

## MENA Climate Change Discourse Series PT1

# What are the Key Gaps?

Alhusein Elrayah & Kjell Kühne. LINGO. Leave It In the Ground Initiative. 2021.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a very diverse region, politically, socially and economically. Some economies, mainly in the Gulf, are authoritarian and dependent on fossil fuels. Others - like Lebanon - are [more democratic and have a wider variety of industries](#). This document will aim to summarize the discourses surrounding climate change, sustainability and fossil fuels across the region. Each section will cover specific gaps in the region's discourse and provide suggestions for new terminology in light of these gaps.



Before getting into the discussion, it is important to note that the Middle East (or MENA) in this case will be defined as the countries of the Levant and Arab North Africa (LNA) and the Gulf countries.

### 1. Avoiding Talking About Ambitious Reduction of Greenhouse Gas Emissions

- ❖ In the Gulf countries, the [importance of climate change](#) has been acknowledged.
- ❖ However, this has mainly been in the form of [supporting new, green technologies](#) to address urgent environmental issues such as: threats to coastal areas and renewable energy projects, such as the Al-Khafji solar power plant in Saudi Arabia.
- ❖ Yet the discourse has not focused on the entire sustainable development agenda. Most importantly, it has avoided [referring to carbon reduction/decarbonization and carbon neutrality](#).
- ❖ All these countries have hydrocarbon-dependent economies so any mention of a radical reduction of their use, and as such, greenhouse gas emissions, is avoided.
- ❖ Even when offering a critical perspective on climate change discourse, solutions are presented in [vague terms](#). For example, a 2016 Al Jazeera article, 'Problem Solving in the Anthropocene Era', attempted to challenge the current discourse by urging countries to adopt 'a smarter approach to strategic decision making', a 'broader understanding of innovation' and expansion of the current discourse to incorporate 'natural' matters.
- ❖ In addition, any reference of an ambitious climate change agenda, including radical decarbonization, almost entirely refers to international negotiations rather than local and domestic climate change challenges closer to home.
- ❖ Countries have also [focused on their own domestic indicators](#), which do not follow climate science, in reference to their climate change targets. This is as opposed to the more ambitious goals set out in the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement.
- ❖ However, in the Levant and Arab North Africa (LNA), most of which have historically lower hydrocarbon reserves and or revenues, governments in this region cannot afford to decarbonize gradually. They have therefore [used much more ambitious climate change discourses](#), such as shifts

to green land management and renewable energy. For example, Morocco set a renewables target of more than 50% by 2030.

- ❖ However, climate change has not been the most prioritized issue for governments as most ministries in the LNA specifically tasked with addressing the impacts of climate change have not been given enough powers by leaders to implement national plans.
- ❖ NGOs have stood out compared to other actors in that they have [been the most active in pushing for radical reduction in greenhouse gases](#). This is mainly because many are not restricted by ties to the fossil fuel industry so have much more freedom to collaborate with other civil society groups and communities. For instance, [IndyAct organized street protests](#) and publicly denounced the efforts of some Arab hydrocarbon-producing nations in their efforts to sabotage international negotiations concerning curbing greenhouse gases.

## 2. Optimistic Fossil Fuel Discourse

- ❖ [The government and the media often present positive outlooks of the oil and gas sector](#), with little mention of their harmful effects to the environment. The continuity of fossil fuel dependence is not seen as an antithesis to the future wellbeing of countries, especially in the GCC. Any negative framing of hydrocarbons is presented less as a climate-related issue but more about recent price volatility and the fact that hydrocarbons will run out in the following decades.
- ❖ These narratives emphasize [‘human ingenuity’ and ‘technological progress’](#) rather than a radical shift from oil and gas dependence.

## 3. Secular Western Discourses on Climate Change

- ❖ In addition, [Western notions of environmentalism through academics are not finding traction with many locals in the Muslim-majority MENA](#). As many are religious societies, they do not relate to Arabic secular climate change technical terms which mostly translate terms from the West.
- ❖ Educational programmes integrated with Islamic courses have proven to be very effective for mobilizing populations in enacting climate change discourse changes, where, in the past, secular government initiatives have failed.

