

Connected Contradictions

Climate Policy in the Middle East and North Africa

A publication by Dr. Juliane Schumacher

Imprint

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in the Middle East and North Africa**

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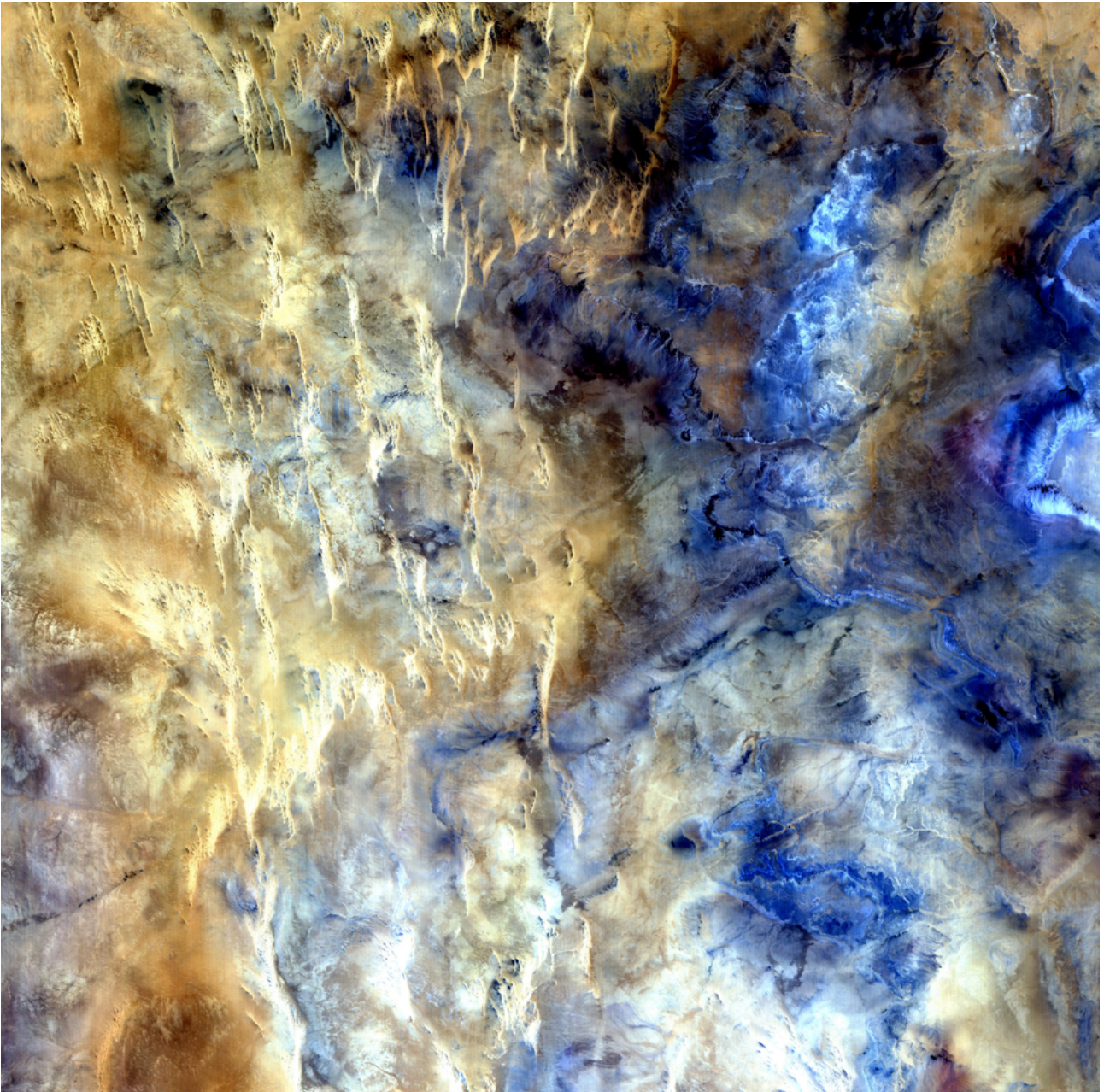
Between the fertile Euphrates River valley and the cultivated lands of the eastern Mediterranean coast, the Syrian Desert covers parts of modern Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq.

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Summary

The 27th UN Climate Conference, COP27, will take place at the end of 2022. This year's conference is due to take place in Egypt for the first time, and in the United Arab Emirates the following year. This is reason enough to take a closer look at climate policy in the West Asia and North Africa region—or the Middle East and North Africa, as it is still mostly referred to. Thus far, only a few studies on climate policy in this region have been produced. A general survey is made more difficult by the region's heterogeneity: it includes oil-exporting countries with a high standard of living and above-average per capita greenhouse gas emissions, but also poor countries with slim resources and low emissions. An adequate discussion of climate change and international climate policy in the region must take this diversity into account, by examining different sub-regions and groups of states separately.

The region is already feeling the effects of global warming, and these will only continue to become more evident. However, predicting them precisely is difficult. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which compiles the current state of climate change research every few years, points out that there is insufficient data and a lack of research funding, for the African continent especially. The forecasts that can be made suggest that impacts will vary by sub-region. The whole area will become hotter, especially in the summer. Heat waves will be more frequent, posing a particular threat to the elderly and the ill. While wind speeds are likely to decrease in North Africa, in West Asia, conversely, there may be more sand and dust storms due to stronger winds. In the Mediterranean, reduced rainfall is highly likely. In the Sahara and parts of Western Asia, precipitation may increase, but mostly in the form of brief periods of heavy downpours, accompanied by the risk of severe floo-



This glimpse of Africa's Sahara Desert, located near where the borders of Mali, Niger, and Algeria converge, is a world of sand and rock without roads or settlements. The horizontal lines across the top half of the image are intrusions of igneous rock, where magma poked up to the surface from deep underground.

ding. Increased evaporation due to higher temperatures will make things drier overall. This, and the more marked fluctuation in precipitation, will significantly reduce the reliability of agriculture, which continues to be the main livelihood for many people in the region. Rising sea levels threaten numerous coastal towns with flooding. Areas used for agriculture are threatened with salination, which would render the land infertile. However, the observed developments are not solely due to climate change. There are other factors that need to be taken into account. For example, the subsidence and salination of the Nile Delta can also be ascribed to the construction of numerous dams, something that has been going on for more than 100 years. The increase in sandstorms in Iran is also due to the draining of marshes and the intensive agricultural use of water.

Climate policy has recently gained in importance in the region, and not only due to the palpable effects of global warming. Since the 2015 Paris Agreement, obligations to reduce emissions have been extended beyond the countries of the developed world. All countries must now submit climate plans with potential reductions and regularly report on their progress. Investment decisions and entry criteria for export markets like the European Union (EU) are also increasingly linked to climate policy. The countries of the region, which—with few exceptions—have not been actively involved in international climate policy discussions, have reacted to this challenge in a range of ways. Three broad groups can be distinguished, taking diverse climate policy positions. The first group tends to emphasize the fact of being vulnerable to the climate crisis. These countries, with their minimal emissions per capita, have barely contributed to the problem, and have few resources available that could be deployed to ameliorate its consequences. For this group, the focus is on adaptation and climate financing, whether for adaptation measures or, in the lon-

ger term, as compensation for damages. In the second group, the polluters, the opposite applies: these are countries that through oil and gas exports have themselves made considerable contributions to climate change. To this group belong countries like the Gulf states, which have become rich thanks to the export of fossil fuels, and which have high living standards as well as high per capita emissions. These countries have intermittently tried to obstruct international climate policy. In the meantime, a policy shift has taken place, and they are now trying to diversify their economies, with the help of climate policy measures, for the sake of greater economic stability. Other countries from this group also export oil and gas, but continue to have low standards of living, and on this basis argue that the use of such resources is necessary for their further socio-economic development. Finally, a few states have taken up the role of climate policy trailblazers and strive, despite their own low emissions, to put ambitious climate policies in place—Morocco falls into this group, for example. They also use this role to further their foreign policy, attempting to position themselves as locations for investment in green energy. Additionally, there are numerous countries currently unable to pursue a fully fledged climate policy due to war, civil war, or severe economic crises.

Conflicting interests in the region, including within countries and governments, at times make for contradictory climate policies. This is compounded by the considerable influence exerted by external powers. Most of the region's states are former colonies, and postcolonial dependencies persist both economically and politically. Country-based climate policies are also often shaped by the priorities and interests of international donors. Military and security interests likewise play a significant role, as the region is considered geopolitically important. Finally, in Europe especially, the region is frequently discussed in connection with migration.



Geometric shapes lie across the emptiness of the Sahara Desert in southern Egypt. Each point is a center pivot irrigation field a little less than 1 kilometer across. With no surface water in this region, wells pump underground water to rotating sprinklers from the huge Nubian Sandstone aquifer, which lies underneath the desert.

In contrast to other regions, to date there has been little activism explicitly addressing the climate crisis. Projects dealing with climate change tend to take place in government circles or in the context of development aid. However, many issues that play a role in the political debate—such as access to land or water—are clearly related to global warming but often framed in different terms. In recent years, too, regional social movements have increasingly been taking up the issue. Differing trends can be traced back to the extent to which the respective governments have tolerated or promoted these movements, and to the amount of available knowledge about climate change.

Understanding climate policy in the region requires recognizing the diversity and variety of starting points, and keeping these in mind. Making alliances with local progressive forces will require acknowledging the existence of different debate cultures; in some cases it will be necessary to transcend the concept of climate, in order to connect with political debates that are relevant to the climate crisis even though they are conducted with different keywords. This will avoid a reductionist approach to the causes of the existing problems and crises. Resource conflicts, wars, uprisings, and migration are all complex phenomena, usually involving the convergence of multiple causes. Solely or predominantly attributing such phenomena to global warming risks depoliticizing them and obfuscating political responsibilities. In terms of progressive climate policy, for most

of the poorer states in the region the adaptation to local consequences of global warming plays a greater role than reducing emissions. The expansion of social welfare, systems of social support based on solidarity, and the rollback of neoliberalism can provide frameworks for adaptation that are more effective than technical solutions. The restructuring of existing trade relations, and of the financial and debt systems, are also important prerequisites for enabling any kind of meaningful climate action in the countries of the Global South. Separate from all of these aspects is the concrete question of how to deal with authoritarian regimes that represent their countries in the context of international climate policy. Especially where funding is concerned, social movements from the region have called attention to a vitally important problematic: how can support be designed in such a way that it reaches those affected, and does not prop up repressive apparatuses and authoritarian regimes? Nor is this issue limited to the region. Although particularly salient in the Middle East and North Africa, the same problem presents itself in many other parts of the world. Engaging with countries in the region, and developing proposals for progressive climate policies that are functional under these difficult conditions, can contribute to better ways of dealing with such contradictions and also generate approaches to solutions—not only within the region, but also beyond it.

This Landsat image looks like a bold watercolor. Yellow dances across the darkness with muted violet underneath. With a kind of science-fiction flair, this scene shows a portion of the Qattara Depression in Egypt.

1

1. Introduction

In November 2022, the annual United Nations Climate Change Conference will be held in Egypt for the first time; in the following year, it will take place in the United Arab Emirates. As it stands, in the coming years negotiations on how to deal with climate change will be taking place in a part of the world that, thus far, has barely come to the attention of international climate policy observers and activists: West Asia and North Africa, still mostly referred to as the Middle East and North Africa, or MENA. The region is not an easy one for climate campaigners. Most states are ruled by authoritarian regimes, and social movements that oppose governments are subject to harsh repression. In addition, many environmental policy debates are conducted using completely different terms than those common in Europe. Nor is classifying the region in terms of climate policy simple either, because it is made of up very different states: on the one hand, the rich oil exporters, and on the other hand, states that hardly contribute to climate change

at all, and that due to poverty are ill-equipped to deal with its consequences.

This is not the only reason for the scarcity of studies or publications tackling climate policy in the region. In the media, security and geopolitical issues dominate the conversation about the Middle East and North Africa—migration and terrorism, crises and war—and this is also the case for research and politics. When the focus does get placed on the region’s societies, cultural topics get priority—religion first and foremost.

In the past few years, however, a change has been taking place: in academic research on the Middle East and North Africa, there is increasing interest in the question of how communities treat and shape their natural environment. At the same time, at an international level and in the development sector, the significance of environmental policy has grown since the 1990s. The severity of the effects of climate change has already become obvious: record tempera-

1

IN BRIEF

- » The next two climate conferences are slated to take place in the Middle East and North Africa region: the COP27 in Egypt in November 2022, and in 2023 the COP28 in the United Arab Emirates.
- » To date there have barely been any comparative studies on climate change and climate policy in the region.
- » “Middle East” is a colonial construct. Making observations about the region as a whole can nevertheless prove fruitful: its countries have historical, cultural, and economic commonalities, and climate change presents them all with similar challenges.
- » At the same time, the countries are sharply distinguished in terms of living standards and economic power, as well as presenting wide internal differences—for example, between town and country or between specific sub-regions. Recognizing this diversity is important for understanding climate policy in the region, and in order to avoid sweeping, insufficiently detailed appraisals.

tures, sand storms, heavy rains, and floods are more frequent, while rising sea levels threaten coastal cities and river deltas. The claim that a drought caused by climate change contributed to the outbreak of civil war in Syria was the subject of a serious albeit controversial discussion. However, a simple formula—things are getting hotter and drier—does not encompass the consequences of climate change in the Middle East and North Africa. Global warming is having a variety of effects in the region, depending on location and on who is impacted.

This is likewise valid for climate policy. With the 2015 Paris Agreement, the second binding international climate treaty, the focus of climate policy shifted. Unlike previous treaties, the aim is not only to reduce emissions from the developed world; all states worldwide are now obliged to structure their economies in a more environmentally friendly way. This presents a challenge for many states and stakeholders whose national economies are organized around the export and use of fossil fuels, and who have had to find, or still need to find, their role in this changed climate policy context. The present study aims to document this process, and thereby at least partly close the current gap in climate policy research on the Middle East and North Africa region.

