THE RIGHT TO WATER AND CLIMATE CHANGE

2025

THE ARAB WATCH REPORT ON ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RIGHTS

WATER AS A RIGHT AND A FIELD OF STRUGGLE IN THE ARAB WORLD:

An Analysis of Water-Related Protests

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Arab NGO Network for Development
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This report is published as part of the Arab NGO Network for Development's Arab Watch Report on Economic and Social Rights (AWR) series. The AWR is a periodic publication by the Network and each edition focuses on a specific right and on the national, regional and international policies and factors that lead to its violation. The AWR is developed through a participatory process which brings together relevant stakeholders, including civil society, experts in the field, academics, and representatives from the government in each of the countries represented in the report, as a means of increasing ownership among them and ensuring its localization and relevance to the context.

The seventh edition of the Arab Watch Report focuses on the right to water. It was developed to provide a comprehensive and critical analysis of the status of this right across the region, particularly in the context of climate change and its growing impacts. The information and analyses presented aim to serve as a platform for advocacy toward the realization of this fundamental right for all.

The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND), Brot für die Welt, or Norwegian People's Aid.

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INTRODUCTION: AN ARAB WAVE OF WATER ANGER

Over the past two decades, the Arab region has experienced a significant increase in water-related protests, highlighting water as a critical and contested resource central to social and political tensions. In villages, working-class neighborhoods, agricultural areas, and peri-urban zones, public demands for equitable and safe access to water are increasingly visible. These movements frequently oppose privatization, denounce the contamination of drinking water sources, and challenge large-scale policies that redistribute resources in ways that exacerbate existing structural inequalities. These protests reflect more than a service delivery crisis; they signal long-standing exclusion and embody alternative conceptions of citizenship, dignity, and sovereignty. Between 2009 and 2019, the number of protests in the region rose by 16.5% (Brannen et al., 2020), indicating the expansion of social mobilization across the Arab world. Most countries in the region face varying degrees of drought risk and low rainfall, which intensify disparities in access to safe water for marginalized and low-income populations. Climate projections indicate that the region could experience a temperature increase of up to 4°C by the end of the century, potentially reducing rainfall by up to 40% in some areas and doubling the frequency of drought events (Elgindy & Mabrouk, 2024). Consequently, social disparities in water access are becoming more pronounced, driven by the convergence of climate pressures and structural imbalances in water management and distribution. In many parts of the Arab world, water functions both as a source of conflict and as a resource at risk of depletion, reflecting and reinforcing broader socio-economic inequalities (Khalifa, 2025).

This wave of social mobilization occurs within a regional context characterized by severe environmental crises, social inequalities, and the weakening of state institutions in several countries. The intensification of this crisis extends beyond environmental dimensions, with direct implications for food security, social stability, and national sovereignty. For instance, losses associated with water stress and scarcity are projected to reach approximately 6–12% of the region's GDP by 2050 (World Bank, 2018). Furthermore, underinvestment in water infrastructure and inequitable distribution exacerbate social and spatial disparities in access to water.

The water crisis transcends national borders, fueling regional tensions, as exemplified by the dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Grand Renaissance Dam, and the recurring conflicts between Iraq and both Turkey and Iran over the sharing of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. In these

cases, concepts of national sovereignty are reshaped through the lens of water, turning this environmental resource into a tool for negotiation, leverage, or even confrontation. It can be argued that, in many countries of the region, the water crisis has become a catalyst for protests, a driver of mobilization, and, at times, a political instrument used to delay social demands or reinforce existing power structures.

In contexts of war and settler colonialism, such as in Palestine and Yemen, water is not merely a resource but a direct arena of conflict. In Palestine, water is rationed according to security and colonial considerations and is used as a weapon of war to deprive Palestinians of access and to damage water infrastructure. In Yemen, water functions as a weapon in the conflict, whether through the destruction of infrastructure or the control of water sources. In Syria and Iraq, we have witnessed the bombing of dams and the diversion of river courses as part of military strategies that target the environment as a means of punishment or domination. In these cases, water becomes both a victim of conflict and a tool within it.

However, the significance of water-related protests extends beyond their apparent political dimension to encompass profound symbolic and cultural aspects. Water is not a neutral substance; it is a socially reproduced resource intertwined with concepts of dignity, citizenship, identity, belonging, and the right to life. Consequently, the anger over water scarcity simultaneously reflects frustration over marginalization, forced exclusion from shared resources, and the transformation of basic necessities into class privileges or instruments for reproducing existing power hierarchies.

Against this backdrop, several central questions emerge, which this paper seeks to address: What makes water a flashpoint in different Arab societies? Can we speak of a transnational wave of water-related protests? What is the nature of these movements, and what are their organizational forms and modes of expression? Furthermore, what role can civil society and non-governmental organizations play in framing these dynamics and supporting their potential transformation into socially and environmentally transformative movements? Finally, is it possible to construct an Arab discourse on water justice that draws on local experiences and movements, moving beyond technical and neoliberal prescriptions focused on conservation, privatization, and commodification?

This paper seeks to make an initial contribution to this field by providing an in-depth analysis of water-related protest movements in the Arab world, connecting diverse country-specific cases and highlighting their structural commonalities. It also aims to move beyond fragmented approaches that confine each case to its national context, by proposing a synthetic perspective that examines the phenomenon through the lenses of environmental justice, symbolic power, and neoliberal policies.

