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TITLE:

Who Goes Green? Patterns of Environmental Activism, Cooperation and Resistance in the SWANA region

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ABSTRACT (1500 words):

From the 2013 protests in Istanbul's Gezi Park, to the demonstrations against electricity shortages in the Gaza Strip in 2017, from the 2015 garbage crisis and the "You stink" movement in Lebanon to the 2016 "We are not waste" campaign in Morocco or the long-running collective "Maneche Msabb" in Tunisia, from the 2014 anti-fracking campaign in Algeria to "Egyptians against the Coal Movement", there is a growing and increasingly vibrant activism in the South West Asian - North African (SWANA) region around environmental issues. They are just a few examples of a multitude of bottom-up processes of contestation and change that shed light on multilayered, prolonged and overlapping crises far beyond the strictly environmental dimension. As the French sociologist Razmig Keucheyan (2019) shows in "Nature is a Battlefield", the centrality of environmental issues in contemporary social conflicts depends on the fact that the relationship between power, economy, and politics revolves more and more around these issues. Moreover, when talking about environmental issues, activism, and crises, the local dimension very closely intersects with the regional and global ones.

The main goal of this panel is, therefore, to disentangle different notions of environmental and climate crisis and others intermingled, bottom-up and in their relation with state policies, by looking at how local claims, modes of action, languages, and dynamics connect to broader trends domestically, regionally and internationally. Equally important, it is to investigate how and to what extent environmentalism tell us about inequalities, precise political-economic choices, historical processes and hierarchical power relations.

The SWANA region is particularly vulnerable to environmental and climate challenges, as clearly evident in intensifying desertification, recurrent droughts, increasing soil erosion, water shortage as well as the over-exploitation of natural resources. Moreover, environmental issues can hardly be isolated from other pressing issues such as wealth redistribution, infrastructure development, access to basic resources, resource sovereignty, resource governance, and management. Lastly, as Moneer (2020) recalls, rigorous environmental institutions and ad hoc legal frameworks are largely missing.

Against this backdrop, it has long been thought that the region has a poor political ecology and awareness. This assumption, however, is increasingly being challenged on two levels: conceptually, many scholars describe this idea as if it were an orientalist legacy overstating that a scarce nature is deterministically mismanaged by societies and states overall incapable of negotiating modernity inputs (Hoffmann 2018); in practice, as environmental activism has been strongly intensifying in the region (Verhoeven 2018). In that regard, more and more citizens would take advantage of the political openings resulting from the Arab uprisings to organize at the grassroots level for their environmental rights as well (Moneer 2020). At the same time, whereas it is undeniable that the expansion of environmental contestation reflects changing opportunities for activists who learned from other types of popular campaigns how to frame concerns broadly (Sowers 2018), it is equally true that environmental activism is by no means a "new" phenomenon. Environmental problems are not only rooted in the political and economic trajectories pursued in colonial and post-colonial times, but also reflect long-term structural changes in the region's political economy, including population growth, and rapid urbanization. In this sense, a historical reconstruction of the origins of environmental crises is a key step to better contextualize what is happening today. Current environmental issues cannot, in fact, be properly understood without taking into account colonialist legacies but also specific policies for constructing the modern post-independent states, as well as the subsequent neo-liberal economic policies and processes of privatization and commodification of spaces and resources, which reproduced a number of inequalities, based on social class, gender or even ethnic

belonging, as well as regional imbalances between urban and rural areas, and among different regions within the same country. Last but not least, one should not forget the role that state environmentalism played in some regimes as a legitimizing factor, not unlike state feminism.

The diffusion of environmental activism is mainly evident in countries like Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Israel, and Iran but also emerged albeit to a lesser degree in the Persian Gulf. It manifests in many forms and creative modes of action: from resistance to megaprojects, land dispossession and waste dumping, to mobilization against air pollution, fracking and mining. Moreover, and remarkably, local protests in many countries have increasingly developed in an intersectional manner around multiple crises, bringing together labor claims and especially lack of job, with environmental issues, underdevelopment, misrecognition and even neocolonialism. An increasing number of scholars of SWANA/MENA politics, for example, engaged with issues of environmental exploitation, especially in “peripheral” territories (Suárez Collado 2013; De Smet and El Kahlaoui 2021, as byproducts of neoliberal, state-led and international donor driven policies, and as the manifestation of neocolonial practices.

This panel is interested in exploring five largely interwoven axes:

- First, the interconnectedness of environmental issues and other socio-economic, identity, and even cultural claims.
- Second, how practices of environmental activism and resistance go about renegotiating state-citizen relations, and social contracts.
- Third, whether and to what extent current state-led environmental projects and discourses meet environmental priorities from below, or are even in opposition and conflict with them.
- Fourth, the historical roots of environmental crises in connection to the (re)definition of hierarchical power relations, and center-periphery dynamics, with a particular attention to their entrenchment in state-led developmentalist projects first and privatization processes later on.
- Fifth, the ways in which local “crises” connect to global “crises”.

A last dimension is added to the previous ones, still largely underexplored, and that is the relationship between Islam and environmentalism. In other words, whether and to what extent social and political actors use a religion-based discourse as a theoretical framework to promote specific policies and narratives on environment.

In short, this panel aims to explore how “environmental consciousness” plays out in the SWANA countries, what the main local environmental concerns are, how they are embedded in broader processes of contesting the established political order and denounce social injustices, as well as the discursive narratives and modes of action of environmental activism(s) locally, their global connections and disconnections and their historical background.

The panel seeks original papers that elaborate on these topics, either as comparative studies or individual case studies. Contributions are invited from different disciplines including Political Science, Anthropology, Sociology, History and Area Studies.

Paper proposals shall include: an **abstract** (300-400 words maximum) along with **name, affiliation, contact information** and a **short bio** (no CVs please).

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