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Climate Information Transparency in the MENA Region

There is a lack of transparent and accurate information in the MENA region. Governments should implement transparency measures, reduce bureaucratic hurdles, and invest in capacity building and interagency coordination to change this.

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Published on
January 30, 2025

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Despite its low contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions, the MENA region is considered one of the most vulnerable regions to climate change. As human-induced climate change accelerates, the region faces extreme heat, declining rainfall, sandstorms, and other forms of environmental degradation. Additionally, outdated environmental laws, absence of climate legislations, bureaucratic hurdles and fragmented information systems duplicate challenges to effective climate governance. Other factors such as state-controlled narratives, lack of interagency coordination, internal conflicts and political instability, further exacerbates the climate crisis in the MENA region. Addressing these challenges requires structural changes to reduce climate-related risks. The adoption of modern climate laws, interregional cooperation, capacity building, and establishing independent research centers could improve climate resilience and governance.

Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, home to 6.3 percent of the global population and only 1.4 percent of the world's total surface freshwater—is already enduring visible climate crisis impacts, such as drought, severe heat waves, floods, and water scarcity. Moreover, the region's continued population growth, expected to reach more than 724 million by 2050, coupled with worsening arid or semi-arid climate conditions, will only exacerbate its water scarcity challenge. This disparity between water availability and human demand will create significant pressure on the region's water sources, which are essential for daily life, the economy, and all other sectors such as agriculture, energy, land cover, and biodiversity.

The physical impacts of climate change in the MENA region are evident and interconnected, encompassing reduced seasonal rainfall, intense droughts, desertification, rising temperatures, frequent dust storms, wildfires, and floods. These challenges, compounded by ongoing global warming, are further exacerbated by unsustainable natural resource management, insufficient infrastructure, and a lack of energy efficiency, resulting in irreversible ecological and socioeconomic damage. Although the MENA region contributes less than 5 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, its eastern part (the Middle East) contributes to global dust emissions (15–20 percent), affecting regional climate conditions, human lives, and terrestrial and marine ecosystems.

Despite scientific assessments classifying the region as one of the most vulnerable areas to climate change, a lack of transparency and accurate data plagues the information landscape. Many regional media outlets, including newspapers, television, and digital and social media, often lack access to reliable climate information, resulting in misleading reporting in some contexts. Interconnectivity and information sharing between state institutions are either insufficient or absent. Internal conflicts and war and media fragmentation, as well as hyperlocal media platforms that obtain their information from untrusted sources, hinder transparent information ecosystems in the MENA region, including those focused on the climate. As a result, official reports submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) by most Arab countries regarding climate goals do not accurately reflect the national climate and environmental conditions. Frequently, there is a gap between the local reality and the information presented to the UNFCCC, hindering efforts to achieve decarbonized economies and reduce climate risks.

The importance of transparent reporting on the climate crisis in the MENA region cannot be overstated. As I wrote in a paper with Charif Sada last year, “Despite the region's severe droughts, increasing temperatures, and expanding desertification due to climate change, most media outlets provide sporadic and occasional coverage, which contributes to the spread of misleading information in some ways.” This article aims to understand how trustless information ecosystems obstruct the free flow of climate information. It explores the factors behind the insufficient dissemination of climate information and how government entities, non-state actors, paramilitary forces, and private corporations all play a crucial role in fueling complex information ecosystems.

Incomplete Narrations

In covering climate events, state-owned media outlets often rely on official narrations, however information or press releases are limited or insufficient in accurately reflecting the scale of climate realities. In fact, climate coverage is not prioritized by government entities and the dominant media outlets in the MENA region. According to DW Akademie, climate coverage in the region “is limited to extreme weather events, government press conferences or international conferences on climate change. The most obvious is the lack of knowledge and expertise amongst journalists and within media organizations to cover climate change. More seriously, lack of knowledge has resulted in the dissemination of misleading information.”

This problem of information transparency is not related to media establishments alone; it is also a part of state policies that similarly encompass a lack of transparency and sometimes corruption. In Iraq, for instance, the dissemination of climate information often takes place at conferences and official events, where officials enthusiastically present their policies. However, when it comes to implementing these policies, transparency seems to be an empty slogan. Despite numerous announcements about climate initiatives, there has been a lack of follow-up and accountability, hindering progress in addressing the country’s climate challenges.