The paper is structured into four interrelated sections. The first section addresses the theoretical framework for understanding water justice, reviewing literature on the hydro-social cycle, critical environmental perspectives, and the theory of new environmental movements. The second section provides a comparative overview of prominent water-related protest movements in the Arab world, drawing on examples from Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Iraq, Yemen, Palestine, and the Gulf countries. The third section analyzes the roles of civil society organizations and informal actors within these movements, as well as

the challenges of operating in constrained or repressive spaces. Finally, the fourth section and the conclusion offer an analytical reading of lessons learned and outline a strategy for transforming these mobilizations into the core of a socially and environmentally transformative movement, one that restores the political and social significance of water and repositions justice as a liberation horizon.

Through this approach, the paper proposes repositioning water at the center of discussions about the Arab future—not merely as a technical crisis or a resource to be managed, but as a condition for dignity, a foundation for sovereignty, and a starting point for rethinking the meaning of life and justice in an era of climate change and transformation.

02

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: WATER JUSTICE AND UNEQUAL ECOLOGICAL DISTRIBUTION CONFLICTS

This paper seeks to understand water-related protest movements in the Arab world through a multi-level critical lens, intersecting concepts of justice, environmental citizenship, the hydro-social cycle, and ecological distribution conflicts with anthropological and sociological analyses of resistance and symbolism. In contemporary critical literature, water is no longer understood as a natural resource subject to supply-and-demand equations, or merely as a technical service managed through efficiency and governance. Instead, it is approached as a political and social resource, reproduced through inequalities, marginalization, conflict, and meaning.

The concept of "water justice" serves as a central starting point in this analysis. Water justice extends beyond ensuring safe access to water; it encompasses distributive justice, representational justice, recognition justice, knowledge justice, and intergenerational justice. Water is not merely a material resource to be allocated according to technical or administrative criteria; it is a material, cultural, and vital element intertwined with dignity, citizenship, and sovereignty, forming a core condition for a dignified daily life. Water distribution policies often reflect existing class and spatial hierarchies, with marginalized groups excluded from service networks, forced to rely on unsafe sources, or deprived of participation and oversight mechanisms (Sultana & Loftus, 2019).

Our analysis of water-related protests in the Arab world falls within the framework of Ecological Distribution Conflicts (EDCs), a concept developed in political ecology and political economy studies. This framework highlights that water is not a neutral resource but a site of unequal distribution of environmental burdens and benefits. On one hand, the benefits of water—such as secure and stable access—are often privatized in favor of political and economic elites. On the other hand, the costs—scarcity, pollution, and service interruptions—are disproportionately borne by groups excluded from decision-making, whose voices are marginalized in public policy. This analytical framework has been developed as both a research and activist tool through the Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas), which documents hundreds of water-related conflicts worldwide. Atlas data show how large-scale infrastructure projects—such as irrigation dams, power plants, and desalination facilities—intersect with patterns of class, gender, and knowledge-based exclusion, turning water

into a site of political and social struggle rather than a mere technical resource. These conflicts reveal a widening gap between those with the power to influence water policies and those effectively excluded from equitable access. The Atlas includes thousands of environmental justice conflict cases globally, including hundreds related to water, demonstrating that environmental protests are not isolated events but part of a growing social resistance against neoliberal appropriation and institutional marginalization (Temper et al., 2015).

This discussion is linked to the concept of the "Environmentalism of the Poor," which emphasizes that environmental movements in marginalized regions and peripheries do not arise from institutionalized ideological environmental awareness, but from a tangible defense of livelihoods, meaning, and belonging (Martínez-Alier, 2002). In this context, such environmentalism can be understood as a form of common-sense resistance against domination in the Gramscian sense. Consequently, some scholars prefer terms such as "subaltern environmentalism," "marginal environmentalism," or "liberation environmentalism" (Hassaniyan, 2021). Alternative narratives emerging from the margins redefine water not as a commodity or administrative resource, but as a living, spiritual, and cultural right, intertwined with land, health, kinship, and belonging. Accordingly, water protests in the Arab region can be seen as forms of dual resistance: both material and symbolic, daily and historical, opposing neoliberal domination and epistemic and cultural marginalization.

Strang (2004) emphasizes that water conflicts are not limited to physical access or infrastructure but are deeply rooted in cultural, symbolic, and historical meanings associated with water. These meanings shape how communities perceive water ownership, control, and access, profoundly influencing water-related behaviors and policies. Similarly, recent studies, such as those examining the concept of "rooted water collectives" (Rizzi & Mollinga, 2024), highlight forms of grassroots environmental organization characterized by: (1) a deep local and cultural connection to the water resource, (2) a horizontal and participatory organizational structure, and (3) the capacity to engage across multiple levels—local, national, and international. These findings show that local groups redefine environmental action as an identity-based, knowledge-driven, civic, and cultural practice, serving as a medium for producing alternatives to formal institutional domination and fostering forms of environmental citizenship grounded in direct relationships with rivers or water resources.

