

# Changing Opinions: Climate and the Arab Population.

---

RETHINKING **SECURITY** IN THE 2020s SERIES – *Commentary*

By Clémentine Lienard – BIC Climate Security Analyst

## INTRODUCTION

According to the IPCC, 3.3 to 3.6 billion people are highly vulnerable to climate change effects, especially “in locations with poverty, governance challenges and limited access to basic services and resources, violent conflict and high levels of climate-sensitive livelihoods”<sup>1</sup>. While this figure is brought to the attention of policy makers, it does not say much about the level of awareness people might have towards their level of exposure, resilience, and vulnerability to climate change. Neither does it reveal how worried those people may be about the future or how much interest they can show towards this issue. A survey conducted in 2019 demonstrates that perceptions of climate change across continents are contrasted<sup>2</sup>. Respondents from developing countries in the Middle East and Asia believe more that climate change will have a disruptive impact on their lives than people from Western countries, for instance. Asian people tend to have more collapsologist views of climate change than people living in Arab or Western countries and have

---

<sup>1</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability, Summary for Policy Makers, 2022

<sup>2</sup> M. Smith, « International poll: most expect to feel impact of climate change, many think it will make us extinct », Yougov, September 2019

stronger feelings that climate change will likely lead to a new world war or the extinction of humanity.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been identified as one of the most vulnerable regions to climate change, due to the fastest rate of temperature increase compared to the global average and the disastrous ramifications it has on pre-existing water and food challenges<sup>3</sup>. Around the globe, climate awareness and civil societies have played a key role in compelling climate actions and environmental protection to change habits, perceptions, and influence policy. As the most important talks on climate change are to be held in the MENA region in 2022 in Egypt and in 2023 in the United Arab Emirates, this commentary will explore trends of the Arab public opinion on climate. The assessment will mainly be based on the results of polls and surveys and will cross data from the few survey studies on climate change specifically led across the region.

### **WHILE CLIMATE AWARENESS IS ON THE RISE...**

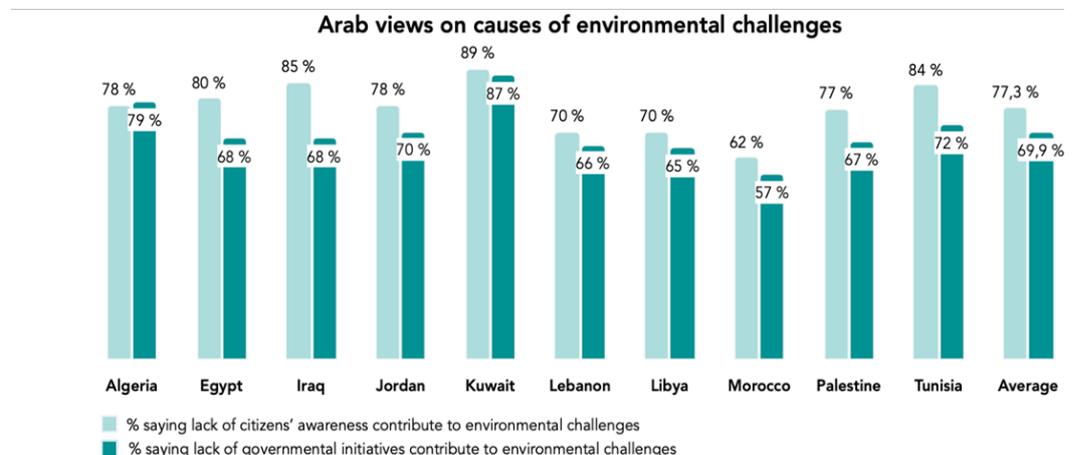
In 2008, an international survey conducted in more than 120 countries affirmed that 41% of respondents from the Middle East and North Africa declared that they have never heard of climate change or of global warming, a figure highly above the global average of 24% . This figure comes more than fifteen years after the Rio Earth Summit, held in 1992, which ended with key environmental policy achievements, notably the creation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the core pillar of the international community engagement against climate change. In 2008, fourteen COPs had already taken place, including one in Marrakech, Morocco in 2001.

