

ECOPOLITICS AND ECOLOGICAL TRENDS IN THE MIDDLE EAST. REALISM OR UTOPIA?

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Introduction

Ecopolitics, understood as a political orientation whose ideology is based on the existence of an active civil society which is aware of its rights and developing in the spirit of sustainability, since the 1970s has been shaping the political arenas of particular states of the broadly conceived Western civilisation and has had a permanent and increasing impact on them, but has also become a widespread phenomenon in the social thought. At the start of the third decade of the 21st century the so-called ecological trend has become such a common phenomenon in Western countries that it has grown into an element of fashion or a stylish way of life in accordance with the principle “you are eco-friendly – you are trendy”. However, while ecopolitics, social ecological trends as well as the work of the so-called Green parties (certainly with different political effectiveness in various states) have become a *fait accompli* in the European perspective, in other regions of the world – especially those where the sphere of social or political movements, including in particular civic movements, is non-existent – the establishment and functioning of such movements, if it happens at all, faces major obstacles in the form of political barriers set up by the authoritarian regimes, which perceive such movements as a threat to their own political existence.

The aim of this article is to present the origin, evolution and functioning of ecological trends and ecopolitics focused on the objectives of sustainable development in selected states in the Middle East, as well as to determine the chances for the intensification of their social, religious and political impacts in the region in the third decade of the 21st century. The research problem will

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be resolved through providing answers to the following research questions: is Islam an obstacle to developing eco-trends in the Middle East?; what is the correlation between Islam, politics and eco trends in the Middle East countries?; what factors contribute to the establishment of environmental (Green) movements in Middle Eastern states?; what determining factors constitute a barrier for the political, religious and social existence and further development of ecological trends and ecopolitics in the Middle East?; if religious factors and circumstances guarantee effectiveness of ecological trends in the Middle East?; do Western states that have close relationships (sometimes alliance relations, e.g. the USA) with states in the region pursue an effective policy for supporting the Green movements and groups in Middle Eastern states?; does ecopolitics in the Middle East remain aligned with the interests of the states from outside the region which pursue their interests in this part of the world?

The hypothesis to be verified in this article is contained in the assumption that there is a close correlation between religious and political circumstances and low effectiveness of environmental movements and groups as well as poor efficiency in the pursuit of their objectives and postulates. Due to the specificity of authoritarian regimes, a limited scope of civil liberties, as well as marginalisation of the influence of Western media (including political control over social media), there are no favourable circumstances for the effective development of ecological trends and pursuit of the objectives of ecopolitics in Middle Eastern states. The Greens are perceived by the authorities as a threat to their own stability and state security, and consequently, as an element of opposition, which has no place in the states in this region. Middle Eastern societies are not mentally prepared for the participation in the Green movements, and the occasional waves of their popularity – the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Nejati and Salamzadeh and Salamzadeh 2011) – are of incidental and transitory nature.

The research problem will be resolved and the hypothesis will be verified with the use of the following research methods: the comparative method, factor analysis, content analysis and systemic analysis. The research problem is original and has not yet been analysed in the academic literature from the perspective presented in the article.

Ecopolitics and ecological trends – The specificities of theoretical approach

Responsible progression of each country, based on the principles of

sustainable development, implies meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the chances of future generations to meet their own needs. Constructive and conscious policy of economic growth dynamisation requires adequate expertise, an innovative approach to solving socioeconomic problems and efficient management of non-renewable resources. The idea of sustainable development and environmental responsibility is already deeply rooted in the awareness of the largest global brands, innovative companies and huge corporations, but above all it has become a part of everyday life of individuals (Pihkala 2020). Being “eco-friendly” has become trendy, while not following ecological trends has simply become passé. Conscious societies have moved from the stage of the “eco-friendly attitude” to the “eco-shaming phase” (eco-shaming, eco-guilt, green-shame).

However, while the notions of sustainability and ecopolitics have become deeply rooted in the socioeconomic reality of the countries in the broadly conceived West, this model of functioning seems to be still far from being achieved in the countries outside of Western civilisation, including Middle Eastern states. Environmental activism, commitment to environmental protection and eco-innovation defined as a new or significantly improved product (good or service), process, organisational or marketing method that bring environmental benefits as compared to alternative solutions, are not trendy in non-Western civilisations, thus they do not determine their social, economic and political functioning. Therefore, fundamental questions are raised as to the possibility of expansion of Western ecological trends to other, in this case, Middle Eastern societies and ruling elites (Stoett 2023, 172, 191).