In a related context, the concept of "hydraulic citizenship" (Anand, 2017) provides a framework for understanding the relationship between water access and political and social belonging, particularly in urban settings. Anand defines hydraulic citizenship as a form of political and social belonging manifested through access to urban water networks, rather than through official documents or conventional citizenship laws. In his study of informal neighborhoods in Mumbai, Anand shows that access to water was not a guaranteed right but an ongoing process of claim-making and recognition, requiring residents to continuously "define themselves" before city authorities and assert their belonging through the language of rights and political mediation. Citizenship was exercised through negotiations with local engineers and municipal council members, as well as through daily practices that affirmed eligibility and entitlement. As one woman in the neighborhood remarked about access-

ing services: "We learned how to speak in the city." In this sense, hydraulic citizenship is not a fixed status but a dynamic relationship enacted through infrastructure, where pipes and valves become instruments of political and social recognition, and the boundaries of urban belonging are reshaped through water access. This concept intersects with studies in the Arab context. For example, Casciarri & Deshayes (2020) analyze protests against water scarcity in Khartoum as symbolic acts demanding recognition rather than merely service provision. In Egypt, Saad (2012) demonstrates that rural protests encompassed demands related to citizenship, resource rights, and rural marginalization.

Despite the general focus on regional and transnational water conflicts, Houdret (2010) emphasizes that water disputes are often internal rather than cross-border, occurring primarily among unequal communities: villages versus cities, farmers versus industries. This pattern of conflict cannot be understood solely through technical or legal approaches; it requires a social analysis that integrates symbolic and historical dimensions, as well as power relations within the structure of the conflict. This perspective aligns with previous studies (El Nour et al., 2021; El Marakby & El Nour, 2023), which argue that the so-called "water crisis" cannot be reduced to climatic or demographic factors, nor solely to disputes among Nile Basin countries. Instead, it is closely linked to the breakdown of local governance, the transformation of users—those with historical rights to the resource—into powerless consumers, the exclusion of farmers from decision-making processes, and the physical, symbolic, and cultural disconnection of people from water.

Understanding and analyzing the effects of neoliberal transformations in water policies thus provides a comprehensive framework for examining the commodification of the resource, the restructuring of distribution networks, and the emergence of new patterns of exclusion and privileging. In this context, water is redefined as a site of capital accumulation and nature commodification, where it is managed according to the logic of "financial sustainability" rather than justice and rights. Studies by Bakker (2007) and Swyngedouw (2005) demonstrate that privatization and prepaid systems reproduce class-based control over water and exclude poorer groups from infrastructure access.

This shift toward commodification is further reinforced by discourses of "efficiency" and "rationalization," which are presented as neutral and rational tools for managing "scarcity." However, Mehta (2011) argues that such concepts obscure the structural dimensions of scarcity and place responsibility on users rather than exposing the underlying drivers of inequality and biased distribution. Similarly, Zwarteveen (2021) contends that "water-use efficiency" is not a neutral technical standard, but a political instrument that reproduces relations of domination and excludes women and rural communities from long-standing water practices—making efficiency a "technocratic mask" that conceals a neoliberal logic grounded in differentiation. Within this context, the concept of the Hydrosocial Cycle offers an analytical framework for understanding the relationship between water and power, showing how water is produced through political and social structures and how, in turn, these structures reshape the boundaries of citizenship (Swyngedouw, 2005).

The theoretical review indicates that water justice should be understood not merely as a matter of distribution, but as a lens through which water-related pro-

tests can be interpreted as manifestations of an evolving socio-environmental contract. Water emerges as a contested arena where rights, belonging, and sovereignty are continuously renegotiated. Drawing on frameworks such as ecological distribution conflicts, environmentalism from the margins, hydraulic citizenship, and the hydro-social cycle allows for a deeper examination of the political forces that construct scarcity and perpetuate injustice. These perspectives also help clarify how infrastructure systems, efficiency discourses, and pricing mechanisms function as tools that can either reinforce existing power structures or enable resistance against them.

The literature shows that most water-related conflicts in the Arab region are internal rather than transnational, and they typically occur between socially unequal actors: farmers and institutions, villages and cities, citizens and service providers. In response, resistance takes multiple forms—ranging from public protests, road blockages, and sit-ins to grassroots organizing that reconstructs the social meaning of water and transforms it from an administrative commodity into a symbol of citizenship and dignity. These movements do not simply point to administrative shortcomings; rather, they reveal the extent to which water has become a site of everyday politics, where new forms of claim-making and representation are enacted.

Based on this understanding, the analysis shifts from the theoretical to the comparative and empirical: from asking how inequalities are produced to examining where resistance takes shape and how it evolves. The next section (3), "Comparative Insights: Water Struggles in the Region," aims to map the trajectories of water-related protests in the Arab world between 2007 and 2025, highlighting the forms of collective action, their social backgrounds, and their mobilization mechanisms across the Maghreb, the Nile Valley, the Levant, and the Gulf. This transition allows for assessing the extent to which the theoretical framework can explain the diversity of field experiences and helps identify the strengths and limitations of Arab water movements. In doing so, it opens a broader discussion on the possibility of building a regional water justice movement grounded in rights and local knowledge rather than narrow technical or institutional discourses.

03

COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS: WATER STRUGGLES IN THE REGION

This section examines water-related social mobilizations and protests in the Arab world from a comparative perspective, highlighting key dynamics that shape these movements. From North Africa to the Levant and the Gulf, these mobilizations converge around core demands: the right to water, the rejection of environmental marginalization, and the political accountability of authorities for their repeated failures in managing a vital resource that lies at the heart of daily life and human dignity.