At that time, researchers believed that climate change awareness was correlated with the level of development and wealth of a country, and the relationship of citizens to post-materialistic values. But the reality was more complex. Since the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, only developed countries were made responsible for climate change, while developing countries were given ten years to enhance fossil-powered

---

<sup>3</sup> K. A Miller and all, « Living on the Edge, The implications of Climate Change for six countries in the Middle East and North Africa region », *Greenpeace Research Laboratories*, November 2022 ; F. Wehrey, N. Fawal, « Cascading Climate Effects in the Middle East and North Africa: Adapting Through Inclusive Governance », *Carnegie*, February 2022

economic development. Climate change was therefore relegated to the political background to enable socioeconomic development in MENA. The region is also hydrocarbon rich, and many Arab States based their economic wealth on oil and carbon rent – the Gulf States, Iraq, Libya, and Algeria. In particular, Saudi Arabia was blocking the push of climate actions forward in international negotiations as it was perceived as against national interests. Not only downgraded regionally on the political agenda, climate change also used to be covered on the news from a foreign and international perspective, particularly in semi-authoritarian media systems, to avoid sensitive topics on local or national environmental mismanagement. In the meantime, in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Yemen, priorities were elsewhere as conflicts and political instability already raged.



Source: Arab Barometer, wave VII, 2022

In 2007, only 42% of people in MENA thought global warming was a threat to them and their family, while almost half said to be unaware<sup>4</sup>. Public awareness across the region has grown and presently, 64% of Arabs declare that climate change is a public emergency in 2021, a belief shared at more or less the same rate in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific<sup>5</sup>. According to a survey led by Arab Barometer in 2019, almost 80% of Lebanese saw climate change as a serious problem, around 70% of Algerians, Sudanese, Jordanians, Tunisians and Palestinians

<sup>4</sup> « Awareness of climate change and threat vary by region: Adults in Americas, Europe most likely to be aware, perceive threat », op.cit.

<sup>5</sup> UNDP and the University of Oxford, *People's climate vote*, 2021

thought about the same along with 60% of Moroccans, Libyans, Egyptians, Iraqis and Yemenis. Only 37% in Kuwait did<sup>6</sup>. They also believe that the lack of citizens' awareness contributes more than absence of government initiatives to environmental challenges, particularly in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, and Tunisia.

The level of public awareness on climate change in the Arab States does not depend on the level of education or income. Indeed, perceptions over climate change vary slightly between respondents with basic education, secondary education, and higher education<sup>7</sup>. However, in Arab States, men see climate change as an emergency issue more than women and girls. Even though it is less pronounced than in other parts of the world, there is a generational gap over the vision people have of climate change in the Arab world as well. The proportion of respondents aged under 18 years old believing that climate change is an emergency threat varies between 65 and 69% in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia, whereas only 52% to 63% of respondents aged over 60 share the same ideas<sup>8</sup>.

This common understanding from citizens is probably linked with the perceived growing environmental deterioration of the last two decades. Between 2007 and 2017, 60% of Arabs declared that they observed the environmental situation getting worst, particularly in Egypt (66%), Lebanon (92%) and Tunisia (78%), but also in Iraq (74%), Libya (78%), Syria (95%) and Yemen (90%), where protracted armed conflicts caused destructive impacts on the preservation of natural resources and the environment<sup>9</sup>. The rise of environmental activism across the region and the development of alternative sources of information have also contributed to enhance greater environmental education and increase awareness on climate change<sup>10</sup>. Meanwhile, the end of the « Kyoto era » and the advent of the Paris agreements

---

<sup>6</sup> « Arab environment: a tertiary concern for Arab citizens », Arab Barometer, April 2020

<sup>7</sup> J. Green, « Environmental Issues in the Middle East and North Africa, wave V », Arab Barometer, October 2019

<sup>8</sup> *People's climate vote*, op.cit.