During the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) in Dubai, the Central Bank of Iraq announced the launch of a “green” private financial institution with a capital of \$300 million. The institution, called Green Bank, aims to mitigate the impacts of climate change by investing in environmentally friendly projects and creating green jobs, according to the Iraqi government’s first press release. Mohammed Shakir, the founder and executive director of the Green Bank, announced publicly that the initiative’s first phase aims to create 100,000 green job opportunities.

However, since the opening ceremony of the Iraqi Green Bank on November 7, 2023, there has been little follow-up on implementation of this initiative. According to local environmental reports, the main public information about this project dates back to the ceremony. Since then, no public contact information on the bank’s project managers has been available. As a result, there appear to be many barriers to accessing up-to-date and accurate information on the project implementation process.

Iraq’s information ecosystems concerning climate change and ways to reduce its risks are often ambiguous and contradictory. Ministries and other government entities contribute to contradictory and opaque information. For instance, the Ministry of Water Resources, despite announcing a national plan to develop the agricultural sector in mid-2023, suffers from an underfunded budget.

According to existing studies, “only 1% of the national budget is allocated to both the Ministry of Water Resources and the Ministry of Agriculture, which leaves no capacity to mitigate the risk of climate change impact.” Furthermore, The Ministry of Environment in Iraq is a relatively new and unstable component of government structures. Established in 2003, dissolved and merged with the Ministry of Health in 2015 and reinstated in 2022, the Ministry functioned inconsistently in the absence of climate policies in the country.

Outdated Environmental Laws

Lack of transparent information about climate change in many Arab countries goes back, in certain ways, to the absence of climate laws or new climate legislations. Most environmental protection and improvement laws in the region cover national regulations to protect, for example, ecological systems from pollution, soil degradation, and biodiversity. However, these laws have not been updated for decades in many Arab countries, posing significant challenges for environmental assessment, analysis, and the dissemination of accurate information.

In Iraq, for instance, the Environmental Protection and Improvement Law of 2009 (EPIL) has not been updated to suit Iraq’s climate reality, “which is witnessing a sharp rise in temperatures and frequent dust storms, not to mention the shortages of water and energy.” What is noteworthy is that climate change is not mentioned in a single article of this Iraqi EPIL, which makes it outdated and ineffective in combating the consequences of the climate crisis. It is well known that climate law comprises policies, laws, plans, voluntary codes, and governance methods aimed at addressing climate change by means of mitigation and adaptation.

Based on interviews with members of the Iraqi Parliament in three consecutive sessions since 2012, no new legislation has been issued regarding climate change and its effects on the country’s ecological and human systems.[1] The reason for this, according to those interviewed, is that the legislative institution in Iraq does not pay attention to the climate crisis, even though the country is classified among the most vulnerable countries to climate change.

In Morocco, despite experiencing a sixth consecutive year of drought due to an unprecedented decline of seasonal rainfall, government responses have been limited to regional policies and local administrations and have not developed sufficiently comprehensive national environmental policies. The country has joined the UNFCCC, as well as the Paris Agreement, but except for some government directives, no new climate laws have been enacted as of the writing of this article.

Although the Moroccan Environmental Protection and Reclamation Law is ahead of many similar laws in Arab countries, it is somewhat old, as its issuance dates to 2003, and it does not respond to the effects of Morocco's current climate crisis. Similar to Iraq's law, the existing environmental law in Morocco is not well-suited to address climate change. It lacks the necessary provisions to mitigate the climate-related hazards impacting natural and human-developed systems, particularly the agricultural sector, which is a cornerstone of the Moroccan economy.

The situation in other Arab countries is not much different. In every country, national plans have been adopted to combat climate change, but these plans neither discuss the laws and legislation on which policies for mitigation and adaptation are based, nor how these policies confront the impact of climate change on livelihoods, health, the economy, and environmental systems.