The first question that presents itself is how the region should be defined. The Middle East and North Africa are to a large extent colonial constructs, as the term “Middle East” itself makes clear—the region is neither “middle” nor “east”, except from the perspective of Europe. Still, the term continues to be used as a way of examining the countries of North Africa and West Asia as a bloc. These countries do also share certain common features: the Arabic language, Islam as the dominant religion, a shared history as part of the Ottoman Empire and as European colonies up until independence in the 20th century. Despite their differing levels of prosperity, most of the states in the region

share a similar economic structure and therefore face similar climate policy problems. There is no fixed definition for the Middle East and North Africa. Which states are included depends on the question being posed. In this study, the following countries are examined as part of the region: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.

These countries are totally diverse in terms of economy and standard of living—and as a result, also in terms of their contribution to climate change. The goal of this study is to do justice to this diversity, while still analysing regional climate policy in a comprehensive way. After an overview of the effects of climate change in the region (chapter 2), the countries will be placed into several groups, with particular common qualities and interests with respect to climate change (chapter 3). The analysis first focuses on the level of nation states, for these are the major actors in the UN climate negotiations; further sub-chapters are dedicated to the special regional challenges to climate policy, as well as to climate activism beyond the state. In the last section (chapter 4) the question will be raised as to which emancipatory approaches exist (and could be supported) in this context. How can climate policy in the region be discussed without falling into colonial or orientalist patterns? Which progressive forces or approaches can be discerned, and potentially supported?

The study should thus provide an overview of climate policy in the region for those who have hitherto engaged little with the Middle East and North Africa, as well as facilitating an insight into international climate policy for those who are researching the region—with the hope that the exchange between both groups becomes more intensive, and that treatments of climate change in the region take on a more differentiated form.



Climate Change in the Region

Current State of the Research

A giant whirlpool cloud, coaxed into shape by high-altitude winds, swirls above the sea between Spain and Morocco.

Dealing With Uncertainties and Insufficient Data

What are the effects of climate change on a particular region? Apart from individual studies, the reports of the Intergovernmental

Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) provide an answer to this question. Thousands of scientists worldwide work together for the IPCC. In a multi-year cycle, they sift through all the current research on climate change, summarize it, and publish reports which often run to several thousand pages. The most recent of these appeared in three parts, between August 2021 and April 2022. The current state of research on the impacts of climate change on West Asia and North Africa should therefore be apparent from these reports.

However, this is neither unambiguous nor simple to determine. For one thing, the IPCC reports contain chapters on the regional effects of climate change—yet the Middle East and North Africa is not one of the regions defined by the IPCC. Their analysis takes place roughly by continent: North Africa is part of Africa, and West Asia of Asia. For the first time,

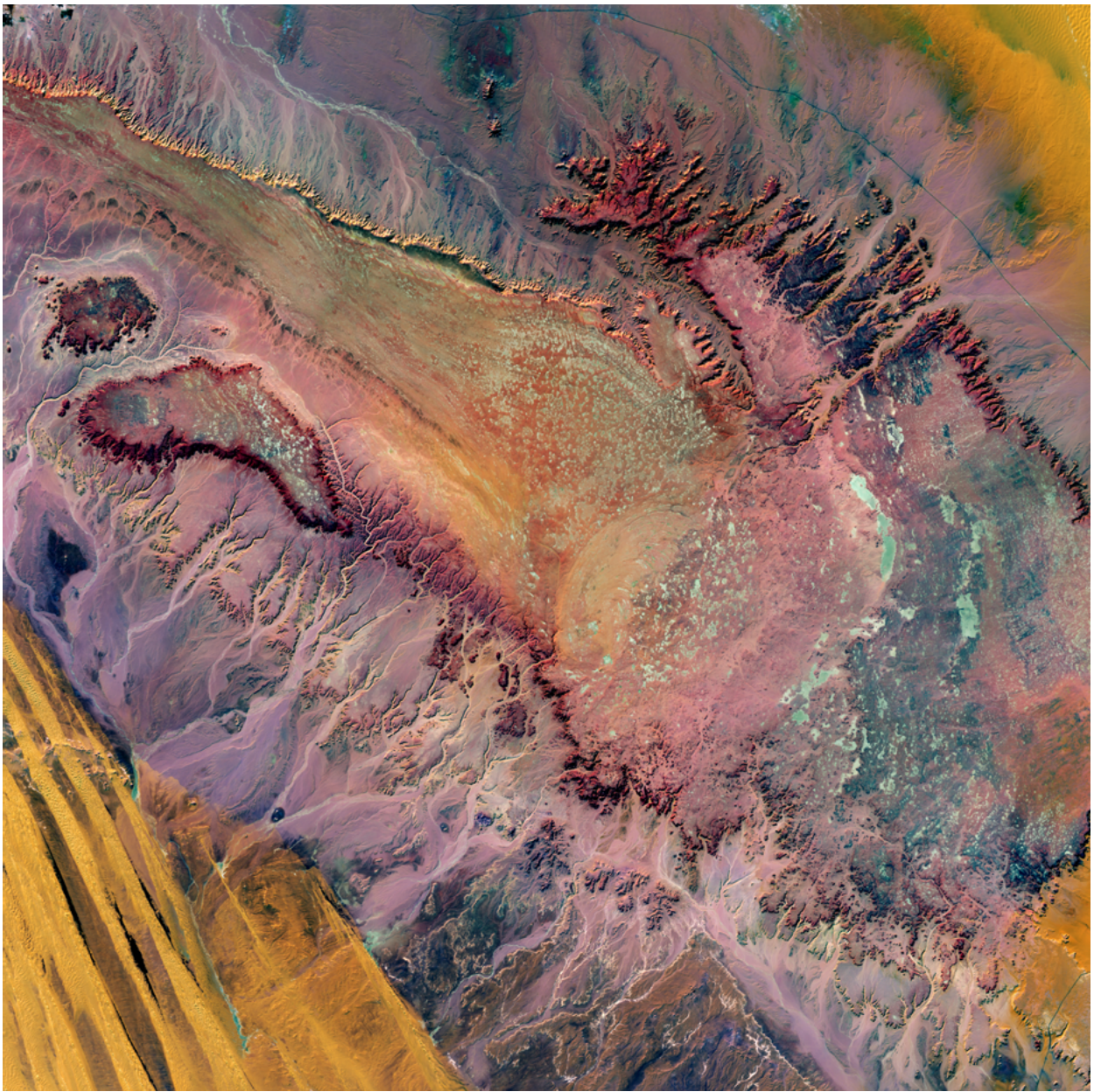
the latest report includes a chapter on the Mediterranean. Detailed statements about how climate change is affecting specific places cannot be made on such a coarse scale.

Such statements also remain difficult to make even when the report goes into more detail about particular countries or areas within the region. Often, there is simply not enough data. For example, in order to ascertain temperature increases as compared to the long-term average, —and to deduce potential further increases—historical data are just as necessary as current measured values. For many countries in the Global South, there are no historical data available. There are also insufficient infrastructure and funding for the regular collection of weather and climate data. This lack is especially glaring in Africa. Although the continent is among the hardest hit by climate change, only 3.8 percent of global climate research funding is allocated for research there—and 78 percent of this amount goes to institutions in North America and Europe (IPCC 2022, chapter 9.1.5).

2

IN BRIEF

- » The reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) summarize the current state of climate change research.
- » For many regions in the Global South, it is difficult to make accurate forecasts, due to a lack of current and historical climate data. Research funding is mainly controlled by institutions in the Global North.
- » Global warming affects different subregions differently. The entire region is getting hotter, especially in summer.
- » Climate researchers anticipate that the area around the Mediterranean will become drier. In the Sahara and in parts of western Asia, the models predict more precipitation. However, this will mainly come in the form of heavy rainfall and may lead to severe flooding. In West Asia, there may be more dust and sand storms due to stronger winds.
- » Summer heat waves are a hazard, especially for the elderly, the sick, and children. More erratic rainfall makes agricultural yields less reliable. Rising sea levels threaten coastal cities and agricultural areas with flooding and salination.
- » Although climate change is having a major impact on the region, it is important to always consider its consequences in conjunction with other aspects. The subsidence of the Nile Delta, the increase in sandstorms in Iran and Iraq, and the endangerment of coastal cities like Alexandria are related to the climate crisis—but also to economic and political decisions, the construction of dams, or the export orientation of agriculture.



In a remote part of the Western Desert in central Egypt, highly eroded plateaus rise from the desert floor. The bright speckles are ancient dry lakes, the salt deposits reflecting brightly. Long ago, water flowed off the plateau, forming the breaches seen on the plateaus' edges, surrounded by extensive sand dunes.

Even with good data, climate models are uncertain. With reference to Africa this uncertainty is even more significant. The authors of the IPCC chapter on Africa point out that, due to the lack of data and the absence of regional climate models, the statements for North or West Africa are closer to rough estimates than precisely determined values. They also warn that low participation by scientists from the region means that research questions and proposed solu-

tions may often reflect the priorities of funders from the Global North rather than local needs (IPCC 2022, chapter 9.1.5). These limitations must be taken into consideration when examining research findings on the impacts of climate change. The future of the region is also beset with uncertainties regarding the eventual effects of climate change—uncertainties that need to be addressed politically in ways that go beyond denial or false positivity.



(Expected) Effects of Climate Change on the Region

In spite of these uncertainties, one thing is sure: climate change can already be felt in the region, and its impacts will only become more pronounced in the future. Average temperatures in the region have increased enormously in the past decades—in North Africa at twice the rate of the global average (IPCC 2022, chapter 9.5.2). Impacts vary by sub-region.

For the Mediterranean area, i.e., those parts of North Africa and West Asia adjacent to the Mediterranean Sea, scientists are assuming that climate zones could shift northward (IPCC 2022, Cross Chapter Paper 4). The hot, dry climate that currently predominates in the Sahara could thus also prevail zones that, for the time being, still have Mediterranean climates, with hot, dry summers and rain in winter. There is already a discernible increase in heat waves, which will become more frequent due to rising temperatures. According to the second part of the 2021 IPCC report, a person born in 2020 will likely experience four to eight times as many heat waves as one born in 1960 (IPCC 2022, chapter 9.5.2.1). To date, precipitation in North Africa has mainly been stable, and the models do not suggest that average rainfall will decrease in the future either. However, significantly higher temperatures and consequently greater evaporation mean that there will be more drought, even with unchanged rainfall (IPCC 2021a, chapter 11).

For the Sahara, into which parts of the MENA region extend, the models predict an increase in precipitati-

on, especially for its southern edge. However, the higher precipitation will likely be due to irregular heavy rainfall events, leading to a higher risk of flooding (IPCC 2021b). At the same time, the models assume decreasing wind speeds in North Africa and the Sahara, which will reduce the risk of sand and dust storms (IPCC 2022, chapter 9.5.2).

For West Asia beyond the Mediterranean coast—the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, and Iraq—the opposite is the case. Here, according to the models, higher wind speeds are to be expected, due to the influence of the Indian Ocean’s systems of currents. Together with the higher temperatures and drier summers, this will result in an increase in sand and dust storms (IPCC 2022, chapter 10.3). The Indian Ocean is warming significantly faster than other oceans. This increases the likelihood of cyclones, which could hit the south coast of the Arabian Peninsula. Overall, the models predict an increase in precipitation for this sub-region, primarily in the winter (Mahmoud 2021). Because wind patterns and rainfall are non-linear, chaotic systems, about which it is difficult to make definitive statements even with good data, these predictions are highly uncertain. On the other hand, it is most certain that snow and ice will diminish in the mountainous zones of this sub-region, and this will especially affect the large, glacier-fed rivers (IPCC 2021a, chapter 9.5).

Effects on the Region

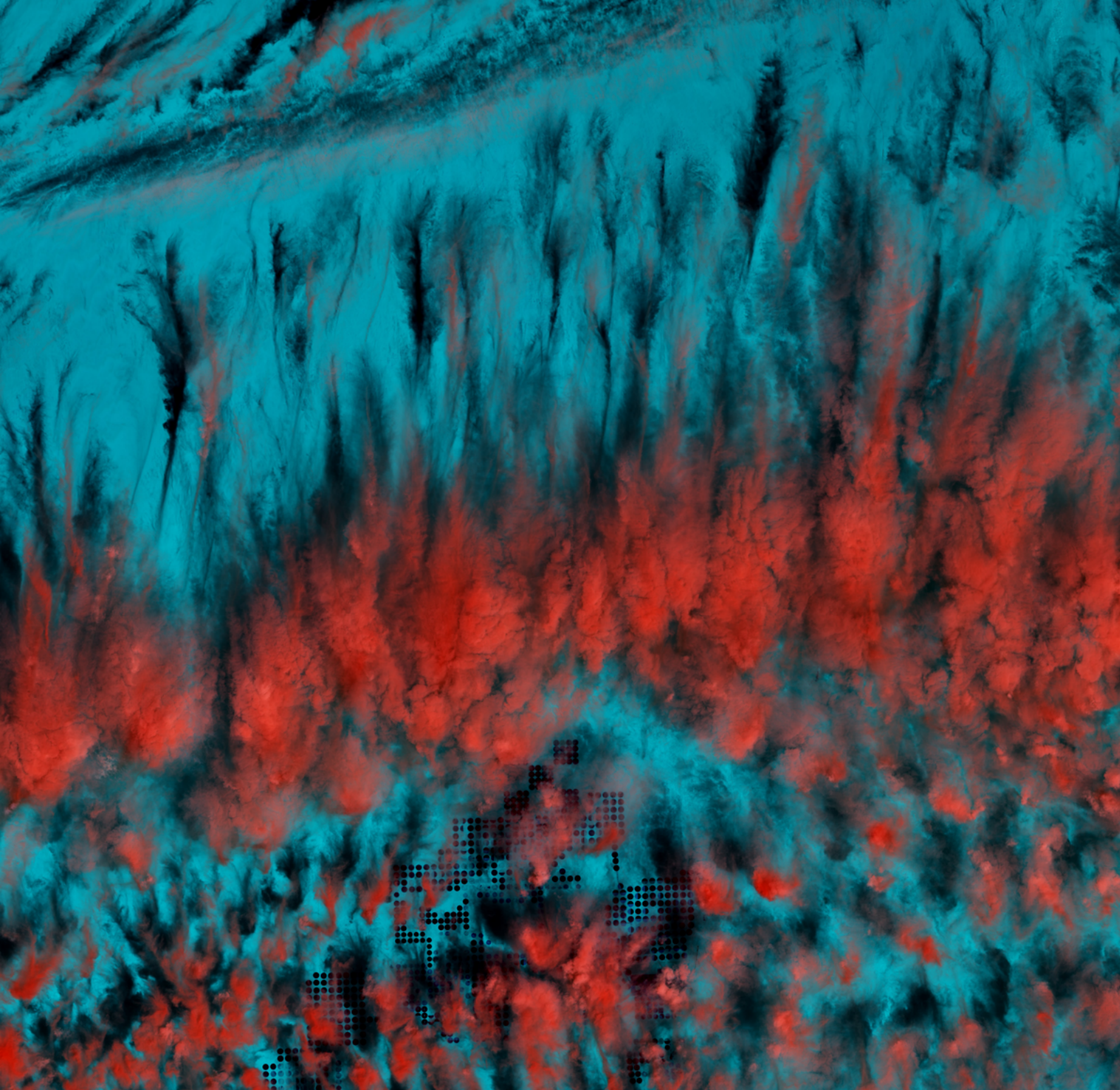
The developments that can already be observed—and which will intensify in future—have wide-ranging impacts on the everyday world and the economy of the affected countries.