It should be stressed that it is primarily the self-awareness and pressure put by young people that make manufacturers apply faster and better solutions related to sustainable development, but also force organisations, institutions and other international bodies as well as state and local authorities to adopt ecological solutions. Greta Thunberg, a Swedish climate activist, who at the age of fifteen started protesting outside the Swedish parliament building against climate change in 2018, has in a way become the face of such ecological campaigns in recent years (Gould 2022). Greta Thunberg’s protest, fitting into and even radicalising the ecological revolution which had already begun and its constituent parts in the form of spreading ecological trends, struck a chord with other young activists all over the world.

An analysis of the newest ecological trends makes it possible to identify six dominant trends which have appeared or become more powerful over recent years (5 Trends 2021).

The first of them, and at the same time one of the newest trends, is “Flygskam”, which means the feeling of shame about travelling by plane.

This attitude results from the awareness of the negative impact of the aviation industry on climate and the environment (Mkono 2020: 223-226). The aviation sector belongs to the group of ten sectors responsible for the highest global emissions of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and production of various waste and pollutants (Timperley 2022). Awareness of this state of affairs has given rise to the global discussion on the adverse environmental impact of flying, which has resulted in a number of eco-friendly actions. In June 2019 KLM Royal Dutch Airlines initiated the “Fly responsibly” campaign (KLM 2022), in Spain the “Zero Cabin Waste” project was started to reduce cabin waste (Evolution 2022), and in 2020 the international programme Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation was implemented, aiming at offsetting around 80% of the CO₂ emissions above 2020 levels by 2035 (Reducing 2022).

Another ecological trend can be described as “ecological fashion”. Its key feature is a trend for good quality clothes, but with the emphasis that they do not cause environmental harm. The brands that build their image on being eco-friendly (11 Eco-Friendly 2022) point out that this ecological trend is based on the manufacturer’s and consumer’s awareness that fashion can be approached responsibly, with the implementation of solutions reducing its negative impact on the environment. The eco-friendly fashion industry uses certified, innovative, environmentally-friendly and recycled materials, promotes the minimalist style and also values traditional tailoring, rejecting mass production of low quality clothing (Chan 2021). Again, it is the young generation that chooses ecological fashion, which gives some hope for the future.

The third, slightly older ecological trend can be described as “Impossible Food” or the “meatless meat”. This trend promotes the alternative culture of vegetarianism or veganism as an element of a healthy lifestyle. The promoters of Impossible Food emphasise that industrial animal agriculture is one of major factors causing climate changes due to the fact that it is responsible for approximately 18% of man-made greenhouse gas emissions, which is more than the whole transportation sector generates (Reiley 2019). In 2016 the New York restaurant Momofuku Nishi was the first in the world to introduce the Impossible Burger, the flagship product of Impossible Foods Inc., which is an interesting example of permanent development of the Impossible Food concept (Holpuch 2016). Since then a network of restaurants and companies connected with Impossible Foods Inc., such as Burger King with its Impossible Whoopers, has been created. They are famous for serving various kinds of plant-based food, including pizza and sausages.

“Sustainability” and “Ecological entrepreneurship” constitute the

fourth ecological trend. It defines and determines marketing activities which would allow modern companies whose customers are the environmentally-aware consumers to gain and maintain a privileged market position (Rodríguez-García, Guijarro-García, Carrilero-Castillo 2019: 7-8).

The fifth ecological trend, which to a great extent draws on ecological entrepreneurship, can be termed as “being happy”. This is a relatively new trend where people pay more attention to themselves and their own lives, while employers – to their employees. This attitude is related to the problem of burn-out addressed by the World Health Organization in May 2019. According to WHO, overworking, stress and lack of motivation have a negative impact on the well-being and health of workers. This is why in 2020 a new job position called “happiness manager” started to appear in many corporations. The manager’s main duty is to ensure a friendly atmosphere and proper communication and to fight workaholism at the workplace (Messinger 2016). The “being happy” trend shapes the environment based on the assumption that only a happy employee is capable of working effectively and responsibly, and this can guarantee attainment of sustainable development objectives.