In Tunisia, for example, most national legislation is shaped by agreements, treaties, and protocols on climate change ratified by the Tunisian government. Najiba Zayer, a Tunisian judge and writer, points out that the Tunisian national legislative mechanisms to reach the goals of the international legislative framework are limited. The Tunisian strategy for adapting to climate change apparently remains ambitious but is incomplete on the ground.[2]

In short, implementation delays—in terms of clear climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts to respond to climate crisis impacts—contribute to the flow of unreliable information. This is particularly evident when considering the different interpretations of climate change among some skeptics. “On May 18, 2023, a virtual meeting that brought together a group of Iraqi experts took place via Zoom and was broadcasted on YouTube. In his opening remarks, Shaker al-Makhzoumi, the webinar director and former director general of the Iraqi Meteorological Committee, stated that the current water scarcity in Iraq has no connection to climate change. He explicitly denied any climatic changes in Iraq over the past eighty years. This example highlights the lack of reliable coverage of extreme climate events and scientific explanations in media outlets, which aligns with the absence of new legislation recognizing the existence of climate change.

The lack of climate-specific legislation in the MENA region could lead to more severe climate change impacts on the region's economic, agricultural, health, and public service sectors. Without effective regulations and policies, it becomes more difficult to adapt to the impacts of climate change, including rising temperatures, water scarcity, and extreme weather events. And it becomes harder to institutionalize transparent information and data sharing, which leads to poor climate governance.

Media coverage of climate issues in the MENA region often falls short of reflecting the local deterioration caused by climate change and environmental degradation. The reliance on government statements and a lack of independent reporting often leads to an underestimation of climate topics.

The struggle to access information, a fundamental right of people and media outlets, is still a primary goal of the civil movements in most Arab countries. However, most governments in the region see demands for access to information as stemming from collusion with foreign agencies and as a threat to national security. According to a study conducted by the Arab Reform Initiative, “these and other fuzzy accusations continue to hang like a sword above citizens’ heads and suggest the rulers still believe they can get away with cosmetic reforms.” There is no exception to this prevailing view on information, including when it comes to policies on climate and environmental information. Government programs confronting climate change are plagued by ambiguity and corruption, not to mention security restrictions.

Lack of Knowledge

Despite the global consensus that climate change is occurring, various factors prevent transparency in climate information. These include challenges in clearly communicating complex climate science to the public, the marginalization of climate topics in media outlets, greenwashing practices by governments and corporations, and a general lack of in-depth climate knowledge among journalists. Additionally, various factors hinder the clarity of information in the MENA region, such as restricted information flow or state-controlled narration in the best case and the lack of scientific studies explaining climate change. These factors make it challenging to distinguish between reliable and inaccurate information.

In a survey study about climate mis/disinformation in the MENA region, conducted by Internews and the Earth Journalism Network, around one-third of surveyed journalists expressed the belief that climate change is the will of God. This was the opinion of 40 percent of surveyed Yemeni journalists, compared to 30 percent and 19 percent of Iraqi and Moroccan journalists, respectively. This indicates how limited scientific knowledge on climate change contributes to untrustworthy and inaccurate information. Since climate change is a complex scientific issue and interconnected with other science aspects, a climate journalist needs a background in science.

However, climate journalists and the public cannot be solely blamed for their limited understanding of climate change. The issue is exacerbated by the absence of climate change considerations in public policies, including education and media policies. Along with all that, the lack of academic studies and research in universities and scientific centers further hinders the dissemination of reliable climate information in the MENA countries.

In countries facing conflict and instability, such as Yemen, leaders and politicians often take over scientific bodies, contributing to the widespread public denial of climate change and the dissemination of inaccurate climate information. Over the period 2021 to 2023, the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation released four shipments of methyl bromide pesticide after it was detained by customs for being banned and toxic.

On May 19, 2024, Mahdi al-Mashat—the head of the Houthi rebels’ extra-constitutional political institution, the Supreme Political Council—met with the ministry’s leadership to discuss determining the types of pesticides permitted for agricultural use. Al-Mashat told the meeting attendees that the shipment of agricultural methyl bromide pesticide, which was released by customs, was previously used globally, before the product’s company decided to discontinue production due to a protocol in Europe that says it has an effect on the ozone layer. He then confirmed the possibility of using the pesticide, saying that there is no problem with the ozone layer in Yemen and that they do not have global warming. This statement was made despite Yemen facing recurring climate impacts, such as increasing temperatures, droughts, and floods that have started to threaten large areas of the country.

