returns to the Middle East, Arab youth fear a lack of representation and opportunities | Middle East Institute. Middle East Institute. [www.mei.edu/publications/un-climate-summit-returns-middle-east-arab-youth-fear-lack-representation-and](http://www.mei.edu/publications/un-climate-summit-returns-middle-east-arab-youth-fear-lack-representation-and)

## **Media and social media literacy, accessibility and accountability are paramount to raising awareness about environmental issues and countering disinformation**

The media play a major role in disseminating reliable information about climate change, showcasing climate initiatives, shaping public opinion about the protection of the environment, and calling for governments' and other major stakeholders' accountability. Media coverage of climate change issues in the Arab world is low, and does not correspond to the size of the problem and its urgency. Bayan Hamdan, a fact-checker and editor at Misbar, a Jordanian fact-checking platform, laments that "the percentage of people in the Arab world who are aware of climate change and its consequences is very low and is restricted to the highly educated people. Most people are not aware of the problem". The media are not always effective in translating a complex scientific issue into a language and evidence that are accessible, understandable, and appealing to the general public. Framing the issue in a negative and alarming way is most commonly used, but not necessarily the most effective. Moreover, scarce information is available on this topic in Arabic, and most of the debate is dominated by sources of information in English. According to the Arab Opinion Index 2022<sup>19</sup>, 75% of social media users in the Arab region obtain news and political information via social media. The percentage of those relying on television for political news has gradually declined over the years. Investigations have shown that fossil fuel companies, other major polluters and their allies have spent hundreds of millions of dollars to spread false and misleading content on social media. The MENA region, which is likely to see the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories, has also been affected by climate change disinformation. Therefore, it is crucial to raise awareness of social media users about this threat and counter campaigns of disinformation with the support of fact-checking platforms, whose number is increasing in the MENA region. Ahmed Elattar, investigative and environmental journalist, emphasizes that "governments are responsible for spreading awareness on climate change as enshrined in agreements of the UN. However, there have been limited efforts from Arab countries to translate this responsibility into plans and policies. The whole issue is about political will". The forthcoming United Nations Conference of Parties (COP-28) that will take place in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, will be the opportunity to test this commitment and assess progress toward a more sustainable future.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Support climate initiatives that build bridges with the development and peace-building sectors, as enhanced safety, education and economic opportunities are paramount to making Arab societies and citizens more protective of the environment.
- Promote a regional approach toward protecting the environment and mitigating the effects of climate change, to foster more effective, holistic and sustainable local solutions.
- Advocate for greater cooperation among Arab countries, to ease travel restrictions placed on Arab citizens and thus facilitate the exchange of young talents, ideas and resources.
- Engage with and train Arab media on environmental issues to increase visibility, awareness, dialogue and accountability on climate change and environmental protection in Arabic language.
- Disseminate information and narratives that highlight climate action, innovation and promising solutions rather than focus solely on threats and scientific data.
- Empower and build the capacities of young MENA climate activists on advocacy, digital campaigning, networking, green economy, business management skills and fundraising.
- Establish a MENA regional platform that will enable youth climate activists and experts to exchange knowledge, experience and resources, and develop joint projects.
- Appeal to business leaders to invest in Green economy and provide financial support to youth initiatives aiming at tackling climate change and protecting the environment.
- Encourage local and national authorities, international organizations, donors and media to support greater participation and visibility of MENA youth perspectives, climate action and innovative solutions.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/arab-opinion-index-2022-executive-summary/>

## In their own words



**Nisreen Elsaim**  
From Sudan

Chair of UN Secretary-General Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change and guest speaker at the project's closing ceremony

*“Be active in your neighborhood, your community and help the most vulnerable. Talk to your government, push for youth inclusion in the policies and debates. There are many ways to stop climate change. Find the best way you can do and build your capacities now. We cannot wait!”*



**Ghadeer Taira**

Project participant from Yemen

*“We, the youths, are required to develop our skills in line with the green economy, the fourth industrial revolution, and global trends. We ought to understand that green jobs do not only impact the environment positively, they also give rise to innovation and creativity.”*



**Saed Hanani**

Project participant from the occupied Palestinian territory and winner of the Green Voices Challenge

*“Today I am speaking to you from an Israeli check-point that prevented me from reaching my home on time for this online closing ceremony. Despite the harsh circumstances that we are facing, the Palestinian people are determined to preserve their land and confront climate change.”*



**Abd el Malik Al Nimri**

Project participant from Yemen and 2<sup>nd</sup> winner of the Green Voices Challenge

*“I aspire for people to pay more attention to climate change because talking about it is not a luxury as some think. We are confronted with a war in Yemen, but this will not deter me from continuing to advocate and work for the protection of the environment.”*

*This Policy Brief was drafted as part of the Youth in MENA and COP27 project implemented by ARDD in cooperation with RNW Media and funded by the Inclusive Green Growth Department (IGG) of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NL-MOFA) in Jordan.*