The last of the above-mentioned ecological trends has been named “Be Like Generation Z”. Generation Z is broadly defined as people born after 1995. They grew up in the digital world and virtual reality. Importantly, members of Gen Z have already entered the labour market and turned out to be a creative and entrepreneurial generation, to whom work is an integral, but positive part of their lives. They are opponents of workaholism. This is a generation that has its own opinions and is not afraid to express them. Members of Gen Z can collect, analyse and synthesise data, draw conclusions and work with passion (Parker, Igielnik 2020). Their strength was visible in marches and protests in the streets of many capitals during successive UN climate summits.

Having presented six most important and most popular ecological trends among the societies of the broadly conceived West, it is worth considering the issue of their permeation into culturally different societies. The crucial point in the case in question is the presence or absence of ecological trends in the Middle East.

The Middle East (Islam) and Western ecological trends – assimilation or resistance?

Explosion of environmental activism in Middle Eastern states occurred in the first three decades of the 21st century. It is thus a relatively new phenomenon in this region, which is why it remains an understudied element

in the broader sociopolitical landscape of this part of the world. Importantly, however, the spread of environmental activism in Middle Eastern states reflects changing political circumstances in this region, including attempts to build civil societies in their Western meaning, as well as long-term structural changes in the economic and social spheres of these states, including permanent population growth, increasing urbanisation (almost 70% of the region's population lives in towns) and industrialisation, a progressive growth in the enrolment rates, increased participation of women in the political and economic life or migration processes related to the awareness and desire for the best possible living conditions. However, Joannie L. Sowers is right arguing that “not surprisingly, the expansion of environmental contestation has been most evident in countries with semicompetitive political systems and long histories of collective action, such as Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Israel, and Iran. Environmental activism has also emerged to a lesser degree in authoritarian states considered inhospitable to activism, such as those of the Persian Gulf, while routine forms of civic engagement have become almost impossible in war-torn Syria, Yemen, and Libya” (Sowers 2018). This argument remains fully compatible with the principles and objectives of the Green movement, which is becoming increasingly widespread all over the world, although its foundations are related to values characteristic of democracy. Environmental activists base their work on four key pillars being the antithesis of authoritarian state, which is an inherent element of the Middle Eastern political landscape: sociology based on theoretical foundations of ecology, social justice, participatory democracy (equal participation of the society in the functioning of a state) and nonviolence. It is worth adding that in April 2001 72 countries adopted The Global Greens Charter in Canberra, committing themselves to global partnership based on six fundamental principles, which constitute environmental activism in the 21st century. The principles to follow are: ecological wisdom, social justice, participatory democracy, nonviolence, sustainability and respect for diversity (Global Greens 2021).

It is important to note that Middle Eastern states are far from meeting the globally adopted environmental objectives, including especially the targets which the UN set to the world in 2015 to achieve by 2030 within the framework of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Transforming 2015). This is a conclusion from the UN's 2020 “Arab Sustainable Development Report”, in which progress on each of the seventeen goals of Agenda 2030 is assessed (Schaar 2020). However, this does not mean that environmental activation, at least in certain countries in the Middle East, is not progressing,

as some Middle Eastern societies are aware of the challenges and threats to the environmental and food security typical of this part of the world, such as: excessive consumption of water, which is hard to find in the desert environment and which is scarce in the region (it is estimated that all Arab countries are likely to face the most serious water deficits by 2040–2050) (El-Zein 2014); rapid global warming, which is likely to exacerbate water stress and at the time intensify heat waves and droughts; overfishing and pollution of ecosystems; soil degradation, which has a negative impact on biodiversity, limits the development of agriculture and food production and contributes to severe sand storms and starvation (Al-Sarihi 2022); rapid urbanisation and economic development connected with the increased consumption of fossil fuels, water and other non-renewable natural resources, as well as with the excessive CO₂ emission into the air in connection with the growing demand for energy (Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are among the world's largest per capita CO₂ emitters – lobbying against fossil fuels is regarded by the authorities as a threat to state security and eliminated or ignored completely); lack of infrastructure and expertise on issues related to environmentally friendly policies and sustainability (Hawkins 2020).

