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Dajani, M.; Henderson, C.J.V.

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Muna Dajani & Christian Henderson

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INTRODUCTION



Special Section: “Circuits of Production, Crisis and Revolt: The Environment and Capital in the Middle East and North Africa”

Muna Dajani^a and Christian Henderson^b

^aDepartment of Geography and Environment, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom; ^bDepartment of Geography and Environment, Leiden Institute for Area Studies, Universiteit Leiden, Leiden, Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This article introduces the special section on “Circuits of production, crisis and revolt: The environment and capital in the Middle East and North Africa,” featuring four articles. Each one examines cases where imperial and hegemonic state powers exert power over the environment, while forms of agency and resistance emerge in response. The introduction identifies some of the problems that exist within the study of the environment in the Middle East and North Africa. The Orientalist tendency continues to lead to distortions that exceptionalize and mislead. A redress to these problems is the development of a political ecological framework that identifies the power differential within social relations over resources. The introduction explains how these are represented within the four articles.

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Middle East; environmental politics; political ecology; North Africa

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is often portrayed as a region on the cusp of environmental crises. Predictions of wars over water, scarcity of food, conflicts caused by climate, and unsustainable population growth are a constant feature of Anglophone discourse over the region. Climate change has renewed this anxiety and there has been a slew of media articles full of alarmist predictions that the Arab region will no longer be fit for human habitation because of warming temperatures. Absent from these tropes are deeper analyses about the region’s political ecology; how environments are determined by social hierarchies, and the ramifications of discursive framings, and material interventions.

This special section responds to some of these lacunae with four original articles that apply notions of political ecology to cases in the MENA. Plans for this special section began in 2020, when an online workshop entitled ‘Circuits of production, crisis and revolt:

CONTACT Christian Henderson ✉ c.j.v.henderson@umail.leidenuniv.nl 📠 Leiden Institute for Area Studies, Universiteit Leiden, Leiden, Netherlands

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The environment and capital in the Middle East and North Africa' was held amid the Covid-19 pandemic. At that time, the online format was a novelty and it facilitated a gathering of scholars from diverse locations amid variegated lockdown regulations. The workshop featured 13 papers in total; three of the papers in this section were presented in this workshop. Building on these discussions, this special section intends to contribute to the field of political ecology and environmental politics within the MENA region. The articles challenge hegemonic narratives and offer an alternative insight into the way in which land, resources, and sustainability are configured.

The section examines some of the themes that define the environmental politics of the MENA region. This is a region that is forged by a history of colonialism, imperialism, conflict and extractivism, but the politics of the regional environment is often overlooked. The question of political ecology, environmental politics, and sustainability within the MENA region has been determined by a series of ontological and epistemological constraints. In Anglophone social sciences, the study of the MENA has been dominated by security studies and international relations. The history of conflict, the region's strategic nature, and the continued geopolitical tensions dominate Western perceptions. As a result, the region's environment has often been sidelined and, when discussed, it tends to be motivated by debates over stratagem. This has created a series of distortions within Western knowledge production. Academic and cultural representations of the region's ecology tend to misrepresent or obfuscate ecological realities and human interaction. As Barnes contends, this 'single story' of crisis and scarcity in the Middle East 'obscures as much as it illuminates' (2024:1), necessitating a far more critical reflection and analysis on resource politics in the region that uncovers power dynamics, societal relations amongst other factors.

One persistent ontological lens is an environmental imaginary that is Orientalist, a perception that essentializes the region's ecology and creates inaccurate assumptions about biophysical reality and the causes of crises. This is an environmental imaginary that is specific to the wider MENA region. It dominates Western understandings of the region, and it has deep roots in cultural production and scholarship (Davis and Burke 2011; Hoffmann 2018; Sawyer and Agrawal 2000). One of the most significant manifestations of this imaginary is the exceptionalization of the region's environment as one in a perpetual state of crisis, a portrayal that has been concomitant with Western intervention. Historically, the colonial powers used this depiction as justification for dispossession, framing the indigenous people of the region as incapable of managing their resources (Davis and Burke 2011). This premise is manifest in the notion that European settlers could transform the region into a fertile and verdant landscape. This has deep roots in Western knowledge production and there is a tendency to portray the indigenous population as the cause of an environmental deviation, both socially and environmentally. One example are the words of French historian Pellissier de Reynaud who expressed this belief in his writing of 1836, six years after the French invasion of Algeria.