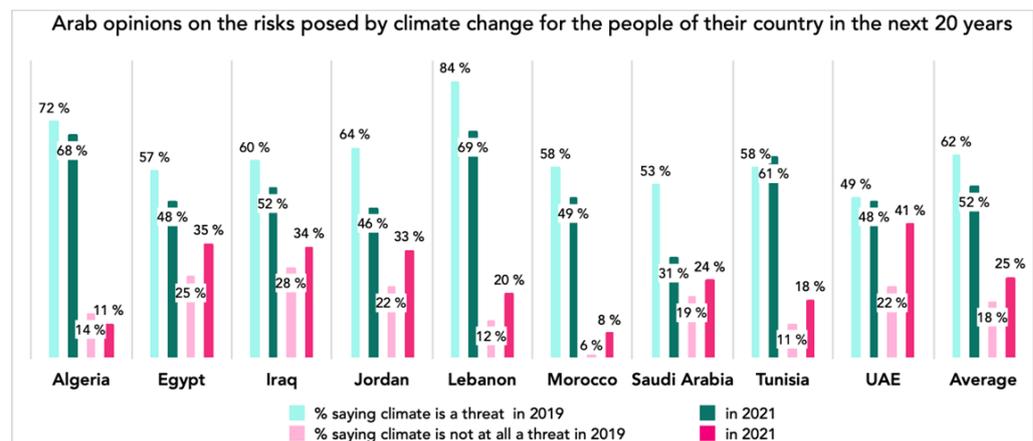
<sup>9</sup> Arab Forum for Environment and Development, *Arab Environment in 10 years*, 2017

<sup>10</sup> J. Sowers, « Environmental Activism in the Middle East and North Africa » in *Environmental Politics in the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, 2018 ; « Climate change Communication in Middle East and Arab Countries », op.cit.

under the principles that all countries had to contribute to the fight against climate change, not only the main polluters, led all Arab countries to foster more ambitious climate policies, especially the Gulf states which changed their attitude towards climate policies and started to shift to alternative and greener sources of energy supply and production.

### CITIZENS STILL DO NOT SEE CLIMATE AS A TOP-PRIORITY

Over the past fifteen years, polls and surveys on public opinions have shown that environmental education and climate change awareness have risen in Arab countries. However, despite the spread of alarming communication on the devastating consequences of climate change, Arab citizens feel less worried about climate change impacts than they were two years ago.



Source: The Lloyd's Register Foundation, 2021

Apart from Algeria, less Arab people believe in climate threats: in 2019, 18% of Arabs estimated that climate change was not a threat for their country in the next 20 years and 62% thought that climate was a very or a somewhat serious threat. In 2021, 25% did not see any threats from climate change for the next 20 years and only 52% did. The major change comes from the United Arab Emirates, where the share of people seeing no serious harm from climate change went from 22% in 2019 to 41% in 2021. The apparition of the Covid-19 pandemic may have changed people's perceptions over immediate and direct risks. Less people have also claimed to experience serious harms from severe weather in the past two years, which might be another explanation of this change of belief.

The tendency to minimize current and future climate risks is nonetheless indicative of the attitudes and perceptions Arab citizens have towards climate change. Arab people are aware now that climate change is not a distant challenge and will have repercussions directly on their daily lives, but they still face more urgent concerns. Another study has also shown that people in the region do not tend to link climate change with the environmental degradation and changes they are experiencing.

From a financial and political perspective, Arab citizens feel that climate should not be prioritized in their country neither by their governments' spendings or international aid. The most recent survey led by Arab barometer displays that only 3.8% of respondents estimate environmental pollution should be on top of public spending priorities, with 9% in Libya and Algeria, 7% in Morocco, 4% in Tunisia, 3% in Palestine and Iraq, 2% in Lebanon and 1% in Jordan. Responses about foreign aids are similar, the most convinced being Algeria at 11% but only 3% in Iraq, 2% in Tunisia and Lebanon and 1% in Palestine, Jordan and Egypt. Only 2% in Iraq and 1% in Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt also believe that climate change should be the first priority of the United Nations among other socioeconomic problems, and Algerians rank first again with 9%. This difference of attitude between Algerians and their neighbours are corroborated by another survey led on the perception of risks in 2021. Among all Arab respondents, Algerians are those who see climate change as the greatest source of risk to their safety in their daily life (9%), while only 2% to none from Tunisia, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan. In Tunisia and Iraq, crime, violence, and terrorism were pointed as the greatest source of risk, likewise in Lebanon, in addition with economic risks, as well as in Jordan.