Public environmental awareness is thus the essential condition, but it does not constitute a sufficient basis for environmental sustainability in Middle Eastern countries. The development and promotion of ecological trends are hindered by the following factors and circumstances: numerous and long-lasting regional conflicts (Özalp 2011: 5-9); the problem of refugees and humanitarian disasters (for example civil wars in Yemen or Syria); rivalry for influence between regional powers (such as Turkish policy of cutting down trees in Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan) (Abdulla 2022); terrorist activities; or the rivalry for economic, political and military influence in the region between the outside powers (the USA, Russia, China, India), to whom the ecological values of the region are of secondary importance (Del Sarto, Malmvig, Lecha 2019: 35-36).

Therefore, awareness of environmental problems in the Middle East is highly insufficient as it lacks a broader conceptual basis. There is a lack of political thought focused on how to fight, and how to prevent damage to the environment in the Middle East. As Hafsa Halawa rightly remarks, language and literature have not yet provided intellectual thought on the issues of environmental challenges and threats as well as the forms of addressing them in the MENA region. The direction of Middle Eastern ecopolitics is still unclear and its targets undefined. Although the governments of all the MENA states have adopted some kind of national environmental protection legislation and established agencies or ministries of environmental protection, such

ministries are frequently no more than an institutional facade of little practical significance and the funds at their disposal are extremely modest. What is more, analysts and environmental activists often face misunderstanding resulting from combining environmental civil society (focused on water security and air quality) with climate activism (direct targeting of emissions, and action to address and reduce climate change), which leads to the inability to differentiate between the short- and long-term actions. “Almost nowhere is there a deep appreciation of these topics as they relate to broader civil society activism, rights, and economic and political security and engagement” (Halawa 2020).

Therefore, while analysing the phenomenon of environmental activism in Middle Eastern countries it should be pointed out at the very beginning that there is a noticeable contradiction as far as environmental mobilisation of Middle Eastern societies is concerned. On the one hand, the goal set for themselves by the authoritarian ruling elites (Danahar 2015: 22-24), understood as dynamic social, political and economic development leading to the modernisation of the states and the ability to meet Western competition, requires attracting private investors that use innovative technological solutions. That means prioritising ecological solutions, in line with the common Western assumption that the future of our planet depends and is based on environmentally friendly patents and on the implementation of the sustainable development concept. On the other hand, however, the authoritarian Middle Eastern authorities permanently suppress any social activity by controlling universities and non-governmental organisations, thereby preventing the rise of civil societies that are aware of their rights and using censorship as an instrument to control social awareness, which does not promote the development of social and political movements, including the Green movement. This state of affairs is due to the fact that environmental activism is perceived by the political decision-makers in the Middle East as a threat to security, internal order and territorial integrity of the states, and above all as a threat to the political status quo, which in some cases is decades-old (Esposito, Sonn, Voll 2016: 238-240). It may also be seen as a risk of increased influence of external (Western) actors, which is associated with a loss of some sovereignty and a return to the mandate system, colonial or even postcolonial era.

However, despite common resistance, conservatism and concerns of the ruling elites in Middle Eastern states, there has been a steady rise in the awareness of the necessity to adopt and implement ecological solutions, both among the Middle Eastern societies and some of the political decision-makers. It is a very positive trend and all the signs are that it will continue

both in the short- and mid-term perspective. Therefore, it will be an extremely demanding and difficult task for the Western world elites pursuing their political, economic and military interests in the Middle East to exert a positive pressure and raise the awareness of the significance of environmental mobilisation and gradual implementation of the objectives related to the Green movement among Middle Eastern decision-makers.

Therefore, as the study of the environmental activism phenomenon in the Middle East has shown, it is possible to pose a hypothesis that it develops in two different ways. This is why environmental activism can be considered both in broad and narrow terms.