Dryed and cracked by the sun ... like a young woman of ill repute, wilted, faded and withered by her misconduct before she has reached her maturity. Let the gentle, guiding hand of Europe reach out to save her and lead her back to fertility and prosperity, (Heffernan 1991, 39).

This fallacy is present in other settler colonial narratives. It can be found in Zionist discourse, which claimed that its settler colonial project in Palestine also transformed the land and ‘made the desert bloom’ (Alqaisiya 2024). This is a persistent but powerful delusion. In 2023, European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, made a speech in which she lauded Israel and repeated this claim (MacDonald 2023). According to Clemens Hoffman this is a ‘reincarnation of the imperial practice of Environmental Orientalism, geared towards maintaining a hierarchy between an environmentally competent West and the age-old Middle Eastern inability and unwillingness to “manage” its lush nature in a sustainable and stable fashion’ (2018, 102).

The Orientalist imaginary is also apparent in a synthesis of ideas portraying the environment in the MENA as a place of danger, instability, and ecological extremes (Verhoeven 2011). Societies are often portrayed as determined by their environmental conditions and geographic features, over which they have little agency. This is manifest in analysis of contemporary events, particularly in the surmise that disasters and ecological events are caused by natural environmental reasons. An example is the popular argument that the Syrian civil war was a conflict caused by climate change, a theory for which there is little evidence (Selby et al. 2017). Another example is how the destruction and death in the Libyan town of Derna was framed as a ‘natural disaster,’ with little exploration of the unnatural factors that played a role in this event such as the NATO intervention, sanctions, and the civil war (Elkorghli 2023).

Western scholarship has also framed the region through its history as a site of extraction. Oil dominates several economies in the region, but arguably this remains under theorized from an ecological perspective. The role of the region as a producer of a large share of the world’s oil supplies often dominates how the region is seen. The social implications of this resource are subject to a growing body of work (Craig Jones, 2012; Hanieh 2011; Mitchell 2001). Less has been done to analyze the environmental relations of oil and the ecological world of this commodity. Indeed, the extractive nature of oil and gas is sometimes under consideration and its production is seen as a simple, denatured, desocialized process. One question is how oil extraction constitutes a commodity frontier and the way this results in the ‘destruction of property systems, political structures, social relations, and life-worlds’ (Rasmussen and Lund 2018, 389).

Another persistent trope is Malthusian concepts of population and scarcity (Amery 2020). Within the policy literature, population growth is assumed to be a cause of environmental problems, such as food insecurity and water scarcity. However, this ignores how resources are determined by social hierarchies that create highly unequal forms of distribution (Alatout 2009). The region’s agriculture shows that resources have also been defined by histories of extraction (Henderson 2021). The region has a history of plantation agriculture producing commodities, such as cotton, oranges, and wine for the world market. In the present era, export agriculture has turned many countries in the region into sources of table crops and agricultural commodities for Europe and other wealthier countries (Ayeb and Bush 2019; Dixon 2023). This has been accompanied by the extraction of water for agro-industry (El Nour, Elaydi, and Hussein 2021). As a result, the potential for food sovereignty and indigenous

knowledge is not taken seriously at the policy level, and the region's food production is seen as being in a perpetual state of crisis that depends on imports, debt and foreign technical knowledge.

One means of overcoming these proclivities is through the application of a political ecology framework. This approach examines the power relations of environmental problems and the co-production of nature and society (Benjaminsen and Svarstad 2019). According to Paul Robbins (Robbins 2020), political ecology is concerned with 'critically explaining what is wrong with dominant accounts of environmental change, while at the same time exploring alternatives, adaptations, and creative human action in the face of mismanagement and exploitation' (2012, 20). With this considered, it provides a method to tackle problematic mainstream accounts (the hatchet) and a means to explore alternatives (the seed).

This encourages a methodological approach that instantiates environmental problems and abstracts them from space and time. In the case of the MENA region, this approach must be sensitive to the realities of subjugation and extractivism that continue to define the region's environment. According to Van Sant, Milligan, and Mollett (2021, 5), 'history matters to how we understand and illustrate the ways in which racial capitalism and settler colonialism shape environmental change.' For example, the integration of the region's economies as a producer of primary commodities during the colonial period, resulted in subordination that has had an enduring economic legacy. Additionally, another feature that is brought to the foreground through this approach is the ongoing forms of military occupation and foreign interventions that are taking place around the region. The ecologies of Palestine, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Libya cannot be understood without considering how they have been subject to imperial stratagem and its exploitation of resources (Ajl 2021). According to Capasso and Kadri 'this historically-established unequal accumulation of value does not only entail the pile of commodities, natural resources, and their corresponding ideas. It also consists of the pile of dead bodies and destruction of nature that is produced through the process of accumulation and extraction of capital' (Capasso and Kadri 2023, 155).¹ In the case of Palestine, the people and land are subject to ongoing colonization, in which resources offer both a means of control and economic value (Panosetti and Roudart 2023). In other cases, imperial intervention has resulted in an assault on the state and its capacity to govern the environment. Food insecurity, water supply, and infrastructural frailty cannot be understood without taking into account these realities.