The higher temperatures in the summer and the increased frequency of heat waves are a serious danger, above all for older people and the ill, pregnant women, and children. This is especially the case for those populations with limited protection from the heat: those living in informal settlements in cities, for example, and with limited access to electricity and water. Heat waves place an additional burden on energy systems. In hot regions like North Africa and West Asia, the highest use of electricity occurs in summer due to the need for air conditioning and refrigeration. The precarious electrical grid in many countries of the region—e.g. in Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories—often collapses under the increased load. Higher temperatures can also lead to the swifter spread of certain diseases. In Egypt, for example, certain types of mosquitoes could multiply more rapidly in the irrigation canals and spread malaria and other diseases (Sowers 2013, p. 212).

More erratic rainfall and temperatures, and more severe drought, are making agriculture less reliable and can lead to more frequent crop failures. In 2021, for example, half of Egypt's usual olive crop was lost because spring temperatures were too high for the sensitive flowers (Arafat 2021b); the unusually volatile temperatures led to even greater losses in mango crops (Arafat 2021a). The severe impacts climate change is having on agriculture in particular are hurting the region, since in many countries the majority of the workforce is employed in farming. According to

one study, between 1991 and 2010 the economic output of the African continent was more than 13 percent below what it could have been in the absence of global warming (IPCC 2022, chapter 9.6).

Rising sea levels endanger coastal areas and cities in multiple ways: with the threat of floods, particularly during storms; with increased erosion; and with salinisation—if seawater increasingly mixes with groundwater, the latter can no longer be used for drinking or irrigation. Rising sea levels cannot be halted. Even if all emissions of greenhouse gases were to cease immediately, sea levels would long continue to rise, and it will take hundreds or thousands of years for them to descend again. Around a third of the region's population lives in areas that are directly affected by rising sea levels. Along the coast of the Mediterranean and of the Indian Ocean there are numerous cities with a million or more inhabitants, such as Tripoli, Alexandria, and Beirut, as well as the newly established Gulf metropolises like Dubai and Abu Dhabi. For the Arabian Peninsula, rising temperatures are predicted to result in more wind and hence more frequent storms, which may threaten structures constructed in the water, such as Dubai's sand islands; in the long term, these may only be maintainable at great expense and with permanent protective measures. The authors of the IPCC draw a gloomy picture for the future of many cities of the southern Mediterranean. The measures that would be necessary to protect these cities in the event of a sharper rise in sea levels are so extensive that hardly any country in the region would be capable of implementing them alone (IPCC 2022, Cross Chapter Paper 4, FAQ 2).



These cloud patterns cast eerie shadows on the landscape of southern Egypt. The clouds appear red and the desert below hazy blue in this infrared rendition.

Causes and Adaptation—Climate Change in Context

The very example of rising sea levels also shows how it is impossible to understand climate change in isolation. The consequences of man-made climate change are intertwined with a plethora of political and economic decisions that can amplify or mitigate them. The specific impacts can only be understood in the context of specific circumstances. Three case studies from the region illustrate this point.

Floods and Salination

the Nile Delta



It is easy to see from this image why people have been drawn to the Nile River in Egypt for thousands of years. Green farmland marks a distinct boundary between the fertile Nile floodplain and the surrounding desert.




The Nile Delta, one of Egypt's most densely populated and most important agricultural areas, is heavily impacted by erosion and salination, and is often presented as a prominent example of the consequences of climate change. Precisely in the case of the Nile Delta, however, these effects cannot be solely attributed to climate change, since they have been present for decades. More and more dams have been built along the Nile, the first as early as the 19th century, and the largest to date, the Aswan Dam, between 1960 and 1971. These have disturbed the natural sediment deposits which—for thousands of years with every flood—developed along the river and into its estuary, thereby ensuring that the latter extended far out to sea. Today, despite protective measures, the delta continues to recede. At the same time, the land is sinking due to the extraction of groundwater for irrigation purposes; in some places the land is already below sea level. At the same time, the Nile is a highly sensitive—and highly political—issue, because of Egypt's dependence on water from the river. Current climate models assume with a two-thirds probability that the expected heavier rainfall in the Ethiopian highlands will increase the flow of the Nile. The Egyptian government and Egyptian scientists, however, tend to play up the aspect of uncertainty, and at an international level warn that climate change decrease the amount of water. The reasons for this are less scientific than political, as Barnes (2016) has shown. Egypt does not see the greatest threat to its water supply in climate change, but rather in Ethiopia's construction of the immense Renaissance Dam. Climate change is thus only one aspect of the international conflict over which of the Nile states is entitled to what amount of water from the river.



Dust Storms

Iraq and Iran



Higher temperatures can lead to more frequent droughts, affecting agriculture. The adaptation of agriculture to rising temperatures is often cited as one of the most important measures needed to make societies more resilient against the climate crisis. Currently, however, the agriculture practiced in the region is chiefly of the type that exhausts water supplies and causes droughts. Since the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, the agricultural sector in the southern Mediterranean has been oriented towards exports to the EU: meaning the intensive farming of fruit and vegetables with heavy water consumption. Saudi Arabia launched an ambitious program in the late 1990s aimed at achieving grain self-sufficiency, and began intensively cultivating these crops. This even turned the country into an exporter of wheat, but also used up so much groundwater that today the country's supplies have been largely depleted and drinking water has to be obtained through energy-intensive desalination techniques.

The case is similar for the problem of sand and dust storms in Iran and Iraq. These will probably be intensified by the stronger winds and drier summers predicted by the climate models. Yet the problem is also bound up with an overuse of natural resources that has been going on for decades. Due to the extraction of water for intensive farming and the construction of large reservoirs—from which a great deal of water evaporates in the hot summers—the once fertile areas around the Euphrates and Tigris rivers have been more and more parched in recent decades (Cooke 2017). Large swamp areas like those in Iraq, which played an important role in the region's water regulation, were drained for political reasons, as they were considered safe havens for insurgents (Husain 2014; Nicholson and Clark 2002). Also, poor air quality in many cities in Iraq and Iran is provoking health problems, especially among children. Whether the situation improves in the future depends on whether the climate can be successfully stabilized, and at the same time on whether agricultural practices and the use of land are altered.

In an area north of the city of Al-Basrah, Iraq, which borders Iran, a former wetland has been drained and walled off. Now littered with minefields and gun emplacements, it is a staging area for military exercises.

Sinking Cities

Alexandria

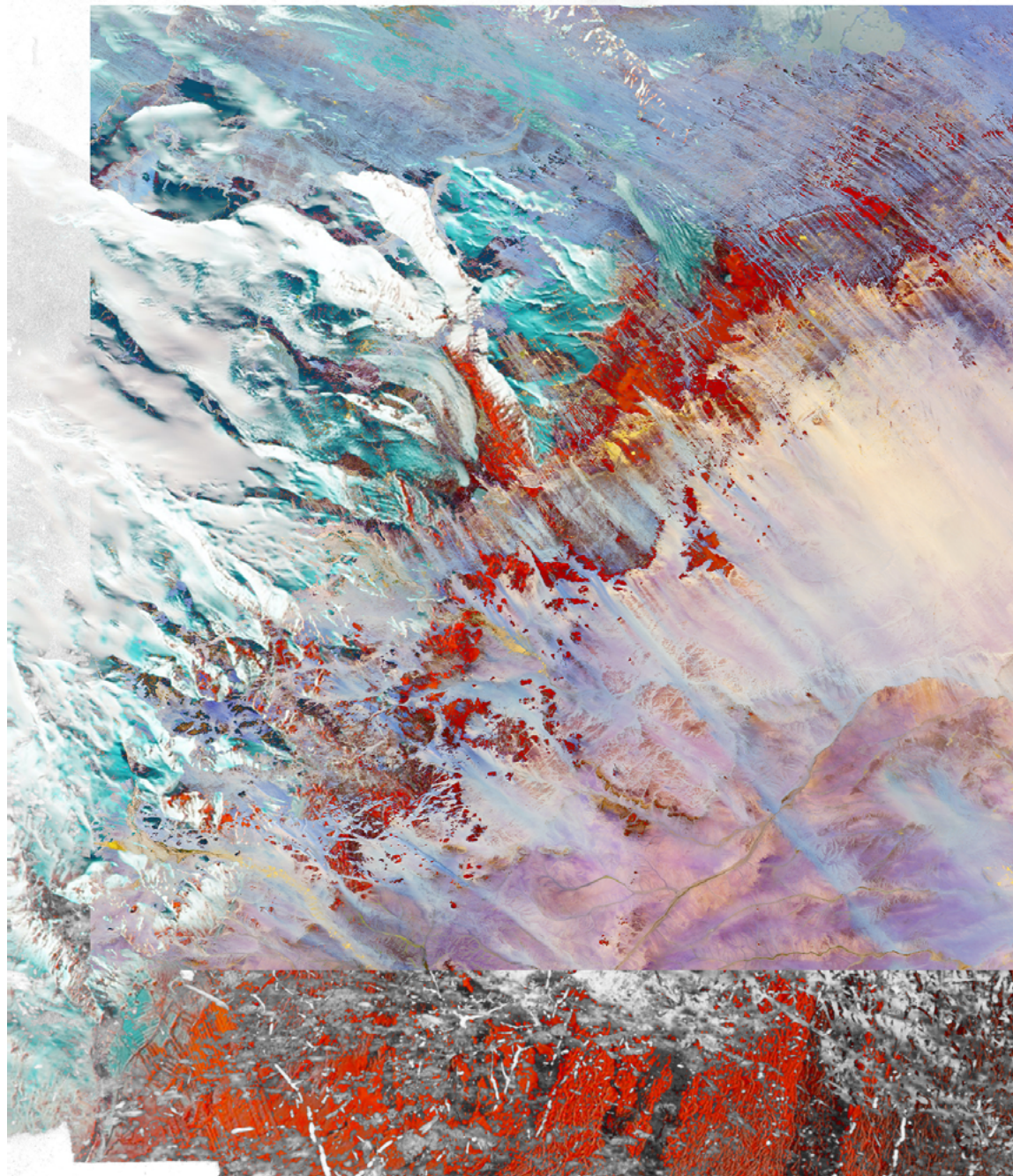


The Egyptian city of Alexandria, located on the western edge of the fertile Nile Delta, which is crisscrossed by numerous canals and waterways.



How closely the effects of climate change are tied up with political questions is also shown by the example of the Egyptian city Alexandria, sometimes pointed to as the city most endangered by climate change worldwide. Located on the edge of the Nile Delta, Alexandria has battled against the sea since its foundation, and repeated floods and destructions form part of the city's history. In the winter of 2015 there was severe flooding, and at least seven people died. In recent years, multiple buildings close to the water have collapsed—a result of rising sea levels and ground subsidence, but also brought about by low-quality materials, construction industry corruption, and poor city planning. In 2018, the government evicted large parts of the neighbourhood known as El Max, an informal settlement of fishermen families along a 19th-century canal. Among other things, the neighbourhood is famous (notorious) as a setting for gangster films. The neighbourhood is below sea level. Flooding occurred repeatedly when, due to heavy rainfall, the pumps that regulate the canal's water level were overloaded or failed. The government justified the evictions on the basis of the threat posed by rising sea levels. Some residents defended themselves against eviction and resettlement to newly constructed zones further away from the water. They saw the eviction as an outgrowth of the state's programme of clearing slums, which it considers a hotbed of social unrest (Michaelson 2018).