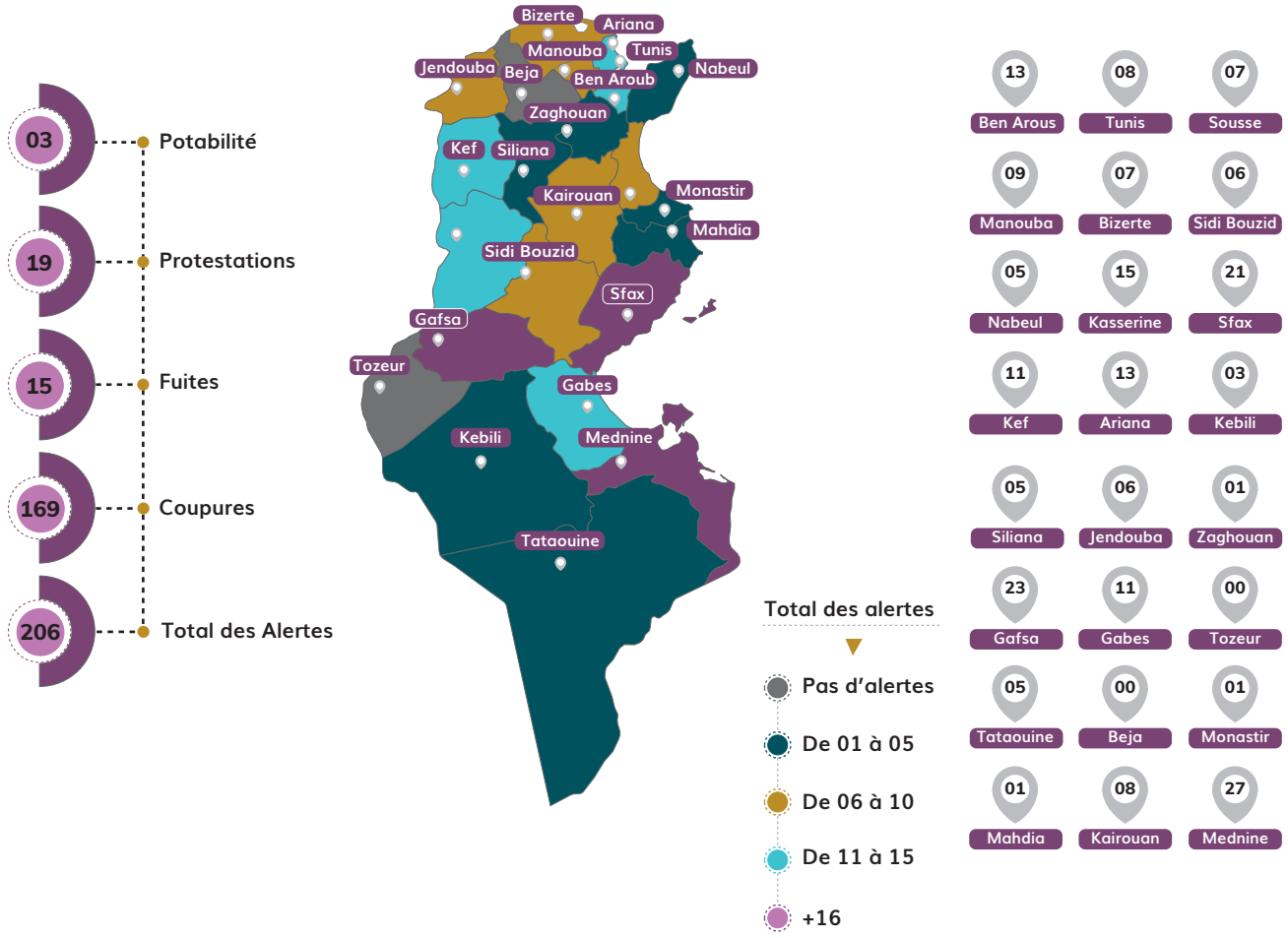
In the countries of the Maghreb, numerous popular mobilizations have emerged over the past decade in response to thirst and water shortages, reflecting chronic crises in the distribution of vital resources and the deterioration of infrastructure. In Morocco, early signs of popular rebellion against water privatization surfaced in the summer of 2006, when spontaneous protests broke out in Casablanca against price increases introduced by the French company Suez. Similar demonstrations soon appeared in Tangier and Tetouan against Veolia, the company responsible for water and electricity distribution in those cities. The Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH) played a significant role in coordinating parts of this movement and broadened its agenda toward defending the right to the city and opposing privatization and neoliberal policies. In the town of Bouarfa, near the Algerian border, protests escalated in September 2006 into a large-scale civil disobedience movement, during which nearly 25,000 residents collectively refused to pay their water bills in response to price hikes. This rebellion swiftly transformed into a sustained political struggle that exceeded its initially spontaneous nature and drew participation from diverse segments of society (Bogaert, 2018). Far from being an exception, this episode marked a turning point in social protest around infrastructure and public services, laying the foundations for a civic movement rejecting the commodification of water. In southeastern Morocco, protests intensified in Zagora during 2017 in what became known as the "Thirst Revolution." Amid worsening water scarcity and declining quality—partly due to expanded watermelon cultivation for export—hundreds of residents took to the streets demanding their right to safe drinking water. The authorities responded with repression, arresting 23 demonstrators (Al-Talbi, 2017). The protests were notable for substantial women's participation and for the broad solidarity they generated nationally, including a major march in support of the detainees (Harmach, 2017). Demonstrations also spread to Wazazat and areas near Marrakech, but the most prominent mobilization

emerged in the Figuig/Fkik oasis (2023–2024), where residents organized a sustained campaign against a regional plan to restructure water distribution. The project raised concerns about creeping privatization and the subordination of water to market logic. Local inhabitants launched a coordinated bill-boycott campaign and refused to engage with any official mechanism that redistributed water outside the oasis community, insisting on recognition of their historical and collective rights to the resource. The protests took place weekly, with women forming the backbone of these mobilizations since 2023, participating in public marches and organizing separate women-led demonstrations. Solidarity and advocacy efforts extended to the capital, Rabat, where activists held a press conference, while residents continued their refusal to pay water bills as an act of civil resistance against privatization (ATTAC Morocco, 2024). Despite limited government responsiveness and the arrest of several movement leaders (Hespress, 2017), the mobilization persisted amid weeks of tension. These rural and urban protests—expressed through peaceful, community-based action—illustrate the capacity of local communities to generate forms of resistance rooted in environmental memory and collective rights, countering the broader wave of privatization and commodification of water.