Together with historical properties, political ecology also embodies spatiality across different scales. The analysis of the environment must consider how resources are distributed across boundaries. Historically, core-periphery relations developed on a North-South basis, and value from ecological resources flowed towards the industrialized countries of the North. A more recent development is the formation of core-peripheral relations within the region, in which a regional hierarchy based on exchange of commodities contributes to concentrations of wealth and plenty, and the production of inequality and impoverishment. This is most apparent in terms of regional

¹See the Special Issue On Imperialism in the Middle East, *Middle East Critique* 32(2).

food trade (Henderson 2022). But this transboundary exchange also takes place in mineral resources, Sudan, for example, is the third biggest producer of gold in Africa and almost all of it is exported to the UAE. The regional dimension may become of increased importance in the future as renewable energy investments and the sustainability industry will have a regional configuration (Hamouchene and Sandwell 2023).

The study of the environment in the MENA region will need to be sensitive to the increasingly complex spatial configuration of resource distribution, capitalization, and power relations. This constitutes a changing geographical pattern of resource extraction and trade, one that is concomitant with shifts in the global economy. The emergence of the Gulf states within the region is also accompanied by their growing presence within world trade. This constitutes a more complex geography of an international political ecology, one that involves polycentric arrangements of exchange and capital flows. According to Mariko Frame:

the uneven but nonetheless global saturation of the capitalist mode of production is driving new dynamics of appropriation from not just core, but newly ‘emerging’ industrializing centres, even as their own natures are exploited in the intense competition to industrialize and serve as subcontractors to companies in the Global North (Frey, Gellert, and Dahms 2018).

These precepts are particularly helpful given the future prospects of the region amid the crises of the environment. The region’s exposure to climate change cannot be understood without taking into account its position within the global economy. The poorer states of the region, particularly those in North Africa, have been designated as producers of renewable energy, yet it remains unclear whether this support has been matched in support for climate adaptation (Hamouchene and Sandwell 2023). This is even though the carbon emissions of many poor Arab states are insignificant in comparison to Northern states and richer states within the region. At a regional level, this imbalance is obfuscated by the assumption that the region has shared social and ecological realities, a perception that stems from a focus on religious identity and environmental imaginary rather than severe economic inequality (Henderson 2023). Another characteristic is the way in which the sustainability industry is presented as a technical and economic fix in which free trade and capital flows will ameliorate the environmental crisis. The emphasis on these fixes creates an imaginary in which consumption and growth can continue without consideration of ecological limits. According to Gökçe Günel, these interventions are ‘technical adjustments’ that allow the wealthier states of the region to maintain their socio-ecological trajectory; they create a ‘future where humans will continue to enjoy abundance without interrogating existing social, political, and economic relations’ (Günel 2016, 293–294).

In this context, the MENA’s environmental future is likely to be highly uneven. According to Hamza Hamouchene, the ‘transition, if and when it comes, will maintain the same practices of dispossession and exploitation that currently prevail, reproducing injustices and deepening socio-economic exclusion,’ (2023, 29). Climate change will deepen inequalities that already define the regional economy. State fragility, war and economic crisis means that some states in the region are unprepared for the realities of climate. Other states in the region have the means to adapt to the

shifts in weather, food production and infrastructure that will be caused by global warming. Amid these paths, questions of environmental and climate justice exist across spatial scales. The uneven realities of climate adaptation are common to many countries across the region; the local experience of environmental justice is present in struggles over land, sites of extractivism, and the externalities of pollution and waste (Rousselin 2018).

Another character of the region that will be relevant to a discussion of climate futures is the experience of devastating wars. Libya, Syria, Yemen and Palestine have all been subject to wars that have destroyed the built environment and created toxic ecologies. The conditions of survival and life in these environments creates what Munira Khayyat described as ‘resistant ecologies,’ modes of life that continue amid intense hardship and difficulty endured by people who have no means to escape (2022). Such realities may become a more common experience in the future. Gaza is the most extreme example of this, and the terms of life amid Zionist-inflicted apocalyptic destruction, ecological devastation within a space of incarceration must be in the foreground of environment and development.