In sum, internal conflicts, the influence of nonstate actors including armed groups, and dysconnectivity among state entities are all elements that hinder the free flow of climate information. In countries paralyzed by conflict and political instability, such as Libya, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, climate narration often flows from unreliable sources. Armed groups’ narration, media fragmentation, and the ideological denial of climate change are the main factors misleading information ecosystems.

Yet the challenge is not just climate misinformation, but also the withholding of information and the difficulty of accessing remote areas and verifying the effects of climate change. According to interviews with environmental journalists from the region, many Yemeni journalists don’t have access to remote areas, where hyperlocal media related to armed groups are providing unverified climate information.[3]

Bureaucracy as a Challenge

After conducting extensive interviews with environmental journalists from Iraq, Morocco, and Yemen, it became clear that two other factors hinder the flow of information and transparency on climate change and environmental issues in the region.[4]

One significant challenge facing environmental journalists and researchers is the absence of a centralized online climate database for the MENA region. This database would serve as a repository for analyses, assessments, academic studies, and relevant data. Without such a resource, journalists are forced to rely on foreign agencies and international research centers, which often do not provide the in-depth, locally focused assessments needed to inform effective reporting.

Government agencies in the region frequently impose bureaucratic hurdles on journalists seeking information. The requirement to submit official requests, coupled with slow response times and limited cooperation from government officials, significantly delays the dissemination of information.

Moreover, the data provided by government entities are often inaccurate or incomplete, failing to reflect the true extent of climate change and environmental degradation.

The issue of bureaucratic red tape extends beyond environmental and climate-specific agencies. It is symptomatic of a broader system that is both affected by and contributes to climate change. To enhance transparency in climate information, there is a critical need for improved intercommunication between government entities, including nonstate actors. By sharing data and information on public health, urban infrastructure, and other relevant areas, these agencies can foster a more comprehensive understanding of climate change and its impacts.

The governments of many Arab countries have yet to implement comprehensive environmental policies and often rely on underfunded and ineffective environmental agencies. The lack of preparedness among professionals in sectors such as health, energy, and municipal services further hampers the exchange of climate information and knowledge. To address these shortcomings, governments must invest in capacity building and establish stronger interagency coordination mechanisms.

In short, the lack of transparency in climate information within the region can also be attributed to the absence of a centralized online database, bureaucratic obstacles, siloed communication within government, and inadequate government policies. By addressing these challenges through the establishment of a comprehensive database, improved interagency coordination, and enhanced government capacity, it may be possible to foster a more informed and engaged public discourse on climate change and environmental issues.

Conclusion

Despite the MENA region being one of the world's most vulnerable areas to global warming and already experiencing a significant climate crisis, there is a lack of transparent and accurate information, posing a real challenge to the conducting of reliable assessments. The region's media establishments have limited access to reliable climate information, leading to misleading reporting. This reality, coupled with the region's ongoing conflicts and political instability, hinders the free flow of climate information.

Because of bureaucratic obstacles, weak climate governance, outdated environmental laws, untrusted information ecosystems, and lack of knowledge and expertise, media outlets often focus on extreme weather events rather than in-depth climate analysis. In addition, state-related media outlets often rely on official narratives, which can be insufficient. Independent journalists and media organizations in the region frequently face challenges in accessing information from government agencies and can therefore have limited understanding of climate science. Internal conflicts, the involvement of nonstate actors, and media fragmentation contribute to the spread of climate disinformation and misinformation.

To overcome these challenges, governments should implement transparency measures, reduce bureaucratic hurdles, and invest in capacity building and interagency coordination. Arab countries should adopt climate-specific laws and regulations through comprehensive and accessible online resources that can facilitate information sharing and analysis. The region needs an interregional climate reporting network and independent climate research centers.

Notes

- [1] Author interviews conducted with former and current members of the Iraqi Parliament in September 2024, Baghdad, Iraq.
- [2] Najiba Al-Zayer, “Climate Change: The Legislative Framework,” Review of Jurisprudence and Legislation 2 (2023), Tunisia.
- [3] Author interviews conducted with environmental journalists from Yemen in August 2024 via Zoom platform.
- [4] Author interviews conducted with environmental journalists from Iraq and Morocco April and May 2024 via Zoom platform.

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Source: This research paper entitled *Climate Information Transparency in the MENA Region* was published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Link: <https://carnegieendowment.org/people/khaled-sulaiman?lang=en>



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