In Tunisia, water-related protests have become increasingly visible since 2011, emerging at varying intensities across marginalized regions—particularly in the central and southern governorates such as Kairouan, Sidi Bouzid, Gafsa, and Gabès. These mobilizations tend to peak during the summer months due to repeated drinking-water interruptions, especially during heatwaves. In Gabès, for instance, residents organized demonstrations in 2021 to denounce poor water distribution and deteriorating infrastructure. In other areas, such as Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, "thirst protests" evolved into broader social movements that articulated demands for environmental and development justice and condemned what many perceived as discrimination in the allocation of vital resources. Gafsa likewise witnessed protest movements calling for equitable development and protection of groundwater resources from depletion and industrial pollution. Despite limited media coverage, these mobilizations reflect the persistence of social discontent and a growing recognition that the water crisis cannot be reduced to a technical or service-delivery issue. Rather, it reveals deep structural imbalances in development and environmental policy (Ghrabāl, 2025). With limited governmental responsiveness, these protests have largely remained seasonal and institutionally constrained, yet they have nonetheless constituted concrete expressions of local resistance and collective defense of the right to water (Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, 2023). According to the Social Observatory of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, approximately 634 water-related protest actions were recorded in 2021, highlighting escalating social tensions surrounding this essential resource (TFESR, 2022). A more recent report from the Forum indicates that the water crisis was among the primary drivers of protest activity in July 2024, which saw 245 social movements, an increase of 15% compared with June and nearly reaching the peak observed in May. These protests were concentrated mainly in Gafsa, Medenine, Jendouba, Kairouan, and Nabeul, ranging from sit-ins to road blockages in response to persistent drinking-water outages. Farmers in the northwest also escalated their protests due to severe shortages of irrigation water, threatening the viability of agricultural

activity in that region (TFESR, 2024). The Tunisian Water Observatory documented 423 water-related protests in 2022, 127 in 2023, and 186 in 2024. The Observatory publishes a monthly bulletin monitoring water interruptions, water quality, and diverse forms of protest. It also provides a monthly "water bulletin" (see Figure 1), which relies on citizen reports, and hosts an interactive map on its website that supports monitoring, advocacy, and networking among related social movements (Tunisian Water Observatory).

Figure 1:



Source: Tunisian Water Observatory

In Algeria, "thirst protests" recurred in 2023 and 2025, particularly in the governorates of Tiaret, Biskra, and Médéa, where residents mobilized against prolonged drinking-water outages, deteriorating infrastructure, and the authorities' lack of responsiveness. While official narratives often attributed the crisis to climate change, protesters blamed the state for structural neglect, reflecting a growing public perception of environmental discrimination and social exclusion (Al Monitor, 2024; The Guardian, 2024).

In Egypt, the village of Kafr El-Barlus in the northern Nile Delta marked an early turning point in water-related protests, when thousands of residents mobilized in 2007 in an unprecedented collective

action against a drinking-water outage that lasted more than three weeks, accusing the local water company of diverting the village's water allocation to a nearby tourist resort. This event, which ended with the restoration of water to the village, represented one of the first rural mobilizations around the right to water in decades (Saker et al., 2021). However, this incident was not isolated; dozens of similar protests were recorded in subsequent years, reflecting growing local awareness of water justice issues (Ismail, 2008). By 2013, farmers had become the second-largest group leading social protests, with inadequate irrigation water cited as a primary cause in more than 40% of these events (Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, 2014). As crises continued, social mobilization around water persisted. The Democracy Index recorded approximately 43 drinking-water-related protests in 2015, alongside other rural mobilizations against irrigation shortages in governorates such as Luxor and Assiut (Democracy Index Foundation, 2016). In 2018, the Social Justice Platform provided a detailed analysis of around 165 water-related protests, noting that 50% concerned drinking water, 40% involved sanitation issues, and irrigation protests accounted for just 1.2% (Social Justice Platform, 2019). The most recent report for 2024, however, indicates a significant shift: irrigation-related protests now constitute 37% of all economic protests, highlighting the deepening agricultural crisis and the growing centrality of water issues in rural social mobilization (Social Justice Platform, 2024). Patterns of protest have also evolved, moving from complaints and formal petitions to sit-ins, strikes, road blockages, and direct confrontations, amid declining effectiveness of official grievance channels. Grassroots forms of organization have re-emerged, with notable participation from temporary workers, and renewed attempts at security-mediated negotiation following the failure of traditional deterrence mechanisms (Social Justice Platform, 2024).