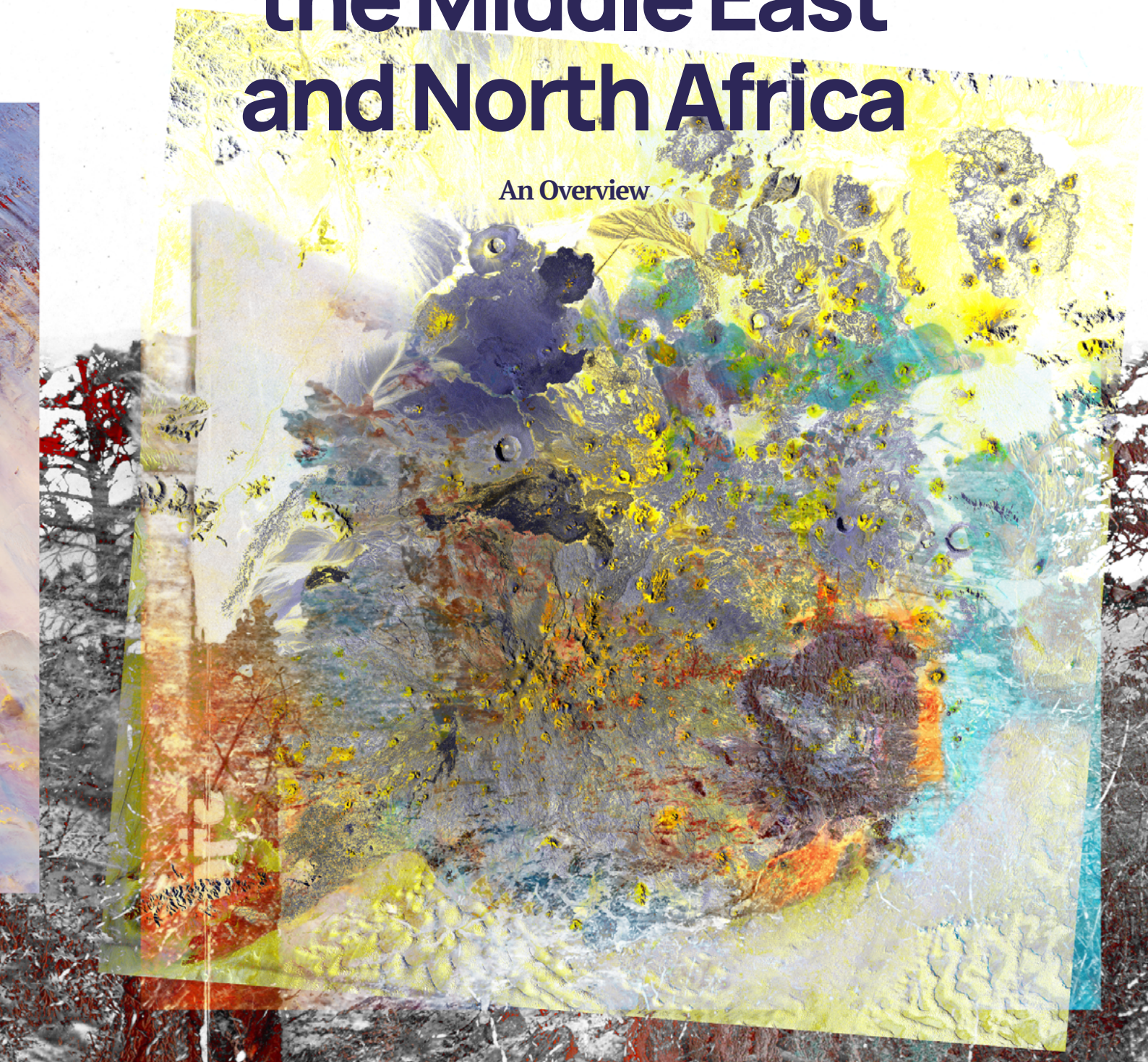
All of these examples show the close interweaving of the consequences of climate change with the overall direction of the economy, with political questions, and with everyday practices. This makes it in part more difficult to allocate definitive responsibilities. But it also shows paths towards more successful adaptation. Measures like rolling back neoliberal structures, promoting functioning social support systems and safeguards, and focusing on resilience—as well reflecting more fundamentally on the character of the economic and development systems—cannot avert the consequences of climate change, but they can significantly reduce their severity.



3

Climate Policy in the Middle East and North Africa

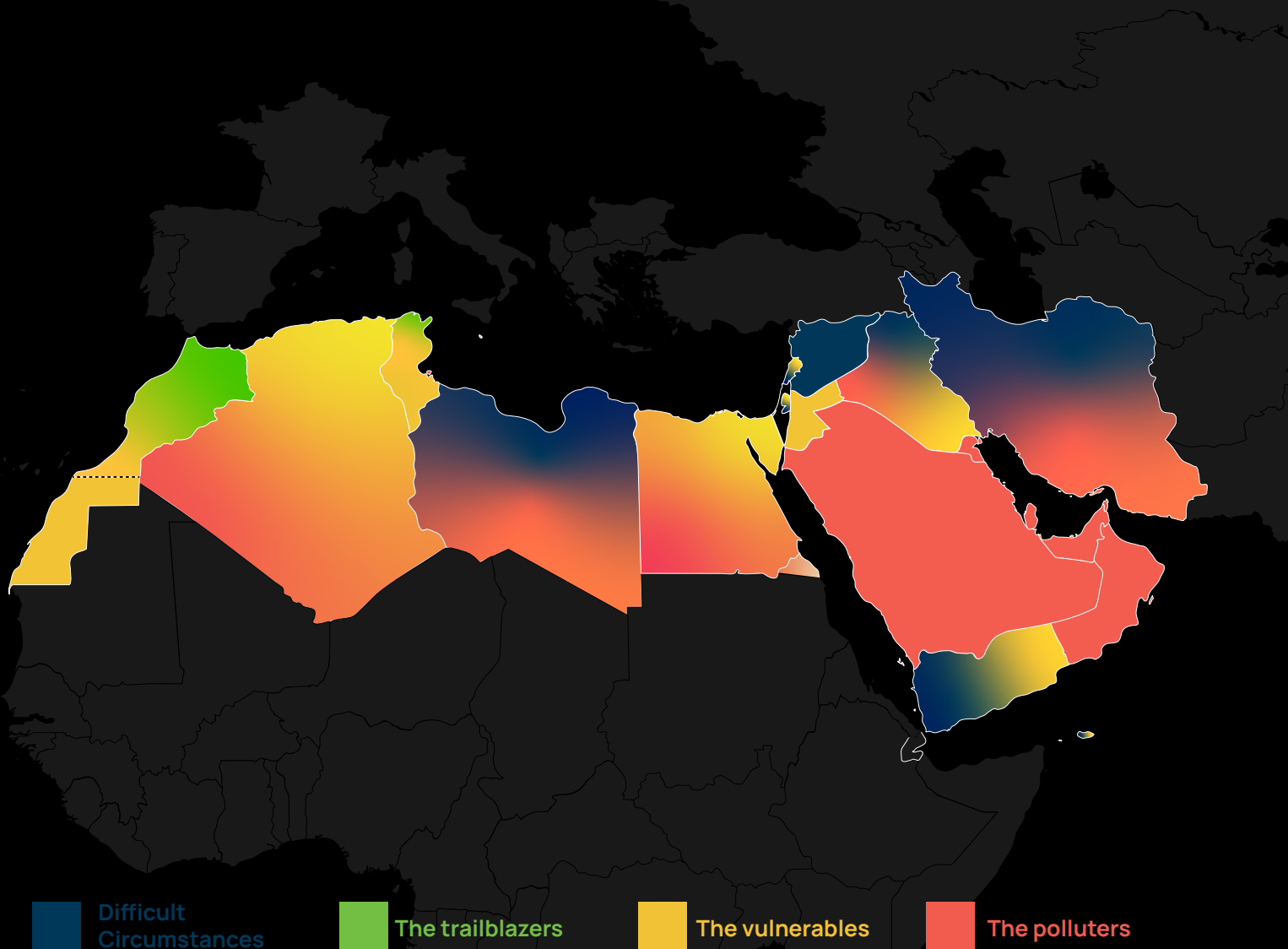
An Overview



In 1992, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was launched at the United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. This convention still provides the framework for international climate policy today. The member states meet at least twice a year—once in early summer in Bonn, where the headquarters are located, and once at the end of the year for the major climate conference, the Conference of Parties (COP), at a different location each year.

At the climate conference in Kyoto in 1997, a legally binding climate agreement was adopted for the first time: the Kyoto Protocol, valid from 2012 to 2020. Since the countries of the Global South have historically contributed little to climate change, the UNFCCC distinguishes between two groups: the in-

dustrialized countries, listed in Annex I of the convention and therefore referred to as the Annex I countries, and the remaining countries, the non-Annex I countries, most of which are in the Global South. The Kyoto Protocol stipulated that only industrialized countries should reduce their emissions, while countries in the Global South were exempt. This changed when a new climate treaty was adopted in 2015 for the period beginning in 2020: the Paris Agreement. Unlike the Kyoto Protocol, the Paris Agreement includes all countries worldwide. Since then, countries in the Global South have also been obliged to draw up national climate plans, known as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), and to report regularly on the progress of their implementation.



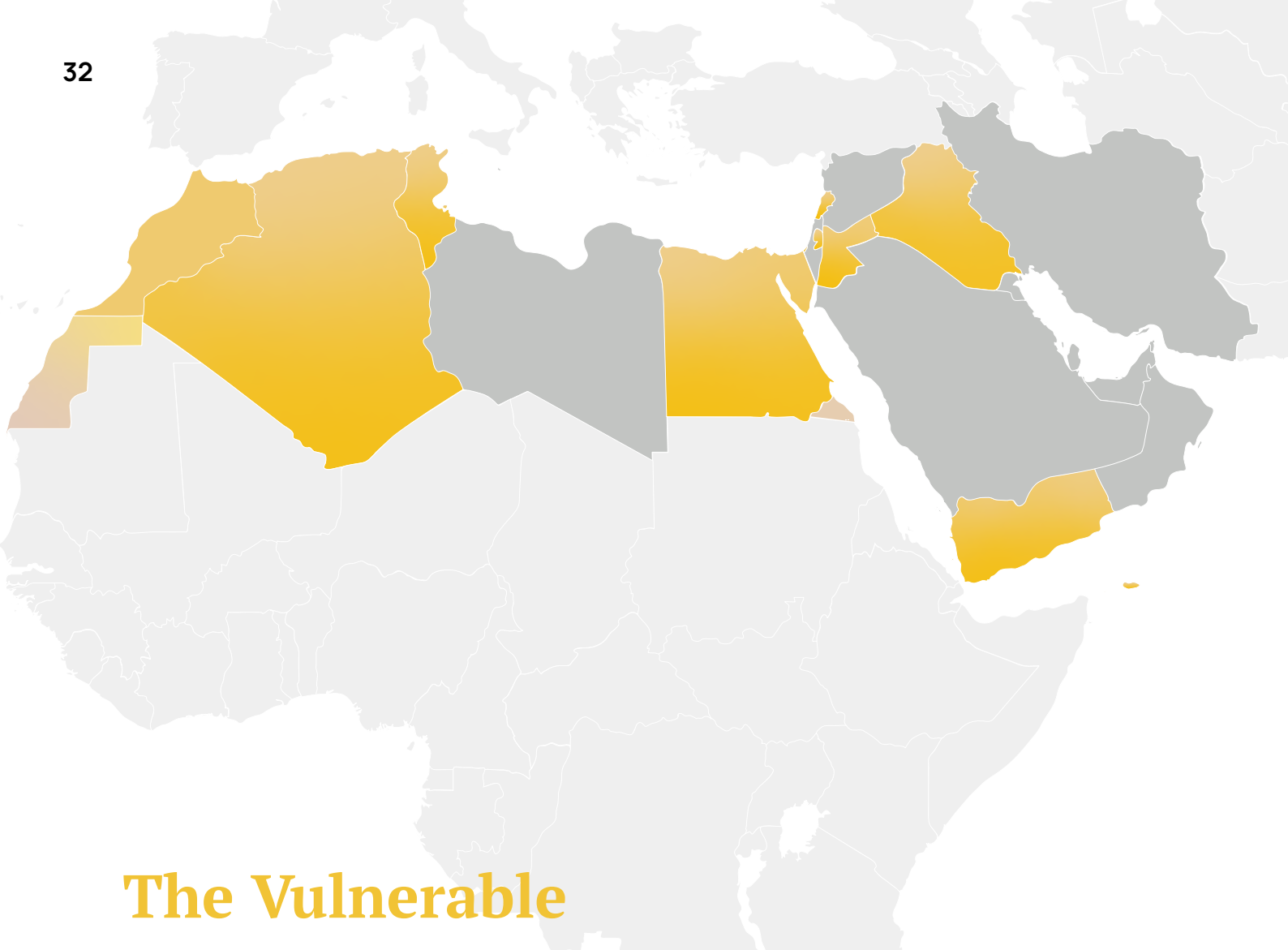
The Region and International Climate Policy

The countries in the region under discussion all belong to the group of non-Annex I countries, and have thus only been obliged to reduce their emissions since the Paris Agreement came into force. But international climate policy also played a significant role in the climate policy of these countries prior to the Agreement. The topic of climate change was predominantly introduced through international organizations—the Framework Convention, as well as organizations like the World Bank—and via regional development aid. These actors continue to dominate regional climate policy (see Chapter 3.c). In economic and finance policy matters, climate increasingly plays a role too: for example, the EU is planning to introduce a CO₂ import tax, the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, in 2026, which would have a strong impact on its southern neighbours, who do much of their trading with the EU. International investors and funds also increasingly make investment decisions on the basis of climate and environmental criteria. The latest energy price spike consequent on the invasion of Ukraine has certainly shifted the political background conditions, but has also strengthened the region's role as a potential supplier of green energy, especially to the EU.

These new general conditions posed a challenge. Previously, countries in the region had barely participated actively in international climate policy,

or had even tried to obstruct it. In view of the new rules of the Paris Agreement and the increasingly noticeable effects of global warming, many governments have reconsidered their approach to the issue of climate change, and tried to find their role in the system of international climate policy.

However, because the region is very heterogeneous, the approaches to these issues differ widely, and depend on the countries' economic structures and on how they are affected by climate change. A rough distinction between three roles can be made in terms of how countries in the region deal with the challenges posed by climate change and international climate policy. First, some states emphasize their vulnerability to climate change. Second, there are the states that, as exporters of fossil fuels and contributors to climate change, attempt to shape climate policy and mitigate its impact on their own economies. The third group consists of states that seek to benefit from the new framework by being trailblazers in green development. These three approaches are not mutually exclusive. Some countries are pursuing two strategies simultaneously; in other countries, different factions within government or national policy have different goals with regard to climate change. Finally, there are a number of countries whose political or economic situation scarcely allows them to pursue a climate policy at all. These belong to a fourth group.