These themes are present in the papers of the section. Violence is the common thread joining the papers together, where dominant and hegemonic actors, whether states, global powers or multinational corporations naturalize extractivism and produce landscapes, geographies, resources and communities living in them as sacrifice zones, enmeshed in perpetual processes of dispossession and inevitable harm. From cement’s ecological devastation to coercive and unequal river basin treaties to sinister environmentalism of settler colonialism in Palestine and the rise of eco-normalization fostering cross-border and regional collaborations and partnerships on energy, water and food.

Benjamin Schuetze’s paper, ‘Follow the Grid, Follow the Violence: The Project for a Transregional Mediterranean Electricity Ring,’ is a critical examination of the proposed Mediterranean electricity ring (MedRing) project that aims to integrate European grids with MENA grids. Scheutze argues that the MedRing project, rather than simply promoting sustainable energy futures, reproduces and conceals various forms of (colonial) violence and exclusion. It exposes how renewable energy initiatives, often presented as apolitical or technocratic necessities, reinforce existing socio-political hierarchies and dependencies, thus masking the underlying violence and exploitation. In the context of MENA, greenwashing of authoritarian power, colonial occupation, extractivism, and anti-refugee violence are just a few examples of such manifestations of violence. Global energy circuits of production are therefore creating and forging new geographies of exploitation and extractivism. Many of those sites coincidentally are geographies of forgotten occupation or where authoritarian regimes dominate over marginalized groups and suppress freedom of speech and perpetuate environmental and climate injustices (Alkhalili et al. 2023).

Ghada Sasa’s paper, ‘American Colony in Jerusalem: Rebuilding the Eight Palestinian Villages Buried by USA Independence Park,’ provides a critical analysis of how USA Independence Park, funded by American taxpayers and established by the Jewish National Fund (JNF) in 1976, serves as an instrument of Israeli settler colonialism and greenwashing. Its main contribution is its challenging of Israeli discourse

and narrative that portrays the park as a benign environmental project, instead exposing it as a tool to erase Palestinian history and inhibit the return of displaced Palestinians. Violence perpetrated against Palestinians through these afforestation projects, in history and the present time, continues to be obscured through framing such projects as green and innovative. Sasa pushes for an alternative framing of such geographies of greenwashing as sites of anticolonial archives. The act of documenting the lived experiences and cultural heritage of the eight Palestinian villages buried by the park ('Allar, Bayt 'Itab, Dar al-Sheikh, Dayr Aban, Dayr al-Hawa, Jrash, Khirbat al-Tannur, and Sufla enables decolonial praxis and popular mobilization.

Israeli settler colonialism is structurally designed and purposely orchestrated to erase and ethnically cleanse the Palestinian population and their presence on the land. Sasa shows quite vividly manifestations of that process of erasure not only in its historical legacy, but also how it endures in the everyday erasure of Palestinian existence on the land through both performative acts of intentionally violent and dismissive mapping and trail development and Hebrewised and Judaised place-naming. Moreover, the Israeli state systematically promotes itself and its Zionist institutions (such as the Jewish National Fund) as spearheading environmentalism and afforestation of the land through investing in green energy development on illegally occupied land, in the West Bank and in occupied Syrian Golan Heights (Alkhalili, Dajani, and Mahmoud 2023; Shqair 2023).

Monica Basbous's paper 'The Violence of Extractive Urbanization: Dying to Live in Lebanon' is a critical examination of how urbanization in Lebanon is deeply intertwined with extractive violence, both historically and in contemporary contexts. By providing a concise history of the development of Lebanon's cement industry and urban planning from the French Mandate period to the present day, it argues that such processes exemplify mechanisms of colonial and capitalist exploitation. By framing urbanization and the cement industry as components of processes of 'extractive violence', it showcases how capital accumulation is always prioritized at the expense of social and environmental justice. Basbous's lucid analysis of the state and the cement industry's necro-power exposes how they are inherently premised on sacrificing lives and 'making death a precondition to life' (2024, 4), by 'subjugating geographies of sacrifice to those of accumulation.'