The narrow approach to environmental activism in the Middle East pertains mainly to the urban population that more and more frequently lives in the proximity of industrial plants, landfills, waste incineration plants and other harmful industrial facilities, with a meagre standard of living and quality of life. There has been a steady rise in the incidence of chronic diseases and mortality rates, and the availability of professional health care services and tests, as well as the possibility to change the place of residence, remain highly limited. It should therefore be stressed that environmental activists in Middle Eastern states have achieved certain success not so much at the central level, but just at the local level. Being close to the environmental problems, feeling the effects of environmental degradation on their own lives, they can mobilise themselves and other people to take initiatives for improving their quality of life. Local social environmental movements are the best evidence of this phenomenon. Acting in particular districts or broader communities, the local environmental activists focus on the most pressing problems, such as poor waste management and the insufficient water infrastructure. Such initiatives may be well exemplified by the Egyptian non-governmental organisation Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association (HEPCA), whose activity is not focused on the environmental problems of the entire country, but on the protection of the Egyptian part of the coral reefs and the biodiversity of the Red Sea in connection with the permanent increase in tourism and the economic development in this region of Egypt posing a threat to the ecosystem. HEPCA carries out multiple projects and social initiatives extremely effectively and is actively engaged in activities related to raising environmental awareness, targeted at the local community, schools, tourism industry and service providers operating in the Red Sea region (HEPCA 2022).

It is therefore important to note that globalisation and widespread mediatisation, including especially expansion of the Internet and social networking sites or blogs, have made people who engage in activities at the local level become more and more aware of the reasons for deteriorating health and

lack of prospects for the future. Comparing their own standard of living with the possibilities offered by the West, they can see an opportunity for change for future generations. This is why it is the young, highly educated generation that is becoming particularly active in the sphere of ecological solutions. This is the generation which can be compared to the Western Generation Z. This generation focuses on green solutions in fashion, dietary habits or the “being happy” aspect in the professional sphere. This generation is aware of its values, needs and the necessity of change. This is the generation that constitutes the Middle Eastern Green movements. And finally, this is the generation that has no communication barriers, since – as described by Marshall McLuhan – it has become a part of the global village. Members of Generation Z should be seen as a chance for an effective and successful environmental change in the Middle East, provided, of course, that authoritarian authorities do not brutally stifle their enthusiasm for environmental mobilisation.

On the other hand, the broader approach to Middle Eastern environmental activism should be analysed in terms of ecopolitics at the level of central authorities. The problem is that the issue of ecopolitics at this level remains a secondary or even tertiary concern in the Middle East. What is more, central authorities are not favourably inclined towards eco-friendly activities. Environmental activists, as well as journalists addressing the issues of environmental protection, are subjected to surveillance and repressions. Their fundamental rights and freedoms are restricted and many of them have been imprisoned or forced to leave the country. Furthermore, at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, non-governmental organisations involved with environmental protection remain under pressure from authoritarian regimes, and their ability to act is usually highly limited. It is worth recalling that the civic-minded reforms in Middle Eastern states, which also pertained to environmental activists, took place only for a short time following the Arab Spring of 2011 (Amin 2016: 45-62). In practice, however, the Arab Spring ended in a fiasco, and after a decade of the uprising there is a return to the status quo ante in the countries in the region (Brownlee, Masoud, Reynolds 2015: 226-228). To confirm this point, it is worth recalling that when citizens took to the streets to protest over water shortages in 2018 or July 2021 during one of the most severe droughts in Iran, many political decision-makers in the Islamic Republic of Iran began to perceive environmental activism as a dangerous source of mass ideological mobilisations which could threaten political stability and the rule of the Shiite clergy. Therefore, the protests met with attempts at their violent suppression (Esfandiari 2021). Suppressing environmental activism at the central level can be perfectly exemplified by the case of Egypt under the rule of general Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. The

Egyptian president, through his radical policy to limit political pluralism, has marginalised the freedom of association and placed severe restrictions on NGOs, including environmental organisations. In May 2017 al-Sisi ratified a new NGO law, which almost entirely eliminated the possibility of functioning of civil society from Egyptian public space and marginalised the functioning of non-governmental human rights organisations and associations. The adopted law criminalised NGOs' work, introducing the penalty of up to five years in prison for non-compliance with its provisions, such as receiving external funds without government approval. The law also allowed for permanent surveillance and monitoring of NGOs' daily activities by state officials. Furthermore, the authorities imposed travel bans on human rights defenders and NGO workers. In November 2020 members of one of the few non-governmental organisations remaining in Egypt, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), were arrested (Human Rights Watch 2020).