The Vulnerable

As shown in Chapter 2, all countries of the region are already suffering from the effects of global warming and will do so even more acutely in future. Still, a group of countries can be distinguished where the effects of climate change are the main issue, rather than their contribution to its causes. These countries have a few points in common:

- they have low greenhouse gas emissions per capita and barely contribute to the causes of global warming;
- due to their geographic location and/or economic structure, they are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of global warming, and
- they have little economic power, and hence a low capacity to ameliorate or adapt to these consequences.

The following states can be counted as part of this group: Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Yemen; with some limitations, Iraq and Algeria could be added to this group as well.

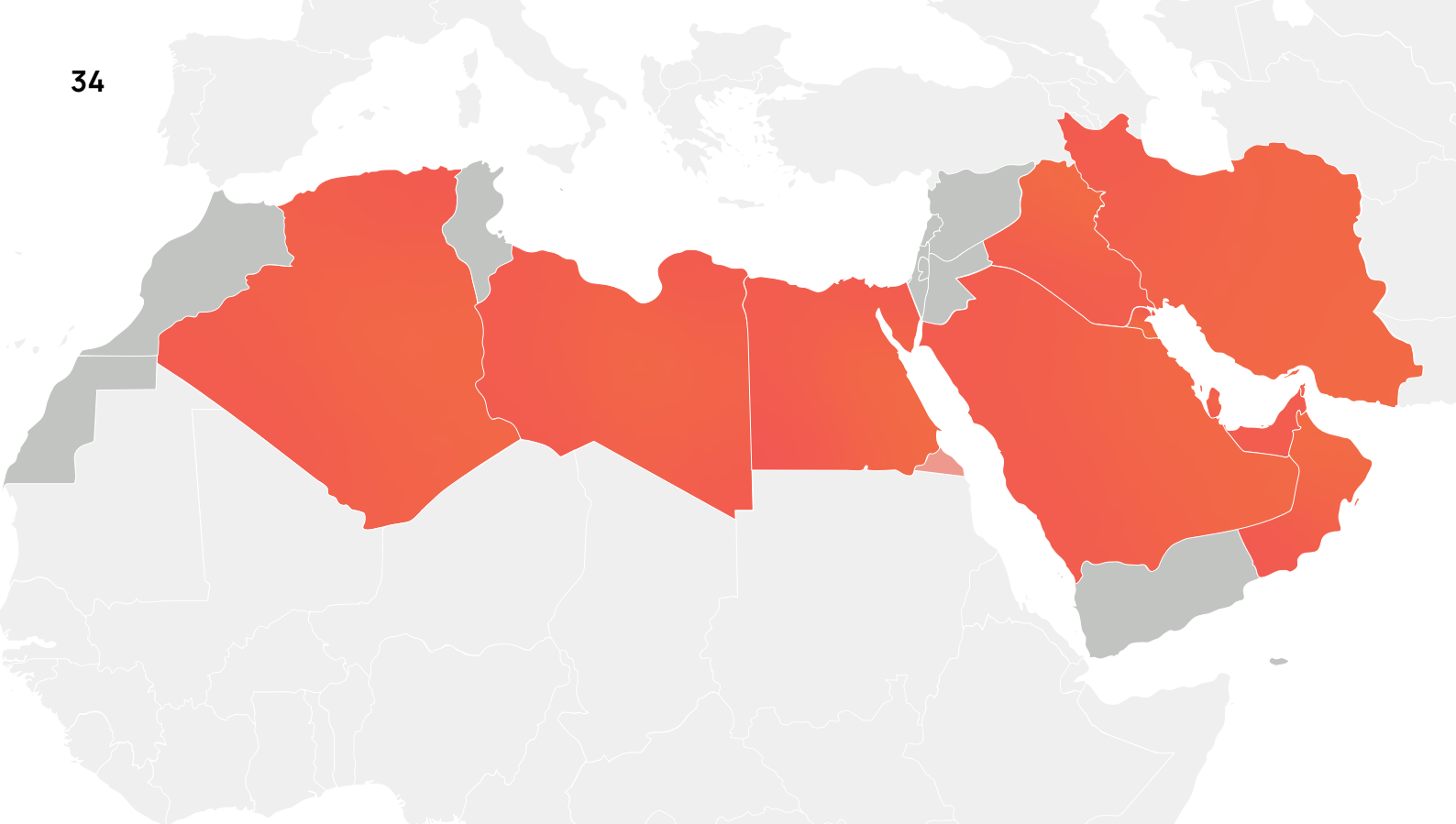
In all of these states, the per capita greenhouse gas emissions are below or close to the global average of around 4.9 tonnes CO₂ per year. In Morocco, for instance, per capita emissions barely reached two tonnes in 2019; in Tunisia this amount was 2.6 tonnes. In Algeria too, per capita emissions were 4.1 tonnes, and in Iraq 5.1 tonnes. These countries thus contribute proportionally little to the causes of global warming. At the same time, the countries in this group are extremely fragile. States with limited economic power, they have few resources to finance adaptation measures or to cushion themselves against crises brought on by climate change. Their infrastructure, such as electricity and water supply, is also often in a dire state, making adaptation to climate change and crisis response in the case of extreme events more difficult. Additionally, almost all countries in this group rely on food imports. Thus, climate-related crop failures or logistical



problems in other parts of the world affect them as well, as these phenomena increase food prices on the world market. In most cases, the governments of these countries subsidize basic foodstuffs because a large portion of the population depends on them. Governments are reluctant to cut subsidies or reduce import volumes, for fear of revolts prompted by hunger. Climate-induced price increases therefore mean either a worsening of the population's nutritional situation and/or an increase in national debt.

For these countries with low emissions and high vulnerability, adapting to the consequences of global warming is much more important than reducing the emission of greenhouse gases. Up until a few years

ago, international climate policy had focused on reducing emissions; the topic of adaptation and the provision of support for adaptation measures have grown in importance only very recently. Within the UN, all of these countries belong to the Group of 77 and China. Formed in 1964, this body currently includes 134 member states, and primarily represents the concerns of the countries of the Global South. The Group of 77 and China advocates boosting the issue of adaptation in international climate policy, as well as establishing a separate institution to regulate the handling of permanent damage and losses caused by climate change—which could also mean compensation payments in the long term.



The Polluters

This group includes states that, through the export of oil and gas, as well as partly through high per capita emissions, themselves significantly contribute to the causes of climate change. The economies of these countries also significantly depend on oil and gas exports, and would thus be impacted by a strict climate policy that constrained the use of these resources.

These states can be divided into two sub-groups. To the first belong the Gulf Cooperation Council states—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar—and Libya. Oil and gas exports made these countries rich, and their citizens enjoy a higher standard of living than those of other countries of the region. Thanks to this prosperity, and considerable state subsidies (energy is free in many of the Gulf states), per capita emissions are significantly higher than the global average. Qatar, with 35 tonnes per year, and the United Arab Emirates and

Bahrain, with around 20 tonnes per year, belong to the countries with the highest per capita greenhouse gas emissions worldwide. These countries are also heavily affected by climate change, yet the impacts of climate policy—especially a possible reduction in the use of fossil fuels—are of greater concern, as they fear losing their most important source of income. Saudi Arabia, the largest economy in the region and the biggest exporter of oil globally, has for many years worked at obstructing international climate policy. It tried up until the very end to thwart the Kyoto Protocol; it has repeatedly emphasized the existing uncertainties regarding man-made climate change during the ratification of IPCC reports; and at times it formed part of a group of states, along with Bahrain, that were demanding compensation for the effects of international climate policy.

This began to change from the mid-2000s. Both Saudi

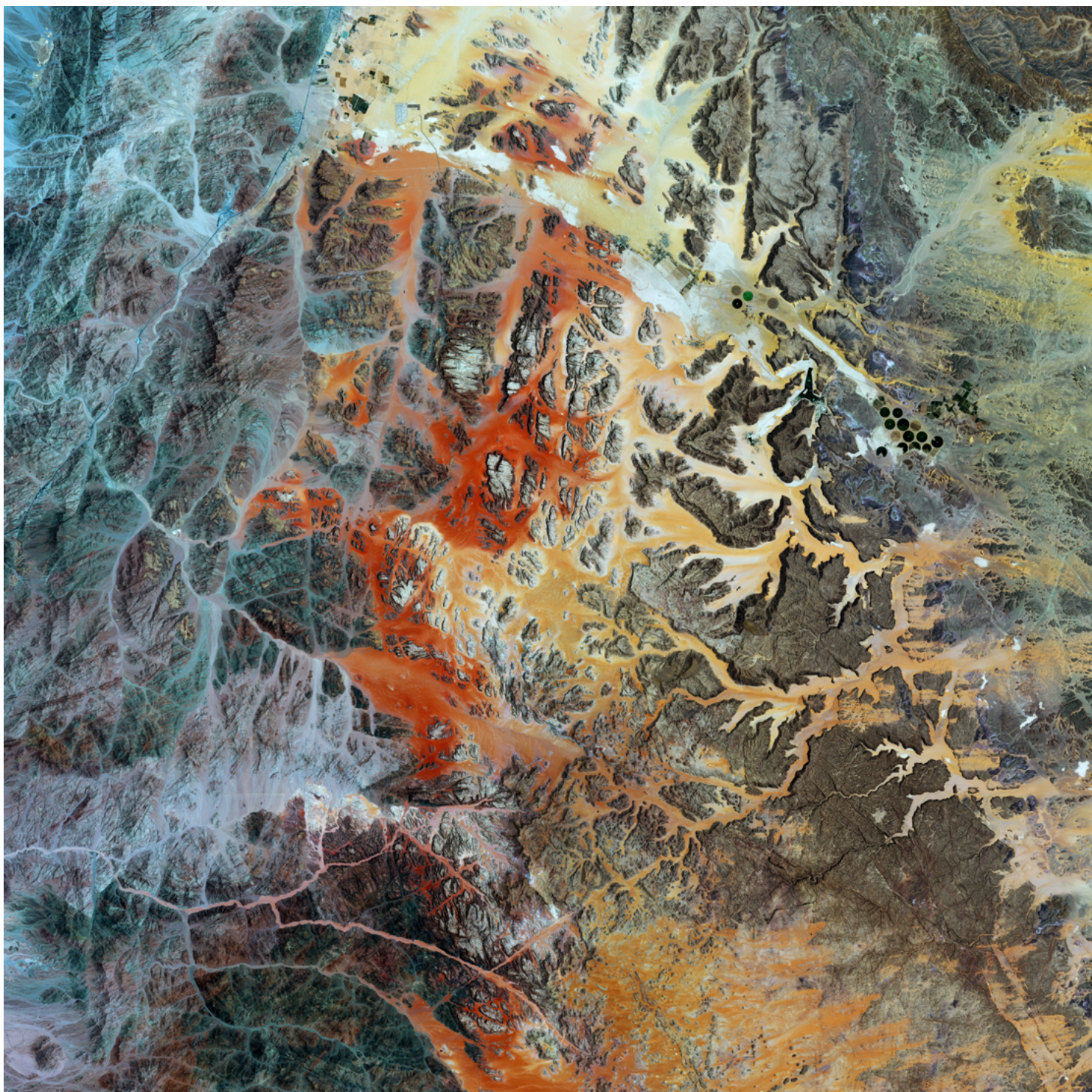
Arabia and the United Arab Emirates tried to establish a new role for themselves and shifted towards a more constructive climate policy. The background for this had to do with both internal and external politics. Important trading partners like the EU, China, and India were increasingly orienting their markets towards e-mobility and more climate-friendly energy, forcing the oil states to consider alternatives for the future. Energy consumption in the oil states had also sharply increased over the years, and was using up resources which were needed to maintain exports. However, the main reason for the change of orientation was these countries' almost total reliance on the export of oil and gas, which increasingly made their budgets depend on the shifting prices on the world market, causing repeated crises. For decades, the Gulf states have been invoking the goal of diversifying their economies and of establishing sources of income beyond the export of raw materials. The low oil prices caused by the global financial crisis lent weight to this plan. Since then, city states such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi have been trying to turn themselves into international transportation hubs and service centres. Saudi Arabia also initiated a process of transformation. Its Vision 2030, published in 2016, aims for a "more diverse and sustainable economy." This is meant to be achieved through, among other things, the further development of economic branches beyond oil—transport and tourism, for example. Central to this, too, is the idea of a "circular carbon economy", which will supposedly be reached through the expansion of renewable energies, and through new technologies and mechanisms like Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS). Since 2018, the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council have begun introducing value-added tax, with the aim of implementing a unified VAT system across the six states; in 2020 Saudi Arabia raised its tax to 15 percent. These attempts to reorient their economies away from oil presented opportuni-

ties to conform to the requirements of international climate policy, and were accompanied by attempts to improve these states' international reputations as respectable negotiating partners. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates courted the role of "green trailblazers", at least rhetorically—for example, through the planned or initiated construction of climate-neutral and environmentally friendly model cities like Neom and Masdar City. In 2009, Abu Dhabi won the bid to host the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), and Qatar successfully bid to host the 2012 climate conference. After the Saudi Arabian oil minister's declaration that climate change was one of the "most urgent problems facing humanity", the negotiators they sent to the international climate talks, previously known to be hard-liners, were replaced by more moderate negotiators (Michaelowa and Luomi 2012). To what extent this altered role is merely rhetorical remains to be seen. To date, renewables account for less than one percent of the energy produced in Saudi Arabia. The Gulf states have no shortage of resources to finance the expansion of renewable energies—all the more so since oil and gas prices have risen to record levels as a result of the war in Ukraine. The issue, then, is more to do with political structures: oil revenues are strongly linked to political power, which would be redistributed by a restructuring of the economy. In very practical terms, there is presently a lack of a concrete plan and practical experience in terms of how such a restructuring of the economy could take place.