Resource dispossession takes different forms, where global powers collude with local authoritarian and violent regimes to normalize extraction as progress and extractive violence as an inevitable by-product. By default, communities in the MENA region are the ones experiencing this dispossession first hand, either as citizens of their countries, refugees seeking asylum and economic opportunities, or stateless groups under brutally exclusionary regimes of settler colonialism. A tiered system of class and state defines the environment. Resource extraction is facilitated by open channels, while draconian and violent measures are exercised against refugees and colonized subjects. These are processes that Gilmore (2007) describes as the state's organized abandonment and marginalization.

Luay Hussien AlDalooi's paper, 'Hydropolitical Relations between Turkey and Iraq over the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers: The Dyadic Relationships and Structure Matter' explores the political dynamics between Turkey and Iraq, focusing on their

interactions over the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The paper employs the hydro-hegemony framework to analyze how power dynamics, both hard and soft, influence water relations between Turkey and Iraq. This hydropolitical relationship is described as ‘partial cooperation’: inconsistent and often pragmatic nature of cooperation, influenced primarily by shifting regional dynamics, political objectives, and mutual concerns such as security, border trade, and the Kurdish question. Such dynamics expose how water relations, meanings, and values have been confined quite violently to the realm of nation-state interactions and priorities. Geographies, people and resources are therefore stripped from meaning and purpose, apart from their utilitarian and quantifiable characters and potential of exploitation and extraction.

In the Middle East, water has been instrumentalized and weaponized by state actors through a combination of soft and hard power. This leaves any room for a serious and progressive conversation around the rights to water confined within the realm of international relations and engineering discourses, where communities are at worse scapegoated and ignored, or treated as victims or mere users of water, reducing their engagement with water to that of provision and supply. Transboundary rivers, such Tigris and Euphrates, and their immediate environments become sites of slow violence, where state-centric infrastructural aspirations coupled with a securitization imperative by riparian countries dominate the discursive and hard power governing river development and overall water politics (Dajani 2024; El Marakby and El Nour 2023). This is also indicative of global water and environmental governance where ‘neoliberal governmentalities, structural racism, and racial capitalism coalesce resulting in ruptures of water-related decision making—with unjust and unsustainable outcomes’ (Wilson et al. 2019).

In essence, all the contributions invite us to engage in critical knowledge production and practical mobilization that emphasize the quest to re-politicize colonial and extractivist logics of resource governance and policy making. Basbous provokes us to widen the scale and forge ‘solidarities along trans-national and trans-sectoral lines.’ (see Basbous in this issue, 20). What Sasa envisions is a structural shift where ‘anticolonial archives facilitate decolonization by rerooting Indigenous nations in their lands, providing them with a template to rebuild their societies, and arming them with data should they opt to challenge colonial courts in their struggles to return’ (see Sasa in this issue, 5). Reclaiming the story and countering the processes of depoliticization, normalization, and quantification embedded in colonial logic is therefore not only necessary. It is also inevitable to forge new pathways to confront the enduring coloniality of violent regimes and the extractive industries’ hegemonic worldviews and modes of operation.

Basbous calls for solidarities beyond the territorial confinement of a state or geography of injustice, seeking connection across borders and reclaiming the right to narrate and the right to a healthy and safe environment. Schuetze calls for a rethinking of energy transitions that goes beyond technocratic and market-driven approaches, advocating for more democratic and inclusive alternatives. A growing scholarly community from the MENA region are also forging critical and progressive counter-knowledge on dismantling green colonialism and countering the hegemonic grip of Eurocentric framing of the environment as a platform for normalizing occupation

and racial capitalism for the sake of green energy transitions that serves the west (Alkhalili, Dajani, and Mahmoud 2023; Hamouchene and Sandwell 2023; Shqair2023).

We hope that this section will contribute to analysis of the contemporary ecological moment in the MENA, in which extreme violence and environmental destruction are explicitly intertwined. Gaza is being pounded by genocidal warfare of Israel, with an unfathomable deadly toll on human lives and the environment. Imperial power in the region is yet again revealed as perpetuating violent realities of ecocide, vicious extractivism, and unabated quench for resource exploitation under a regime of fossil capitalism. Gaza today is experiencing a ‘rehearsal of the future’ in the words of Colombian President Gustavo Petro at the UN Climate Conference, as the climate crisis escalates and is felt most acutely in the Global South. The Middle East, as Adam Hanieh (2024) states, rightly ‘fits within the history of fossil capitalism and contemporary struggles for climate justice,’ necessitating scholars and activists alike to reject the trope of exceptionalism that has for long touted the study of the Middle East and its environments.

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