Surprisingly, most of Arab citizens estimate however that their national governments should be more active when tackling climate change, even though results are more disparate between countries. On average, around 41% of respondents estimate that their government could do more to address climate change, more than 60% in Tunisia and Algeria, 55% in Kuwait, around half of respondents in Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon, and around 40% in Morocco and Jordan. The fact that Moroccans and Jordanians seem to be less keen to encourage greater climate efforts from their government than their neighbours can be explained by the fact that both the Kingdoms of Morocco and Jordan have been particularly active in the field of climate policy and legislation. Around a quarter of respondents are satisfied with their government action on climate change, mainly Jordanians and

Lebanese (39%) and Iraqis (36%) and one quarter of Moroccans feel that their government should be less active on addressing climate change. Divides regarding expectations from citizens on governments' efforts on climate change are mainly explained by the level of income and education, except for Tunisia, Algeria, Iraq, and Jordan. In 2019, YouGov displayed that around 43% of people from the Gulf States estimated that their country could be doing more to fight climate change, and 31% thought that their government was doing as much as it could. The same study showed that 34% admitted that they could be doing more personally.

From an environmental perspective, climate change is not perceived as the most urgent environmental challenge. Arabs see water issues as the biggest environmental challenge their country is facing, followed by waste management. When looking at the 2019 poll results in 2019, it is in Kuwait that climate change is seen as the biggest environmental challenge (10%) and in Palestine that it is regarded as the least urgent (2%). In 2006-2007, waste management, water issues and air quality were already identified as the main environmental concerns.

Another element indicating that climate change is still not considered as a priority issue is that some surveys dedicated to the Arab youth still do not include the climate dimension and environmental challenges in their studies. In September 2022, Arab Youth Survey for instance published its 14th study, based on a sample of 200 million young people across the Arab world, and presented six key themes: identity, livelihoods, politics, global citizenship, lifestyle and aspirations; none incorporated climate. When compared with the same kind of studies on the European Youth in 2021, 'combating climate change and protecting the environment' is pointed as the second political priority that should be addressed by policymakers after eradicating poverty and social inequality.

## **PROSPECTS AND CONCLUSION**

Despite a positive evolution on climate awareness and, in general, a greater consideration for environmental issues, Arab citizens still do not regard climate change as the most pressing environmental, social, political, or economic challenge that their country faces. In particular, their perceptions over global risks have changed in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and they seem to pay less attention to climate risks than in 2019. Citizens across the region agree that national and public spendings should not be in priority dedicated to tackle climate change. In

general, the latest surveys of public opinion show that Algerian citizens stand apart: they tend to be more worried about climate change effects on their daily lives and more prompt to step up climate actions and spendings.

Other socioeconomic and environmental problems have been pointed out as more worrying, notably water insecurity, violence, health issues, and economic concerns. But governing these problems in the future will mostly depend on the trajectories of carbon the world persists in emitting as of now, and the level of climate adaptation countries are ready to prepare for. The more inaction on climate change in the MENA region, the more it will further jeopardize water security, food security, air quality, environmental degradation, health, and will more broadly alter socioeconomic development.

To fully understand the impacts of climate change on daily lives, environmental and climate education should therefore focus more deeply on the interrelations climate change nurtures within all aspects of the human life. Climate change should also be connected with the many environmental problems people are already experiencing, in particular water scarcity or air pollution, as well as more intense extreme climate events such as prolonged droughts.

---

## About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

## Rethinking Security in the 2020s Series

This project takes critical aim at yesterday's approaches to security and defence, with a view towards developing proactive solutions to the evolving nature of insecurity and hybrid warfare. The series has three overarching themes, namely "New Geopolitical Landscape in the MENA Region", "Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention" and "Transnational Challenges to Water and Energy"

## Author

Clémentine Lienard | BIC Climate Security Analyst



 @BICBrussels  @bicrhr  BIC

 [www.bic-rhr.com](http://www.bic-rhr.com)  [info@bic-rhr.com](mailto:info@bic-rhr.com)

 Avenue Louise, 89 1050, Brussels, Belgium  Tel:+32 027258466