It is worth adding that an interesting approach to the issue of environmental mobilisation in the Middle East has been presented by Joannie L. Sowers, who identified three dominant groups of modes of state and society engagement in environmental issues. According to J.L. Sowers, the first are informal and include small-scale, localised actions, focusing on the activities of small groups of community members, rural and urban residents, who block roads and public places, file petitions to local officials and attempt to pressure state authorities in order for adequate measures to be taken to prevent degradation of natural environment in their closest surroundings. These modes of activism, as pointed out by J.L. Sowers, generate small changes in the pro-environmental state and corporate behaviour and policies. The second group is of a more institutionalised nature and focuses on environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOS). An interesting fact is that over the recent years the number of ENGOS has rapidly grown in such states as Iran, Turkey, Israel, Lebanon, Egypt or Palestine, although the level of popular support in particular countries varies considerably. The effectiveness of their activities is mainly limited by the fact that they operate in authoritarian regimes, which entails an array of government restrictions and strict control, including stringent requirements related to receiving funds for their activity. The third group of modes, which according to J.L. Sowers appear to be the most effective due to their flexible, diffused nature, has been termed as resistance campaign (*hamla*). This type of environmental activism is often accompanied by social campaigns, the activity of local committees, lobbying and cooperation with the media in order to get local and nationwide publicity concerning their environmental activities (Sowers 2018). This group of modes bears a strong resemblance to professional work of Western

environmental activists. However, the main difference in their effectiveness lies in the fact that while Western countries support, or at least do not hinder grassroots environmental activities, the Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes, which possess instruments of police repression and hindrances in the form of bureaucratic pathologies, become the main obstacles to successful ecopolitics.

The practical side of sustainable development and ecological trends in the Middle East

As mentioned above, the Middle East is not a part of the world where special emphasis is placed on ecological trends, the Green movement or the sustainable development policy. The fact is that both the authorities and some societies are aware of the importance of environmental problems, however, the approach to addressing these problems is extremely limited and diversified but, most of all, it is dependent on a number of various internal and external factors and circumstances. Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that despite numerous barriers and challenges, which hamper or slow down the progress of the sustainable development policy and the Green movements' activities, measures and projects are being undertaken in most states in the region, which may be perceived as a turn in the right direction – towards ecological trends and the principles of sustainable development. Therefore, it is worth presenting at least a few examples of the practical side of ecopolitics in the Middle East.

Undoubtedly, one of the most interesting examples is Egypt (Hussein, Pollock 2019), where the totally eco- friendly New Administrative Capital (NAC) is under construction. It is commonly named “the new Cairo”, although the new capital cannot ultimately bear this name as one of Cairo's districts has already been named like that.

It is interesting to note that NAC is a city built from scratch, while president al-Sisi himself was the project initiator. According to the project, which originated as early as March 2015, the new capital – smart city – will accommodate about 7 million people. All the key state institutions will be transferred there. NAC is expected to replace the overpopulated Cairo. Justifying the need for the construction of a new capital city, Egyptian authorities pointed out that the overcrowded Cairo was no longer able to function efficiently, and the excessive number of tourists, immigrants, as well as the expansion of slums definitely make it difficult for the old capital to function properly. What is important, however, is the fact that ecology became a significant characteristic and distinctive feature in the design of the new city

(El Hakeh 2021).

Thus, most importantly, the new smart city is to be technologically advanced and have extraordinary architecture, with the tallest skyscraper in Africa, the largest Christian church (a Coptic church) in the Middle East and the biggest mosque in Egypt. Additionally, the administrative and business districts and the Green River Park – the largest park along the river in Africa, which is to resemble the Nile River – are also architecturally unique and modern. Twenty parks and green areas are to be created in the city, which will ensure that over 15 square metres of green space will be allocated per inhabitant, which is several times the number in Cairo. The new authorities constructing the smart city argue that they prioritise environmentally friendly solutions and sustainable development. The city is to use energy from the sun, city transportation is to be based on electric train lines and payments will be cashless. Stefano Boeri, who is famous for his designs of buildings integrated with greenery, designed three unique structures, which apart from their residential function, will also be home to a vertical forest spread over several storeys. The above undertaking in NAC is expected to attract over two million tourists per year (BOERI 2022).

According to the authorities and the city constructors, NAC, due to its innovative character and ecological solutions, is to become the First Smart Sustainable 4th Generation City in Egypt (ACUD 2022). There are claims that Egypt follows the pattern of the so-called Dubaisation – building new, artificial cities based on ecological solutions. The Egyptians themselves stress that they are proud of great projects, yet a huge part of the society emphasises at the same time that such projects do not meet the current needs and priorities of the Egyptian society struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic, economic problems, shortcomings of education system and health service, and additionally the effects of the increasing pathology of the authoritarian regime.