## 4. Missing Academic Terminology

- ❖ Due to low economic support for climate change academia, most climate change research has a limited scope, mainly focusing on local challenges. This has led to the MENA region acquiring a reputation among the world’s scholars as a [‘data-sparse region’](#) in the area of regional climate change studies with few regional models on the growing desertification, water scarcity and uninhabitable areas due to increasing temperatures(“death zones”).
- ❖ Even worse, [there are no unique words in Arabic for many specialist terms on climate change and fossil fuel studies](#). For example, the word ‘Anthropocene’ is the same exact word in Arabic, which ultimately has no meaning to Arabic speakers.

## Ideas for a New Arabic Sustainability Discourse

- ❖ **Tawazon Al Carbon** or 'the Carbon Balance'. The word can be used for carbon neutrality instead of 'Moadil/Taadol/Mohaiyid al-carbon' used in the current discourse. It is much easier to understand the concept if it is presented as an issue of balancing carbon emissions with carbon removal.
- ❖ **Al Ahdaf Al Barisia** 'The Parisian Goals' in reference to the Paris Climate Agreement, as opposed to less ambitious national indicators often cited by governments.
- ❖ **Al-Ghaz Al Ohfoori** meaning 'Fossil Gas', instead of Al Ghaz Al Tabiai or 'Natural Gas'.
- ❖ **Zohd** '[living lightly on earth.](#)'
- ❖ **Khalifah Allah Fi Al Ard** or the 'role of humans as trustees and stewards of the earth' rather than destroyers, who overconsume and damage the earth's limited resources.
- ❖ **Waqf** or the 'Green Endowment Fund'.
- ❖ The green **JIZ** model: **Jihad** green activism, **Ijtihad** green innovation and **Zohd** green lifestyle.
- ❖ **Taharah Al Jaw/Al Beeaa** or 'purity of the air/environment'. This term for purity is mostly used in the context of Islamic physical and spiritual cleanliness.
- ❖ **Nagatat Al Jaw/Al Beeaa** or 'impurity of the air/environment'. This term for impurity is mostly used in the context of Islamic physical and spiritual dirtiness/pollution.
- ❖ **Al Hilal Al Khasib/ Al Hilal Al Mayit** meaning 'The Fertile Crescent'/ 'The Dead Crescent'. This can be terms for regional academic researchers to rally around and present a science-based vision, especially in the Levant and Iraq, as it refers to a rich past of agricultural wealth. This can involve sustainable land and water management strategies. Climate data shows the region is becoming a dust bowl and this is projected to only get worse. Therefore, there is a need for new strategies to manage its environment and rivers.
- ❖ **Al Asr Al Insani** meaning the 'The Age of Humankind'. This can be used instead of the current Arabic word for Anthropocene, which is 'Anthropocene'. The word 'Asr' specifically is more suitable compared to other equivalents because it is the same word used for the Arabic equivalent of 'Pleistocene' (Al Asr al Jaleedi) which literally translates to 'the Ice Age'.



## Further Reading

- ❖ **For more on the discourses in the Levant and North Africa (LNA):**  
Assaf, Hamed. "Climate Change in the Levant and North Africa Region: An Assessment of Implications for Water Resources, Regional State of Awareness and Preparedness, and the Road Ahead Full Text." *Climate Change and Environment in the Arab World* (2018).  
[https://scholarworks.aub.edu.lb/bitstream/handle/10938/21133/Levant North Africa Study As saf.pdf?sequence=1](https://scholarworks.aub.edu.lb/bitstream/handle/10938/21133/Levant%20North%20Africa%20Study%20As%20saf.pdf?sequence=1)

❖ **For a detailed analysis of the discourses in the Arab Gulf countries:**

Al-Saidi, Mohammad, Esmat Zaidan, and Suzanne Hammad. "Participation modes and diplomacy of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries towards the global sustainability agenda." *Development in Practice* 29.5 (2019): 545-558.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09614524.2019.1597017?needAccess=true>

❖ **For suggestions on new climate change terminology surrounding Islamic terms:** Al-Jayyousi, Odeh. "How Islam can represent a model for environmental stewardship". *UN Environment Programme*. (21<sup>st</sup> June 2018).

<https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/how-islam-can-represent-model-environmental-stewardship>