Things look different in the second sub-group of states. The group of contributors to the causes of climate change includes, although in a more restricted manner, other states from the region, such as Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, and Iran. In the case of these countries too, the export of fossil fuels makes up an essential portion of national income, albeit not to the same extent as in the Gulf Cooperation Council states or

Libya. Yet this second sub-group is made up of states that have low-level emissions and are struggling with widespread poverty, high unemployment, and debt. Even though they partly fall within the first group of countries, which are also highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, the countries of the second sub-group have a major interest in maintaining the use of oil and gas, and the possibility of exporting these. Algeria, for example, has so far steered clear of involvement in international climate policy. In Egypt

and off the Egyptian coast, more and more gas fields have been discovered since the end of the 1990s. While the country emphasizes its vulnerability to climate change on the one hand, at the same time it is pursuing plans to greatly expand gas production, both for domestic use and for export. These plans have become even more important since the invasion of Ukraine, and the associated surge in gas prices has placed the country in a comfortable negotiating position.



In this region, called the Valley of the Moon in Jordan, steep-sided granite mountains alternate with sandy valleys. An intriguing interruption of those textures is provided by a few center pivot irrigation fields.



The Trailblazers

There are few countries in the region that adopt a trailblazing role in climate policy. Morocco in particular: despite having only caused very low emissions, the country has pursued an ambitious climate policy since the 1990s, and in comparative evaluations of climate policy it is regularly ranked among the top countries. It is one of the few countries globally whose climate plan aims at a goal that could limit global warming to below 1.5° Celsius, and stays within the bounds of the country's "fair share"—i.e., its historically equitable share of energy resource use (Climate Action Tracker 2022). The entire region of West Asia and North Africa is extremely well-situated for the supply of renewable energy, especially solar and wind. Even though international organizations and development institutions repeatedly emphasize this, and subsidize the construction of individual facilities, in most countries of the region renewable energy plays a limited role. Morocco is one of the few

exceptions: since the 2000s, Morocco has built out its solar and wind capacities, from less than 1000 terajoules in 2006 to over 32,000 terajoules in 2019 (IEA 2021). The goal of Morocco's 2009 National Energy Strategy was that by 2020, total capacity from renewables would cover 42 percent of its total electricity production. The goal for 2030 is 52 percent. These goals were also incorporated into the National Climate Plans. According to Morocco's National Electricity and Water Agency (ONEE), in 2018 the installed capacity of renewable energy sources, such as wind and hydro, was at 34 percent. The majority of generated electricity, and an even larger portion of total energy, continues to come from fossil fuels, but Morocco still sees itself as a regional role model and is striving for further rapid development of renewable energy. The solar thermal project originally planned as Desertec, near the Moroccan city of Ouarzazate, was taken over by the Moroccan state agency for renewable ener-

gies (Masen) after international investors withdrew. Other similar projects are currently in planning or under construction. In recent years Morocco has also greatly expanded public transport, including projects like the renewal of tram networks in Rabat and Casablanca, as well as high speed train lines between the large cities. The country has organized multiple climate conferences; it is a member of the Africa Group in the UNFCCC, and acted as speaker for the group in the 2016 climate conference. The country presents itself as a location for investment in green energy, and increasingly uses its role as “green leader” to pursue foreign policy agendas—in the conflict over the Western Sahara, or with Spain. Morocco’s trailblazing role is often put down to the fact that the country has no oil or gas reserves of its own, and has to import over 90 percent of its fossil fuels. But the orientation also stems from the initiative of King Mohamed VI, who has championed environmental concerns since the 1990s.

Tunisia has also recently turned in a more climate-friendly direction, albeit in a different manner. As the only country to emerge from the Arab Spring uprisings with a democracy, from the beginning of the 2010s Tunisia has been implementing new and more participatory approaches to environmental policy under its new government. Tunisia has oil and gas reserves, but these are too small to cover its own needs. With international assistance, the country attempted to build on earlier plans and expand renewable energies. These were to cover one third of Tunisia’s energy needs by 2030. However, these plans were linked with a problematic privatization policy, and the energy transformation is now largely at a standstill. With the recent political crisis, this process has ground to a halt. Since the declaration of a state of emergency and president Kais Saied’s dissolution of parliament in 2021, the direction of the country’s future development is unclear—including with respect to climate policy.

This scar on an arid landscape is the dry riverbed of the Ghadamis River in the Tinrhert Hamada Mountains in Algeria, near the Libyan town of Ghadamis.





Difficult Circumstances

Civil War and Economic Crisis

In a number of states in the region, political or economic conditions prevail that render an active climate policy virtually impossible. This includes Syria, Yemen, and Libya—all states where there is ongoing civil war is continuing, and where it has repeatedly been unclear which among the contending factions holds a legitimate mandate to represent the country in the context of international negotiations. Lebanon has been in profound economic crisis since 2019. Electricity and water supplies in large parts of the country are very limited or non-existent, food prices have risen by 500 percent, and there is limited access to foreign currency. Things look similar in Iraq. Broad social mobilizations for political reform, and for bringing to justice those responsible for massive corruption and mismanagement, have so far been unsuccessful. The Palestinian territories are in an unusual political situation given the limitations on their territorial sovereignty—for example, for military rea-

sons, Palestinian scientists do not receive certain data from aerial photographs or from measuring stations—and the government's capacity to act is constrained by the ongoing conflicts, scant resources, and power struggles within the government itself. Western governments imposed further extensive economic sanctions on Iran in 2018. Climate policy in that country has in large part come to a halt since then, and renewable energy projects were stopped due to the sanctions. Iran's planned ratification of the Paris Agreement has not taken place, and the last declaration it submitted to the UNFCCC called for a doubling of emissions by 2030 relative to 2010 levels, instead of a reduction (Islamic Republic of Iran 2017). This, however, should rather be seen as a political gesture than a serious plan—of late, the country's emissions have fallen due to the economic crisis and the pandemic, despite its abundant fossil fuel reserves.

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IN BRIEF

- » Climate policy has recently become more significant in the region: following the 2015 Paris Agreement, there has been a change of focus in climate policy. All states, including those in the Global South, are now required to draw up climate plans and show how they intend to cut emissions. At the same time, climate policy has been playing an increasing role economically: as an area for financial investment or due to important markets, such as the EU, planning to implement particular conditions for the import of goods.
- » The countries of the region can be divided into three groups based on their position around climate policy. Each group tends to foreground different aspects of the issues involved.
- » The vulnerable group has low per capita emissions and fewer resources. For them, the focus is on adaptation and the need for funds for climate protection or as compensation for climate damage.
- » The polluter group is made up of fossil fuel exporters. These countries often tried to put the brakes on international climate policy, but are now trying to use the latter to further the diversification of their economies (including for reasons unrelated to climate change).
- » A few states are trying to make gains in foreign policy as climate policy trailblazers, compensating for a lack of fossil fuels by focusing on green energy.
- » A number of states fall into more than one group. These conflicting interests, even within countries or governments, further complicate climate policy in the region. A whole group of countries can also hardly pursue an independent climate policy at present due to war, civil war, or severe economic crises.
- » Three other factors have a strong impact on climate policy in the region: most states are former colonies of Western countries, and economic and political dependencies persist. The region is considered geostrategically important and is therefore the scene of conflicting interests, including military and strategic. Its location on the EU's southern and eastern borders means that climate issues in the region are often raised in connection with migration, which makes the topic even more politically explosive.
- » There is little explicit climate activism in the region compared to other parts of the world. Many political issues related to environmental and climate issues are discussed under other headings or in the context of other debates, but they are also topics that social movements or other non-governmental political actors engage with.

Particular Challenges

Climate policy in the Middle East and North Africa faces particular challenges that can only be understood when viewed against the backdrop of the region's political and economic structures. There are three main

aspects that shape possible courses of action to be taken by states and other climate policy actors.

(Post-)Colonial Dependencies

Most of the states in the region are former colonies, and colonial dependencies shape their economic structures to this day. North African and West Asian states, with the exception of those with large oil reserves, are highly indebted, and this has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. They are, consequently, heavily dependent on external donors, especially organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF, as well as on development aid from Western countries. Through their programmes and attached conditions, these organizations strongly influence certain policy aspects in these countries. This also includes climate policy, which is predominantly financed by state and supranational actors from the Global North. For example, the German development aid agency GIZ funds renewable energy projects in the region, adaptation measures, and the establishment of climate monitoring systems. It also has an influence on political processes: for the countries in receipt of funds, it offers support in international climate negotiations, in drawing up national climate plans, and in drafting environmental legislation. For example, GIZ supported the drafting or amendment of renewable energy laws in Morocco (GIZ 2020) and Egypt (GIZ 2015). This can be a show of beneficial support and it can help to bu-

ild expertise. However, it also calls into question the extent to which climate policy measures are actually supported by local actors. Climate plans or projects could sometimes be more an expression of the interests of donors than the result of political negotiation processes on the ground. In the two cases mentioned above, for example, central concerns of GIZ were to work towards liberalization of the electricity markets, to enable non-state actors to access the electricity market, and to relax existing price regulations. In the field of renewable energies in particular, a danger of perpetuating colonial relations remains: for example, since the end of the 1990s, the EU and some energy companies have been planning the construction of a Mediterranean ring that would connect the electricity grids of North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe—thereby creating the possibility of bringing North African “green energy” to Europe. The German government's hydrogen strategy also relies on importing “green” hydrogen from the Global South, especially North and West Africa, due to a lack of available land-mass in Germany. For North African countries this may mean investment, but—if energy and resources will continue to be exported instead of being used for their own population and further development—it may also lead to a continuation of colonial patterns.

Security and Geopolitics

The region has not been at peace since the Iraq war in early 2000s, closely followed by the uprisings and revolutions beginning in Tunisia in 2010 and then spilling over to most of the other countries. While in some countries protests against authoritarian rule and social inequality escalated into civil war, others are (once again) ruled by authoritarian regimes or military dictatorships. These promise stability, taking advantage of the fear of unrest and civil war both among their own population and in allied countries. The region is considered geostrategically important for various reasons. Firstly, its importance lies in its supply of fossil fuels—Saudi Arabia, a close ally of the USA, is considered a balancing factor on the world market due to its high production capacities, while Algeria, Egypt, and Qatar have the now highly coveted gas fields. Secondly, it holds important transport routes, such as the Suez Canal. The region is also important due to the fear of an escalation or expansion of terrorist activities, as well as the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Arab states. Various major and regional powers are vying for influence in the region, often in complicated and sometimes contradictory constellations, as in Syria or Libya, which further complicates the different participants' scope for action, including in terms of climate policy.

Particularly in the USA and the EU, a reading also established itself early on according to which climate change is mainly viewed as a security problem. It is a “threat multiplier”, according to an influential 2013 report by a US think tank, and amplifies the interconnected effects of political, economic, religious, demographic, and ethnic causes of conflict (Werrell