While analysing the practical side of ecological solutions in the Middle East, it is also worth mentioning some collective and individual actions taken in that area by respective states. It is important to highlight the fact that in view of growing concerns regarding the environment, such as global warming and the depletion of fossil fuel deposits, the states in the region are taking steps to reduce their dependence on natural resources such as oil or natural gas. Extensive investments in renewable energy and solar and wind energy have become an ecological alternative in this case. Significantly, the climatic conditions in the region are favourable for such investments. The Middle East lies within the Global Sun Belt, which gets the most sunlight and the least rainfall. Therefore, states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait or the United

Arab Emirates are investing in a number of renewable energy schemes aiming to achieve from 15% to 30% of their power generation from renewable energy sources by 2030. It is also worth noting that the above-mentioned states are taking proactive measures to control the waste generation by introducing sustainable energy and reasonable waste management projects (e.g. waste recycling). For instance, the UAE, which has achieved a 70% recycling rate in less than ten years, is a pioneer and at the same time the most active state in that area, having reached one of the key environmental trends in its policy referred to as the zero waste. Interestingly, Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates has adopted the initiative named Estidama, which is the Arabic word for sustainability, within the framework of ecological solutions and trends. It is an extremely visionary programme which provides guidance on how to design innovative buildings in order for them to be more sustainable and remain in accordance with the ecological standards. The Estidama programme is fully in line with the innovative project “Abu Dhabi Vision 2030” (Tukan 2022).

What is more, one of the most interesting projects adopted in the Middle East concerns construction and functioning of the smart city named Masdar, located in the United Arab Emirates, which is to be the most sustainable eco-city in the world. Masdar is the first and so far the only city in the world powered entirely by renewable energy and without traffic emission pollution. This is the first city in the world with zero-emission, noiseless urban transport, not compromising the visual side of the city, as it is based on electric vehicles that run on magnetic tracks and operate mainly underground. Interestingly, even the name of the city is not accidental. Masdar is the Arabic word for “source”, which together with its location in the desert and energy self-sufficiency, forms a coherent whole. Masdar is thus to become the flagship example for other cities of how to undergo the process of fast urbanisation through effective use of water, waste and renewable energy, constantly engaging in sustainable development and climate change mitigation. Masdar City, whose construction began in 2006, is a kind of experiment initiated by the emir of the United Arab Emirates (Masdar, 2022).

The practical side of the ecological solutions focuses also on actions in the legal and institutional fields, which are aimed to demonstrate that the principles and objectives of sustainable development are important and have even become a priority, and the states in the region, aware of the consequences of environmental degradation, fit into the ecological trends with their policies. This may be exemplified by the fact that the authorities of the United Arab Emirates have made sustainable development one of the key themes of one of the most important economic events in the world, EXPO 2020 (1 October 2021 – 31 March 2022). A special thematic pavilion has been dedicated to

the broadly conceived environmental issues and a number of regulations have been adopted with regard to pursuing the objectives of sustainable development (Bureau Expo Dubai 2017). Also the websites dedicated to EXPO 2020 expressly expose the sustainable development policy which is to be promoted in the Middle East by the United Arab Emirates. As emphasised by the EXPO 2020 organisers: “From recycling to promoting natural solutions, we hope to inspire others to reaffirm their commitment to the environment and protecting the Earth for future generations. All of our actions are geared towards creating positive environmental impacts on a national, regional and global scale, and support the Dubai Plan 2021, UAE Vision 2021 and the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (EXPO 2022).