Sudan's capital Khartoum, experienced an unprecedented wave of water-related protests during 2015 and 2016. These mobilizations erupted simultaneously in several neighborhoods, including Al-Futaih, Al-Kalakla, and Al-Sahafa, in response to severe and chronic interruptions in drinking water supply, inadequate infrastructure, and the absence of effective solutions from authorities. While these protests were largely local and spontaneous, they also featured organized elements through neighborhood committees and saw extensive participation by women, who in some areas led demonstrations using empty water containers as symbolic tools of protest. The slogans chanted during Khartoum's 2015 "thirst protests" went beyond immediate livelihood demands, addressing explicit political and critical boundaries of the ruling system. Examples included: "We are thirsty, we are thirsty" and "The Nile's country, but people are thirsty." While the repetition of the word "thirst" underscores the vital importance of drinking water, these phrases also express popular anger and highlight the stark paradox between the city's proximity to the Nile and water scarcity in urban neighborhoods. Some slogans directly targeted structural corruption within the authorities. The slogan "'Atashna" ("We are thirsty") gained additional symbolic meaning through its intersection with the discourse of the Sudanese opposition movement "Qarafna," a youth-led initiative founded in 2010 advocating peaceful change. In colloquial Arabic, "Qarafna" translates roughly to "We are fed up," reflecting a convergence between everyday survival protests and symbolic political mobilization (Blanchon & Casci-

arri, 2019). In recent years, amid escalating conflict and deteriorating living conditions, various regions of Sudan have witnessed waves of popular protests triggered by chronic crises in water supply services, including both drinking water provision and irrigation. Local media documented these mobilizations, which emerged in Khartoum and other states, protesting prolonged water outages and inadequate infrastructure in the absence of effective governmental responses (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, 2023; Sudan News, 2023).

In Jordan, the Jordan Valley has historically been a hotspot of tension among farmers, with disputes over irrigation water intensifying amid declining water availability and unequal distribution, particularly in areas situated at the margins of the canal network. Palestinian refugee camps in the country, such as Baqa'a Camp, also experience recurrent difficulties in accessing drinking water, deepening perceptions of spatial and social inequality. Public frustration escalated in November 2021, when Amman witnessed large-scale protests against the "Water-for-Electricity" agreement signed between Jordan and Israel. Under this agreement, Israel provides energy imports in exchange for supplying Jordan with desalinated water. Protesters viewed the deal as a new form of normalization with the occupation, in which water is instrumentalized as a political tool to reinforce dependency, rather than to strengthen national water sovereignty or invest in sustainable domestic solutions. Consequently, water was transformed from a vital right into a bargaining chip, used to reshape regional relations at the expense of popular will (Al Jazeera, 2021).

In Lebanon, the institutional collapse since 2019 has exacerbated the fragility of the water sector, prompting the emergence of civic initiatives in cities such as Beirut and Saida, where local groups sought to secure water access and organize its distribution through volunteer-based efforts. However, weak infrastructure and the absence of integrated governance have hindered long-term effectiveness. A report by the ReWater MENA project (2022) highlighted that conflicting roles among official institutions and the lack of planning are major structural obstacles to achieving fair and sustainable water solutions. In this context, the national campaign to protect the Bisri Valley between 2019 and 2020 emerged as one of Lebanon's most prominent environmental resistance movements. The campaign arose in opposition to the World Bank-funded Bisri Dam project and was led by environmental activists and local citizens. The campaign successfully transformed a local issue into a nationwide movement by employing multiple strategies, including sit-ins and field camping, weekly demonstrations, the production of scientific reports, and engagement in local and international media campaigns. Its official Facebook page (Save Bisri Valley) served as a central platform for mobilization, documentation, and network-building, enhancing community outreach and internationalization of the issue. These efforts culminated in the World Bank's announcement in September 2020 to cancel the project's funding, a development described as a qualitative victory for environmental activism in Lebanon (World Bank, 2020). This experience demonstrates the capacity of locally rooted environmental struggles—when based on community mobilization and scientific knowledge—to halt top-down development projects, particularly in contexts of institutional fragility.

In Yemen and Palestine, the struggle for water takes on an existential dimen-

sion, extending beyond service-related demands to a daily fight for survival. In the Yemeni city of Taiz, protests intensified in 2023 due to severe water scarcity and rising costs of water delivery via tanker trucks, prompting residents to block roads and burn tires in scenes that reflect widespread despair and popular anger (Al-Quds Al-Arabi, 2023). Palestinians face multiple forms of structural water deprivation. In the West Bank, the system of water segregation places surface water, groundwater, and rainwater under the control of the Israeli occupation (Selby, 2013). In Gaza, water has been weaponized, resulting in what can be described as "environmental genocide," where access to safe water is restricted as a tool of warfare and collective punishment against civilians (Al-Haq, 2021). Under these conditions, obtaining even a minimal supply of water becomes an act of daily resistance, enacted through survival strategies, local recycling, and innovative methods for water access, all in defiance of a system of control and water colonization.

In the Gulf countries, despite hosting some of the world's largest desalination facilities, water distribution systems continue to exhibit stark inequities, particularly between citizens and migrant laborers. With rising desalination costs and associated carbon emissions, and in the absence of a sustainable environmental vision, criticism of water management models in countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait has intensified. Recent reports (Munir, 2024) indicate that these models face intertwined crises, including the worsening issue of saline brine discharged into the sea from conventional desalination processes, which degrades coastal ecosystems, and the heavy reliance on fossil fuels to operate desalination plants, making the sector one of the largest regional sources of emissions. The slow adoption of "green" desalination technologies is further hampered by weak environmental regulations and inadequate oversight, while water inequities persist as larger allocations are directed toward urban, industrial, and tourism uses at the expense of poorer communities and migrant workers. Despite these environmental and structural challenges, organized water protests are almost entirely absent in the Gulf, except for sporadic grievances in some rural areas or during heatwaves, such as in eastern Saudi Arabia or the outskirts of Kuwait. This absence is attributed to several interrelated factors, including the relative stability of supply due to extensive desalination infrastructure, centralized decision-making, limited public spaces for mobilization, and patronage-based policies that constrain collective action for environmental rights. While Gulf-focused literature largely emphasizes technical approaches to water management, such as efficiency, desalination, and reuse, it rarely addresses the political or social dimensions of water, or examines its connection to citizenship and environmental justice, highlighting the narrowness of the prevailing analytical perspective in the region.