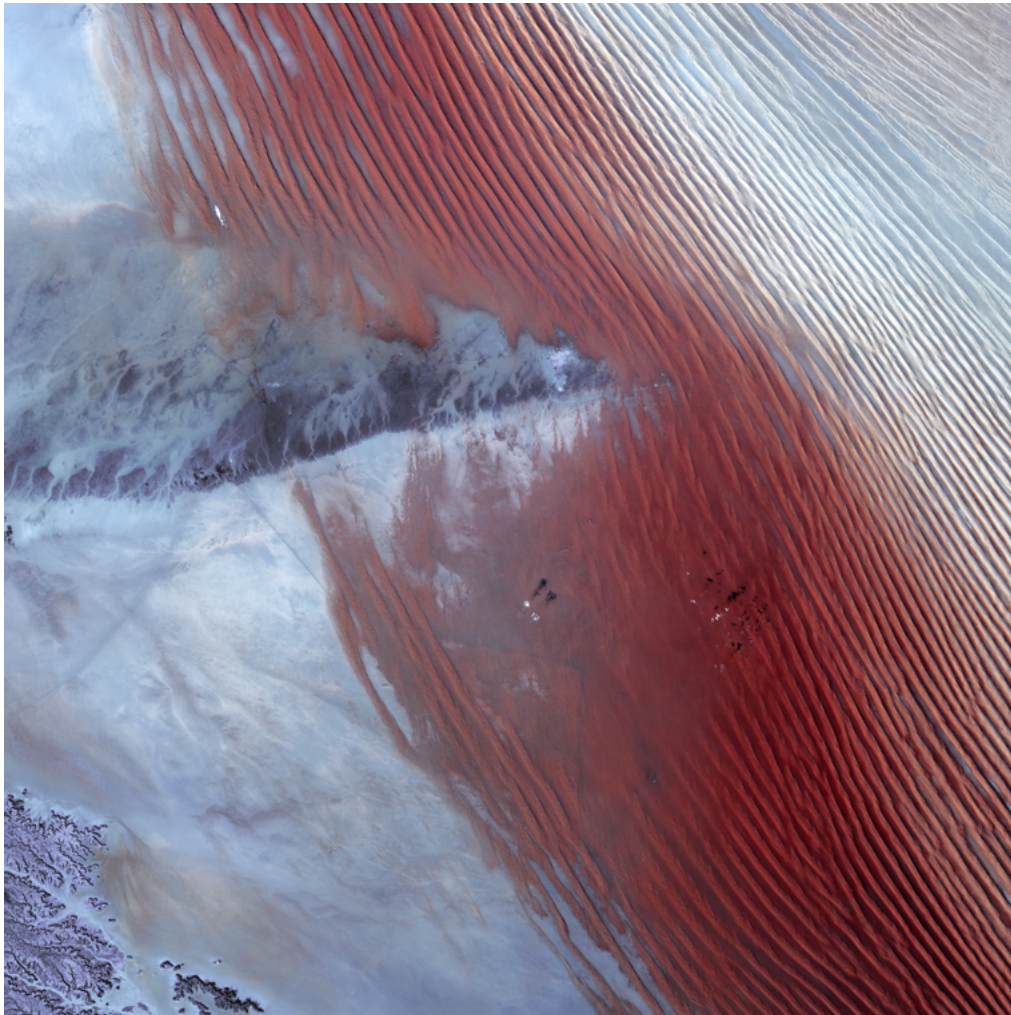
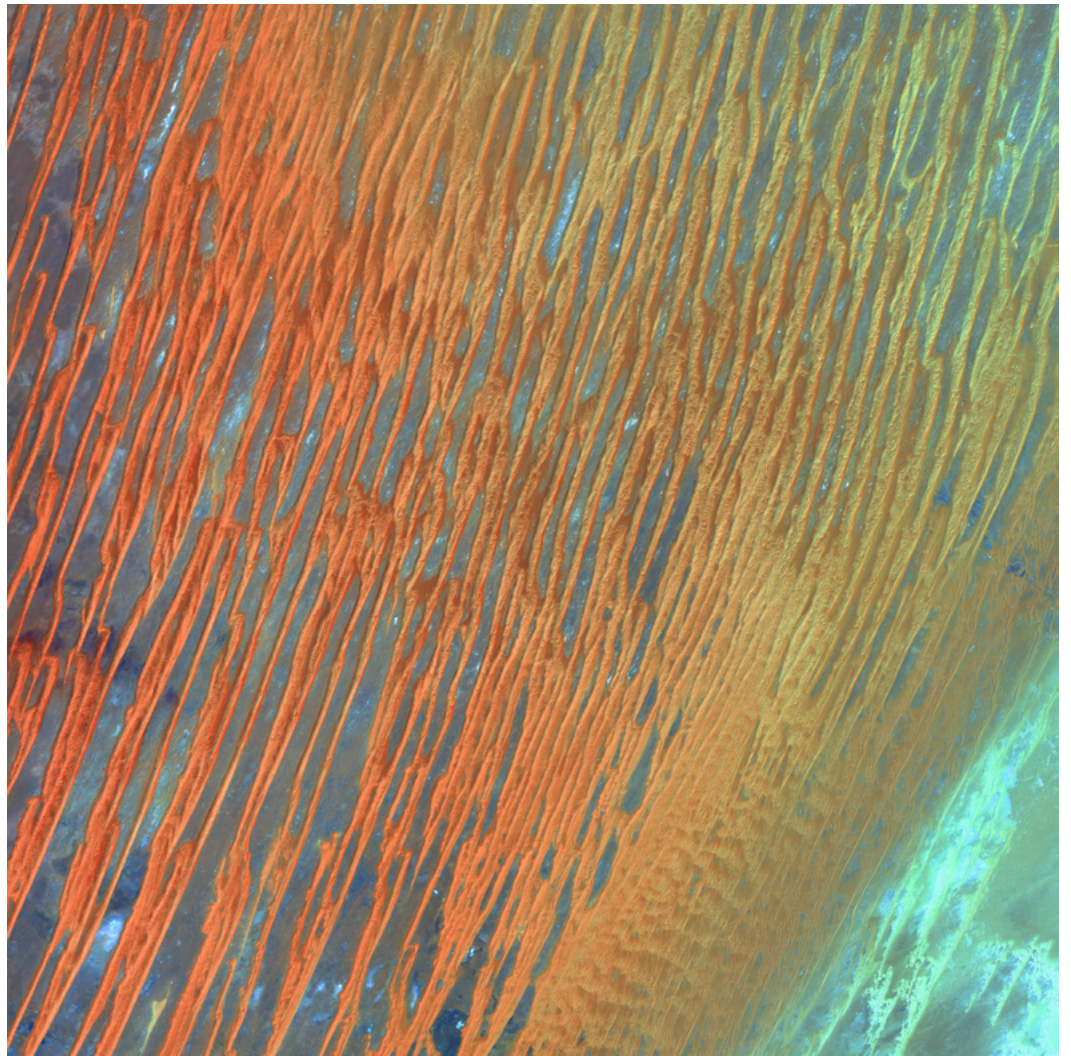
and Femia 2013). Commentators have linked the civil war in Syria with climate change from the beginning (Gleick 2014; Werrell et al. 2015): a drought lasting several years is said to have increased migration from the countryside to the cities, which then led to uprisings. According to Sternberg (2012), multi-year droughts in Asia and the resulting high world market price for wheat were a reason for the 2011 revolution in Egypt. However, authors who have long written about the region have pointed out that these explanations are often based on shortcuts and cannot be empirically proven: for example, there is no evidence of increased migration to the cities in the run-up to the Syrian revolution in 2011 (Selby et al. 2017). The government-set price of aish baladi, the subsidized bread in Egypt that is the food staple of most of the population, has not increased since 1989 (Barnes 2018). Journalist Francesca de Châtel, who specializes in water conflicts in the region, warned against depoliticizing the uprisings by blaming them on climate change (2014). The scholar Jessica Barnes also points out that a one-sided reduction of the reasons for the uprisings to climate change contributes to obscuring political responsibilities: “While climate change is a major global concern, the rush to link climate change with recent upheavals in the Middle East, such as Egypt’s 2011 revolution, is both simplifying and depoliticizing. The link between climate, bread, and protest erases important social, material, and cultural nuances, distorts the allocation of responsibility, and ultimately, obscures more than it illuminates.” (Barnes 2018)

Migration

Finally, the region's geographical location as the European Union's southern and south-eastern neighbour also presents particular challenges. Since the 1990s, the EU has been increasingly sealing itself off from its neighbours, and the political culture is to some extent characterized by the fear of mass migration from poorer countries to the south of the continent. The "security perspective" that often shapes discussions on climate change in the EU therefore primarily refers to migration. The assumption that the consequences of climate change in North African or Middle Eastern states will lead to increased migration to the EU still dominates discourses from both the left and the right. In fact, migration researchers repeatedly point out that migration is a complex phenomenon that involves many factors and cannot be reduced to a single cause. The IPCC also finds no evidence that the already clearly noticeable consequences of climate change are leading to increased mig-

ration to Europe. Instead, climate-related droughts or floods primarily cause migration movements to the immediate vicinity of the event. In recent years, several studies have suggested that migration could be a useful adaptation strategy, as it has the potential of mitigating the risks posed by climate change (IPCC 2022, chapter 7 Cross Chapter Box MIGRATE; chapter 9). However, this can only become a real possibility if it is not severely constrained and accompanied by such high risks as is currently the case in the EU. While there are social movements advocating for more opportunities to migrate, others have criticized the approach of seeing migration as an adaptation strategy: just as there is a right to migrate, they argue, there must also be a right to stay put, and it is therefore necessary to fight to ensure that no one has to leave their home due to climate change or its consequences.

Seen through the „eyes“ of a satellite sensor, ribbons of Saharan sand dunes seem to glow in sunset colors. These patterned stripes are part of Erg Chech, a desolate sand sea in southwestern Algeria, Africa, where the prevailing winds create an endlessly shifting collage of large, linear sand dunes. The term „erg“ is derived from an Arabic word for a field of sand dunes.



White pinpricks of cloud cast ebony shadows on the Rub' al Khali, or Empty Quarter, near the border between Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The lines of wind-sculpted sand are characteristic of immense sand deserts, or sand seas, and the Rub' al Khali is the largest desert of this type in the world. A highland ridge is just high enough to disturb the flow of the lines. In the center of that interruption lies the Saudi Arabian town of Sharurah.

Beyond the Nation State

Climate Activism in the Region

States are not the only and often not the decisive actors in climate policy. In many countries, social movements have and continue to campaign for climate protection and climate justice, persuading governments to step up their efforts. However, a broad climate movement, such as the movement developing in Europe and the USA since around 2019, or active and well-networked groups that demand climate justice at national and international levels, as in South Africa or many countries in Latin America, do not exist in the Middle East and North Africa.

This has partly to do with political and economic circumstances: where there is civil war, or the economic situation forces people to spend most of their effort on daily survival, there is little room for taking action on global problems like climate change. In repressive regimes, where any kind of political activity can lead to arrest, torture, and death, organising around climate issues is also impossible. However, the extent to which environmental and climate activism can be found in the region also depends on the definition of climate activism. Does it have to take the form that is common in the countries of the North? Do the actors involved have to see themselves as climate activists and refer to the global debate on climate change? Or can it also include all those forms of protest that are broadly connected to the big questions on climate change—even if this is not directly referenced?

Farmer and Barnes (2018, p. 381) point out that part of the difficulty in finding environmental movements in the region is that “environment” is a Western term that has no direct equivalent in Arabic. The direct translation *al-bi’a* is hardly used out-

side circles that work with international organizations or development aid institutions. Studies show that knowledge of climate change also varies greatly across the region. While in Morocco a large part of the population knows about climate change due to state programmes and organizations such as the teachers’ union providing environmental education, in countries like Egypt or Jordan less than half of the population is aware of the issue. Almost all the issues that have triggered social mobilization in the region in recent years have involved some environmental and climate-related component—but they are discussed in relation to other debates and using different terms. For example, air and water pollution is a major issue on which significant mobilizations have repeatedly emerged in recent years. However, these are predominantly discussed as health rather than environmental issues. Similarly, the distribution of land and water, the access to electricity and infrastructure, and to waste management and sanitation, all play an important role in public debates, especially in rural areas. Dams and other large-scale state projects for energy production frequently provoke mobilizations and protests. Trade unions play varying roles in the different states of the region: they can be largely controlled by the state, as in Egypt, or conversely be important social actors that also mobilize on issues of energy or social justice, as in Tunisia, where trade unions are active around labour conditions and pollution from phosphate mining, and advocate for energy justice. In this case, environmental issues are often discussed in relation to workers’ rights.


Sowers (2017) distinguishes three forms of political activism on environmental issues: first, there are professional environmental NGOs and networks

dominated by experts, scientists and technocrats, which often emerge around international donors and adopt their discourses, i.e. by using concepts such as climate change and the environment. However, they have little support from or contact with the wider population, and their scope for action is often limited to “non-political” activities in the context of authoritarian regimes. Secondly, small-scale local action on specific demands can be observed around issues such as land access, redistribution of water, or protection from heavy pollution. The affected communities use legal or political means, demonstrations, and occupations to persuade state actors to make limited concessions in a specific case. Thirdly, there are broad mobilizations supported by a significant proportion of the population, *hamla* in Arabic, in which different active groups network regionally, build a temporary organizational structure, and strategically coordinate their activities. Such mobilizations—on environmental or other issues—can temporarily have a strong political impact and therefore force a short-term concession from the state. However, as soon as their strength weakens, they are usually subject to repression and the concessions often turn out to be empty promises.

As already outlined in Chapter 3.b, the first form is dominant across many countries of the region: expert networks of NGOs, scientists, and committed employees of state authorities who work together with international donors and organizations. Despite these countries being heavily impacted by climate change, the work in the region tends to be focused on

climate protection and rarely on adaptation. This is not unrelated to the fact that, for a long time, international funding was predominantly available for climate protection projects (Sowers 2013).

Local mobilizations that refer to climate issues are found in countries where this is tolerated or even funded by the state. For example, as part of Morocco’s liberalization processes starting in the 2000s, the establishment of civil society organisations in the environmental field was promoted. This was especially the case with the widespread educational drive in the leadup to the climate conference in Marrakech in 2016, so that even groups primarily working on other issues—such as human rights—became more involved with climate issues, since they expected less repression and fewer restrictions in this area. Across the region, there are local initiatives, groups, and small cooperatives working for agroecology, for the protection and sustainable use of resources, and against pollution, and often also for women’s rights, the preservation of traditional knowledge and practices, or other forms of economic organization (see Houdaïfa et al. 2021 for an overview of Morocco). Conversely, in most countries of the region, any questioning of large state infrastructure and development projects—land reclamation projects, dams, shipping canals, or new megacities—or oil and gas development, which account for significant portions of state revenue, is viewed very critically by the state, stopped, or met with repression. This was the case of Algerian protests against fracking projects that threaten to pollute groundwater (Belakhdar 2020), for example.



4

Perspectives for Change

Concluding Thoughts

As this study shows, climate policy in the Middle East and North Africa is developing under difficult conditions. On the one hand, the region is heavily impacted by climate change; on the other hand, it has large oil and gas deposits that for many countries represent their main source of income. Due to its location as the southern neighbour of the European Union and as a geostrategically important crossroads between Asia, Africa, and Europe, various actors are striving for influence in the region. Due to wars, unrest, changing alliances and interests, it is a difficult field for climate policy. There are only few social movements that deal with climate change and that can become allies for international actors. Their role is different from climate movements in many other regions of the world. How can those who are active in pursuit of progressive climate policies deal with these condi-

tions? This final section aims to offer some thoughts and suggestions on this question.

Recognize the diversity of the region

The region of the Middle East and North Africa is, as described above, a colonial construct. The region has a number of common features, but at the same time it comprises very different states: from poor countries with very low emissions to the states with large oil reserves, which produce some of the highest per capita emissions in the world. If climate policy is to be analysed or discussed at a regional level, it is important not to see the Middle East and North Africa as a uniform bloc with the same interests, but to recognize and engage with this diversity. This diversity is relevant not only between the different states, but also to the make-up of individual states: as is the case in all countries, these are diverse societies with dif-

ferent groups that are affected differently by climate change and which differ in their interests.

Looking beyond state and climate policy—progressive forces within society

Progressive climate policy in the region must confront the reality that most states here are ruled by authoritarian regimes or military dictatorships. In the United Nations, these governments advocate for the legitimate interests of the Global South. However, they are often not democratically elected. As social movements from Egypt, for example, pointed out in the run-up to the climate conference, they do not necessarily represent the interests of a majority of the population, and especially not those of the groups most vulnerable to climate change or committed to progressive politics; conversely, such groups are often subject to severe repression. At the same time, NGOs working on climate change in the region are often technologically oriented organizations of experts. Here it is worth looking beyond the term climate change: whether it be agriculture and land rights, access to water, energy justice, or working conditions in the extractivist energy sector—many political debates in the region are directly related to climate change and adaptation. However, the discussions are conducted using different terms.