Interestingly, Saudi Arabia has also paid particular attention to the problem of environmental pollution, issuing a decree obliging all organisations to comply with standards related to reduction of noise, air and water pollution. The Presidency of Meteorology of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has established a climate data rescue programme, consisting of recording and archiving metadata information, which is crucial for long-term analyses of climate changes (I-DARE 2022). Furthermore, the theme of environmental protection has been adopted within the Basic Law of Governance in accordance with article (322) of the Statute, which provides as follows: the State shall endeavour to preserve, protect, and improve the environment and prevent its pollution. Taking into consideration the fast economic development of the state, which for decades has been based predominantly on the oil sector, Saudi authorities have been systematically introducing regulations and establishing institutions whose task is to monitor environmental pollution, but also taking actions for the prevention of the natural environment degradation. An example of such institutions is the Department of Meteorology and Environmental Protection or the General Authority for Meteorology and Environmental Protection, and the actions are reflected in the adoption of legal measures in the form of the Environmental Law in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its executive regulations. Saudi Arabia’s efforts to protect the environment are also exemplified by initiatives such as establishing a research fund for energy and the environment. “The Kingdom has the most significant environmental reconstruction project in history. The project is focused on developments, which were integrated after the Gulf War and cost the Kingdom more than 1.1 billion USD. The Center for Desert Agriculture works on developing sustainable, low-input systems, which use water efficiently to produce food and grains and are proportionate with the coastal desert environments that depend on agriculture in relation to sea water and sunlight” (Saudi 2022).

Conclusion

Ecopolitics and ecological trends are not new or unknown phenomena in the Middle East. These phenomena have been becoming a well-established element of the religious and political landscape of societies and states in the region for at least a decade, and their increase is to be expected in the near future.

The fact is that Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes constitute one of the greatest barriers hampering and hindering the work of civic environmental movements, however, there are a number of innovative projects and initiatives both at the local and central level, which are fully aligned with the Western trends of the sustainable development policy, and frequently outdo the Western civilisation in terms of technological advancement.

The discussion on ecopolitics and ecological trends in the Middle East is therefore fully relevant and justified. Sources of the potential environmental disaster in the region should be seen in the wrong policy pursued by authoritarian decision-makers towards their native ecosystems. Middle Eastern states are facing a number of challenges and threats to their sustainable development. Factors contributing to the ecological instability in the region include the dynamics of demographic change, environmental degradation related to the overexploitation of raw materials, especially oil and natural gas, scarcity of natural resources such as water, food shortages being the consequence of droughts and global warming, but also intra-regional conflicts, the activity of jihadist organisations and multidimensional proxy wars fought in the region. This is why, if the Western part of the international society would like the states in the Middle East to pursue global sustainable development policy, it itself must avoid fragmentation of the region through indirect and direct participation in wars, and focus on peaceful settlement of disputes, promoting the implementation of environmental legislation in the region and establishing the relevant institutions supervising ecopolitics by these states.

The Middle East is a very receptive region, which is open to new ideas and solutions. It is a region where the model of authoritarian governance must ultimately become compatible with addressing challenges posed by Western ecological trends and ecopolitics. What is extremely important is that many states in the region have successfully met such challenges and understand that in the 21st century it is not possible to be a highly developed country (a regional power) without taking into account the objectives of the sustainable

development policy. In this case it is especially the young generation that has become the element of the social structure that is building, developing and exporting this ecological awareness in the Middle East.

Therefore, if ecological trends and ecopolitics remain in compliance with the political and religious objectives of the state and are aligned with internal and foreign policies without the risk of losing power and political and religious influence by the ruling authoritarian decision-makers, then they become an important instrument used to enhance the state's position in the Middle East and in the international arena. Ecopolitics and ecological trends have become effective tools used to show the world that a particular state has become modern and its economy is innovative. It appears that ecopolitics in this meaning has been particularly favoured by three Middle Eastern countries: Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This last state promotes sustainable development and ecological trends in the most spectacular way and uses them to build its new position as a power in the Middle East.

In sum, ecopolitics and ecological trends do not threaten religion's dominant position in Middle Eastern countries. Islam and ecology do not contradict each other. Moreover, countries dominated by radical Muslims, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, focus on the development of ecological trends. Therefore, religion (Islam), politics (authoritarian regimes) and ecotrends constitute a new type of dependency triangle in the Middle East.²

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ABSTRACT

The paper explains that Islam and ecology do not contradict each other. Countries dominated by Muslims focus on the development of ecological trends. Ecological trends become essential to enhance the state's position in the region and the international arena. In this case, ecopolitics becomes practical tools used by political decision-makers to create an image of a modern state whose economy is innovative and whose society is aware of the benefits resulting from the implementation of ecological solutions. Nevertheless, there is a close correlation between religious and political circumstances (functioning of authoritarian regimes) and low effectiveness of environmental movements and groups.

KEYWORDS

The Middle East, Ecopolitics, Islam, Ecological Trends, Authoritarian Regime

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