Finally, the comparison across these contexts highlights that water protests in the Arab world are not isolated or circumstantial events, but rather reflect a recurrent and expansive pattern of social and political mobilization centered on the right to resources, distributive justice, and human dignity. From privatization struggles in Morocco, to mass water poisoning in Iraq, from thirst-driven protests in Taiz to grassroots water initiatives in Lebanon, water emerges as a pivotal arena for redefining the relationship between citizens and

the state, between rights and services, and between survival and sovereignty. These struggles are not merely battles over taps; they are contests over who is heard, who is recognized, and who holds the right to be represented.

The forms of protest adopted by these movements have been diverse, encompassing sit-ins, marches, demonstrations, refusal to pay fees, and road blockades, in addition to media and digital campaigns, public appeals, and emergency signaling. Protest spaces have ranged from public areas to water company offices and administrative and governmental headquarters, including the offices of the prime minister and relevant ministries. This diversity reflects a growing awareness of the strategic use of public spaces as both symbolic and material instruments of struggle.

To illustrate the comparative nature and the temporal and geographical scope of these struggles, the following table provides a concise overview of the main water-related protests across several Arab countries from 2007 to 2025, categorized by country, type of protest, and immediate context.

Table 1: Summary of Selected Water-Related Protests in Arab Countries (2007–2025)

Country/ region	Year	Protest type	Brief description
Iraq / Babylon – Al-Hilla	2025	Popular protest in agricultural villages	Protest by over 300 people in Al-Majriya village against irrigation water shortages caused by dams in Turkey and Iran
Iraq / Basra	2018	Popular protests over drinking water	Mass protests against contaminated drinking water and related skin and intestinal illnesses
Morocco / Zagora	2017	Popular protests	Protests against water scarcity and declining potable water quality in the southeast
Morocco / Figuig	2023 - 2025	Bill payment boycott and social disconnection campaign	Residents of Figuig refused to pay water bills in protest against a regional water management plan, fearing privatization and depletion of their resources
Algeria/ Oran	2023	Urban civil protests	Prolonged interruptions of drinking water coinciding with severe heatwaves in Oran and southern Algeria
Algeria / Tiaret	2024 - 2025	Urban civil protests	Burning tires and blocking roads in protest against prolonged water rationing during drought, demanding effective solutions before Eid al-Adha
Tunisia / Gabes	2021	Local protests	Protests over drinking water shortages and unequal distribution during the summer
Jordan/ Amman	2021	Water–energy deal protest	Hundreds of protesters gathered in Amman against the water-for-energy agreement between Jordan and Israel

Lebanon/ Beirut	2019–2020	Civil campaign against dams	"Save Bisri Valley" campaign to halt a dam project due to its cultural and environmental threats, high economic cost, and earthquake risks
Sudan/ Al Khartoum	2015–2022	Protests in popular neighborhoods	Protests in Al-Thawra and Bahri neighborhoods over prolonged interruptions in potable water supply
Yemen / Sana'a, Aden, Taiz	2015–2020	Chronic water crisis	Severe crises caused by war and infrastructure destruction, leading to scattered protests across several cities
Egypt / Kafr El-Sheikh, Beheira, Cairo	2007–2018	Road blockades, collective grievances, digital activism	Diverse protests over shortages of drinking and irrigation water, including road blockages, collective complaints, and online campaigns
Palestine/ Gaza, West Bank	2014–2022	Rights documentation, UN grievances	Documentation of water rights violations by human rights organizations and filing complaints with international bodies

This table was prepared by the researcher based on a review of the following sources: Arab News (2025), Al Jazeera (2018), Hespress (2017), the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, among others (see the references list).

04

COMMON PATTERNS IN WATER PROTESTS: LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY AND NGOS

Drawing on the research questions outlined in the introduction and the comparative evidence presented in the preceding section, it becomes clear that water-related protest movements across the Arab world, despite varying political and environmental contexts, exhibit a set of shared structural characteristics. These patterns signal significant shifts in the relationship between the state, society, and water resources, while also redefining environmental citizenship as a fundamental right to access and manage resources, rather than merely a technical service or utilitarian provision.

This analysis resonates with the study's theoretical framework, which engages with concepts such as water justice, ecological distribution conflicts, environmentalism from the margins, hydraulic citizenship, and rooted water communities. In this light, these protests serve as a tangible, real-world expression of these theoretical constructs, highlighting how water becomes a central arena for civic and political action, as well as for the negotiation of collective and individual rights in the Arab context.