Not all problems should be blamed on climate change

Mike Hulme (2011) was quick to warn against so-called “climate reductionism”, a truncated climate debate, “a way of seeing the world where the future of environment and society is seen in terms of climate

alone”. It may be valid to highlight the impacts of climate change, but overemphasis risks depoliticization. If everything is blamed solely on climate change, those responsible for and profiting from numerous decisions with problematic impacts will no longer be called out. A detailed analysis shows that almost all the problems that climate change is causing and will cause are very complex and have multiple causes (Chapter 2). Acknowledging this complexity is necessary in order not to forget other problematic developments—such as the devastating consequences of industrial agriculture or large dams. It also helps to identify opportunities for action at the regional and local level that can mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Social welfare systems as an adaptation measure

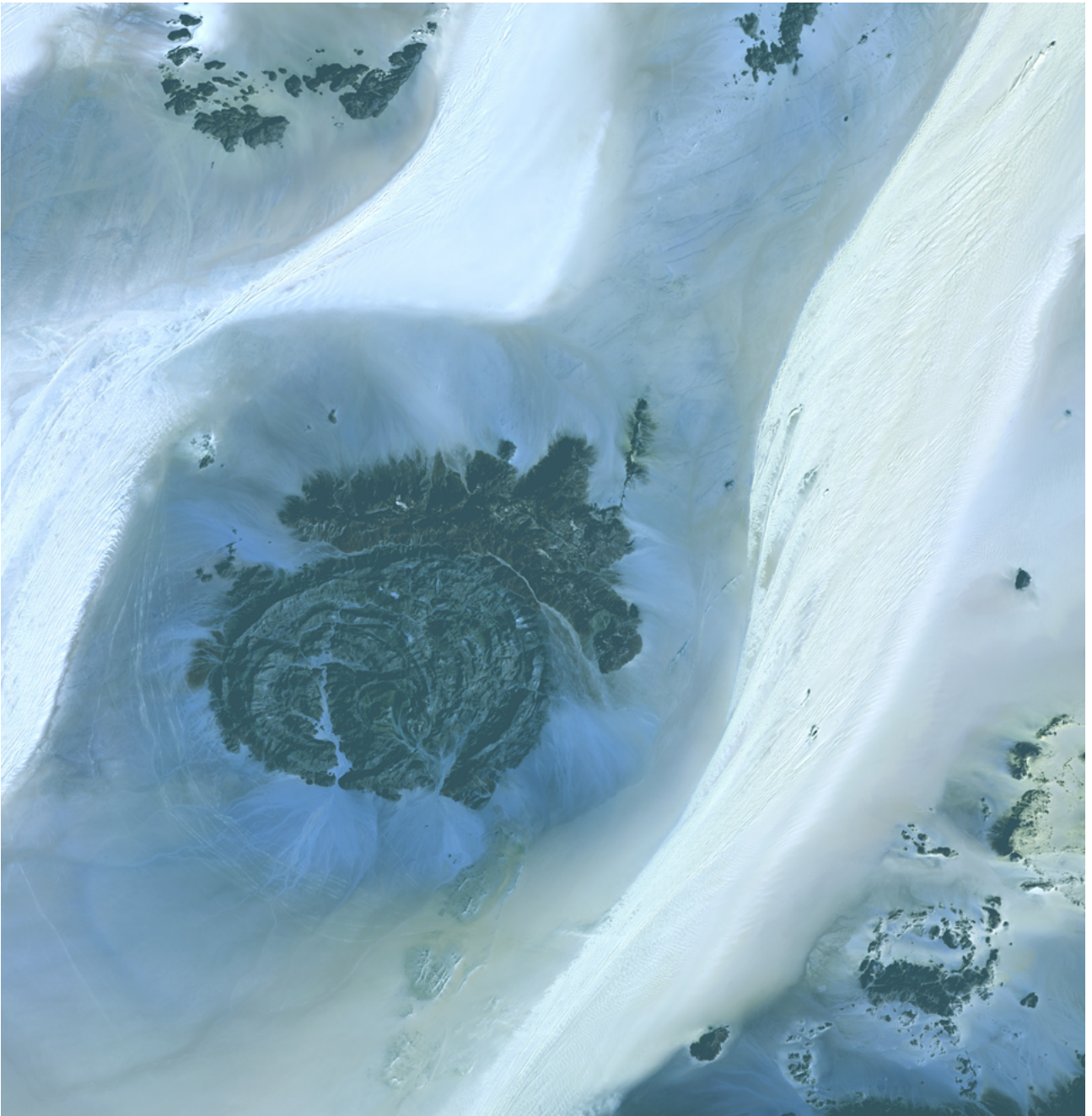
The example of the Middle East and North Africa shows that the effects of climate change are closely intertwined with social developments. The neoliberal reforms in the region prevalent since the 1980s have contributed to large parts of the population now being much more vulnerable to the consequences of climate change. Conversely, social reforms—equitable land distribution, access to health care, government support programmes, and greater social justice—can be very efficient adaptation measures. Under certain conditions, the same can apply to migration, although here it is equally important to demand the right to freedom of movement as well as the right to stay. Looking beyond technological solutions and advocating for social forms of adaptation is especially important in a region with great social inequalities and widespread poverty.

4

IN BRIEF

- » For progressive climate policy in the region, it is worth going beyond the concept of climate itself, as many important debates around climate issues are not necessarily conducted within this framework.
- » At the same time, it is important not to reduce problems to climate change in a one-sided way, at the risk of contributing to depoliticization and obscuring responsibility. Instead, it is important to recognize the complexity and interplay of different causes—for example, in the case of water access or dust storms, to think in parallel about the consequences of climate change and the consequences of certain types of agriculture or dams. This also helps in the development of adaptation strategies.
- » Especially for the poorer countries in the region, adaptation is more important than reducing emissions. Adaptation should not only be thought of in terms of technical measures: expanding social welfare systems and rolling back neoliberal economic policies can help reduce vulnerability to the impacts of climate change.
- » One challenge facing the region is how to deal with authoritarian states. Especially in the area of funding, it is important—as is being urged by social movements from the region—to develop instruments that do not support authoritarian regimes and do not further shore up the apparatus of repression.
- » Engaging with the region can help develop proposals for a progressive climate policy that can deal with contradictions similar to those found in the Middle East—not only in the region, but also beyond it.

The mountainous outcrops of Jebel Auenat rise more than 1800 meters above the barren, uninhabited plains of the Libyan Desert. The frontiers of Libya, Egypt and Sudan meet amidst the rugged granite of Jebel Auenat. The mountains are remnants of an ancient granitic dome. Rivers of sand meander around them, swept across the desert pavement by northeasterly winds.



Responsibility of the North—debt reduction and moving towards a fairer economic system

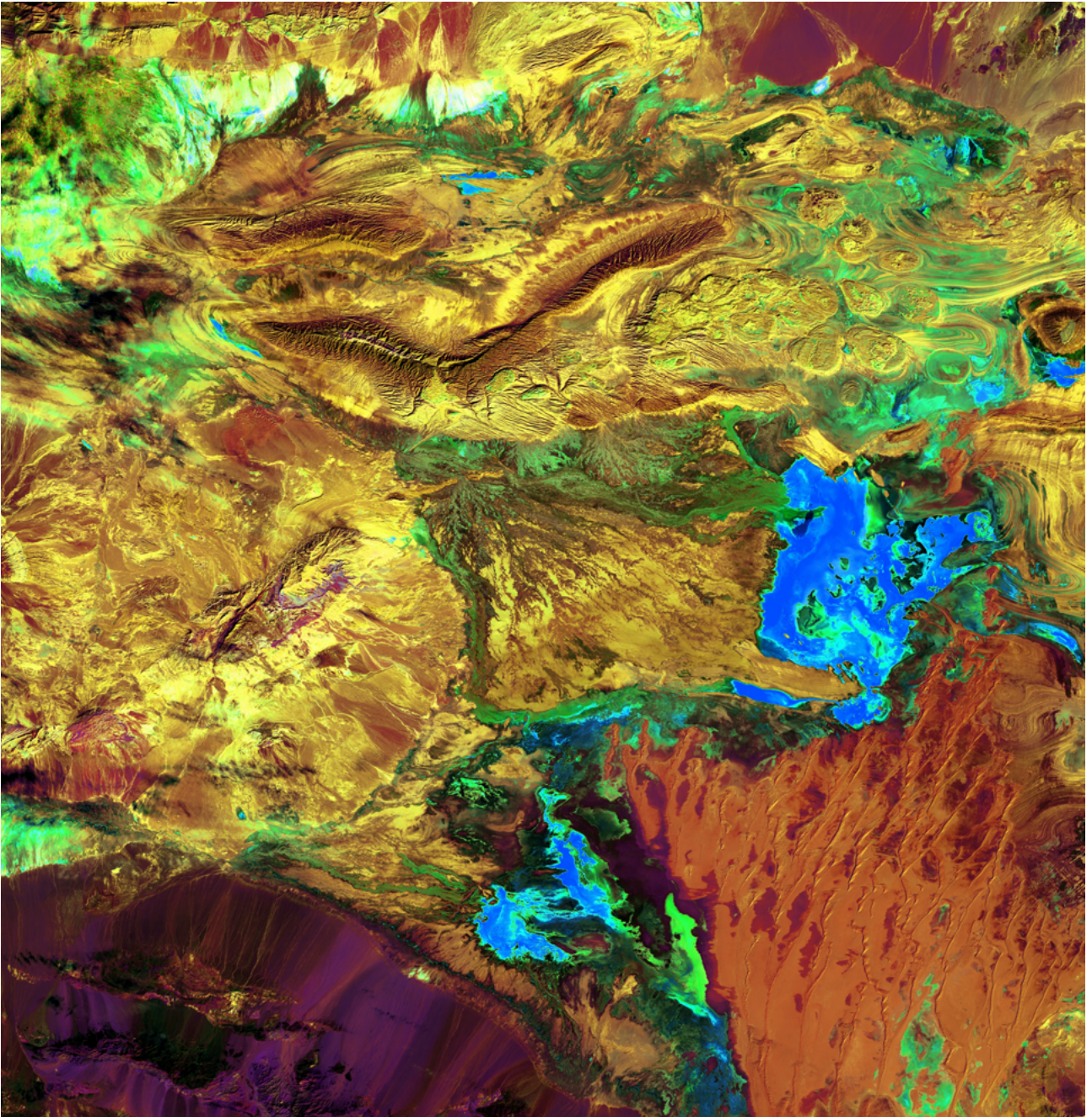
The issue of loss and damage—i.e., how to deal with climate-related damage and loss—has become a crucial issue in international climate negotiations over the last few years. While the countries of the Global South are increasingly demanding that the issue become an inextricable part of climate negotiations, the industrialized countries continue to vehemently oppose it. They fear that recognizing this demand could mean their being forced in future to pay for the damage caused in other parts of the world by their decades or centuries of oil and gas use. While it is undeniably important to support the establishment of loss and damage policies, and to demand that the North take responsibility for the damage done in the South, two points need to be considered. One concerns the question posed by the Egyptian author Hamilton in the run-up to the climate conference: how can such payments—as reparations or otherwise—be designed so that they do not prop up authoritarian state power? And who is going to ensure this, when the ones doing the negotiating on behalf of the Global South tend to be authoritarian state powers, “whose short-term interests are even more graspingly fragile than those of oil executives” (Hamilton 2022)?

The other central point is the sustainability of such payments. The experience of climate financing so far shows that a large proportion of the payments is made up of loans that lead to the already over-indebted countries of the South falling further into debt, thus further reducing their capacity to act. More payments

of this kind, under the given global economic conditions, will eventually fizzle out and flow back to the Global North or to other donors as debt repayments. While demanding far-reaching support for the most vulnerable countries, including financial support, it is also necessary to advocate for new and different conditions—far-reaching changes to the economic system and the terms of trade—that make it possible for such payments to be effective in the first place.

Less climate protection, more adaptation

Finally, the example of the Middle East shows that international politics has a strong influence on how climate policy is implemented in countries of the Global South, and that the priorities set on the international level have a direct impact on individual projects in these countries. This makes it all the more important to strengthen the shift in international climate policy that has begun in recent years, and which, after decades of being primarily concerned with climate protection, has recently begun to focus on adaptation as well. While ambitious climate protection goals remain important—more important than ever, given the current growth in greenhouse gas emissions—these are primarily a matter for the Global North. For many countries in the Global South, adaptation is crucial. The issue of adaptation also offers a much wider range of opportunities for action, including low-threshold and non-technical actions. When action is taken directly, with the affected communities, opportunities for participation and co-creation also emerge.



Like poster paints run wild, this image reveals an eclectic montage of landscapes in Iran's largest desert, the Dasht-e Kavir, or Great Salt Desert. The word kavir is Persian for salt marsh. The almost uninhabited region is a mix of dry streambeds, desert plateaus, and salt marshes.

The Middle East and North African region, as has been emphasized several times in this study, is not an easy region in terms of climate policy—neither in terms of analysis nor in terms of opportunities for action—when the aim is to cooperate with or support progressive actors. Not only because the region encompasses a wide range of very different states. The Middle East is one of the regions most affected by climate change, and at the same time a region where many actors profit greatly from the export of fossil fuels, which is one of the main causes of global warming, not only in the rich Gulf states but also in many poorer states in the region. These two positions on climate change are not always clearly demarcated, but can overlap within many countries or be held in parallel by different political currents. This difficulty, however, is also an opportunity: to engage with the heterogeneity and contradictions of the region and its climate policies is instructive and sharpens one's

view of both the region and of climate policy positions. The contradictions of the region, the competing interests of different groups, the close intertwining of climate policy positions with economic and political issues, the continuing influence of colonialism in the region's political dynamics—all of these factors may be particularly pronounced in North Africa and West Asia. However, the question of how to deal with these difficulties also arises in a similar form in many other countries of the Global South, and in some ways in the Global North as well. Engaging with the heterogeneity and contradictions of the region, and exploring, together with local actors, social movements, and institutions, ways to develop climate policies that do not ignore these contradictions but deal with them constructively can be a rewarding experience—not only for the region itself, but for all those who want to develop perspectives for a just and sustainable future.

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Connected Contradictions

The Haruj Volcanic Field in central Libya was created from basaltic lava flows that erupted over time from multiple volcanoes. The volcanic craters and lava flows are evidence of a previous active eruption period. Many of the bright spots within the darker colored basalt flows are depressions covered with silt and fine sand.