One of the most salient features of water-related protest movements is their deeply rooted local character. Typically, these waves of protest do not originate in capitals or major urban centers, but emerge from geographically and socially peripheral areas: remote villages far from centers of decision-making, impoverished urban neighborhoods on the outskirts of cities, and marginalized rural regions often excluded from major infrastructure investments or whose resources are extracted to benefit wealthier areas or export-oriented agriculture. This emergence from the margins is not accidental; it reflects what the literature describes as "environmentalism from the margins," where the defense of resources is inseparable from livelihoods and the material and symbolic centrality of water in these communities' lives. It also connects with the concept of "rooted water communities" (Rizzi & Mollinga, 2024), which organize around horizontal, participatory structures and social networks that extend locally and regionally. In places such as Zagora and Figuig/Fekik in Morocco, Gafsa and Tozeur in southern Tunisia, Babylon and Dhi Qar in Iraq, or the villages of the Nile Valley and Delta in

Egypt, protesters are not merely demanding water; they are asserting their recognition as full citizens in the face of distribution policies that exclude them and perpetuate their marginalization. This local dimension transforms the citizen–state relationship from a passive service-receiving dynamic into one of accountability, rights, and active claim-making.

However, this local dimension, while highly mobilizing within its immediate context, simultaneously imposes limits on the development of these movements. Protests often remain "episodic," tied to a specific event or crisis, and "local," rarely extending beyond their immediate geographic area. As a result, they can appear on the regional stage as isolated fragments of water-related discontent rather than interconnected episodes within a broader, rooted grassroots movement. The weakness of networking mechanisms between these protest sites—whether due to the absence of cross-local organizational structures, political and security constraints, or differences in the priorities of demands—prevents the accumulation of sufficient power to form a broad environmental movement. Nevertheless, the proliferation of these isolated struggles across multiple spaces, coupled with the growth of horizontal communication channels through digital tools, opens new possibilities for expanding this type of activism. It allows it to evolve from scattered responses into a network of ongoing local struggles capable of exchanging knowledge and developing a shared agenda for water justice.

The second characteristic lies in the symbolic and political meanings that water acquires within these protest movements. As Strang (2004) and Anand (2017) have shown, water is not merely a physical substance (H_2O) or an economic commodity; it is a resource imbued with cultural and political significance, serving as a medium that reflects belonging and recognition. In Khartoum, women carried banners stating, "A Nile country, yet the people are thirsty," succinctly capturing the paradox of abundant surrounding water and lethal local scarcity, highlighting the disconnect between environmental potential and political reality. In Basra, contaminated drinking water became a symbol that encapsulated administrative corruption and infrastructure collapse, just as the thirst in Zagora and Figuig/Fkik in Morocco became a metaphor for political betrayal and the export of water via agricultural products, depriving local residents of their rightful share. These examples illustrate the emergence of "hydraulic citizenship," where access to water is not only a matter of infrastructure but also a political act that redefines belonging and reshapes individuals' relationships with institutions.

Another prominent feature is the integration of digital technologies as a structural component of water-related activism. In many cases, photographs, videos, live streams, and social media posts have played a crucial role in transforming a localized protest into a cause with national, regional, and even international visibility. This digitalization goes beyond mere information dissemination; it serves as a tool for building a collective protest memory, creating an alternative archive that challenges official narratives, and establishing a space for accountability and organization. As Temper et al. (2015) discuss within the framework of ecological distribution conflicts, these digital practices enable movements to break through media blockades, reach audiences beyond the immediate geographic context, and create transnational networks of solidar-

ity. Examples include Lebanon's "Save Bisri Valley" campaign and solidarity initiatives supporting protesters in Figuig, Morocco.

However, this digital dimension is not without structural challenges. Online activism is inherently selective and stratified, requiring communication skills and technological tools that many local participants—those directly engaged in on-the-ground protests—may lack. As a result, those who are better connected, rather than those most embedded in local realities, often dominate public discourse. Moreover, in highly repressive contexts, digital platforms can provide a vital outlet for expression and relative protection for activists. Yet in other cases, overreliance on digital engagement can weaken grassroots mobilization if it substitutes for direct organizing or becomes a virtual replacement for physical presence in public spaces. Thus, the digital arena is a double-edged sword: it offers opportunities for expansion and solidarity, but it can also deepen existing gaps and reproduce power imbalances within the movements themselves.

Additionally, these movements often exhibit a decentralized, non-hierarchical organizational structure. Our observations indicate that water protests tend to rely on flexible, grassroots coordination rather than on traditional parties or unions, which in many contexts have been weakened by years of repression, marginalization, or neoliberal reforms. For instance, in Iraq, the "Guardians of the Tigris" movement drew on local networks of fishers, farmers, and environmental activists connected through horizontal relationships grounded in local knowledge, while also expanding through partnerships with regional and international organizations. This model provides high flexibility in responding to repression and co-optation, yet it also poses challenges for articulating unified demands and developing institutionalized negotiating capacity.

While the horizontal and decentralized nature of these movements provides flexibility and resilience against repression, it also presents significant internal challenges. The absence of hierarchical structures can hinder vertical growth and limit the ability to mobilize beyond the immediate local base. Moreover, in highly repressive contexts, horizontality may impede long-term continuity and serious political negotiation, due to the difficulty of sustaining momentum without clear mechanisms for representation, coordination, and networking.

State responses to these movements show remarkably consistent patterns across different contexts, regardless of the political system in place. In many cases, authorities combine direct repression—such as arrests and dispersal of demonstrations—with deliberate disregard for demands and media campaigns that delegitimize protesters. These reactions reveal a deeper crisis of governance legitimacy, framing the assertion of the right to water as a political threat rather than as a call to policy correction, and treating protesters as subjects rather than full citizens. Notably, repression often does not suppress the movements; instead, it amplifies their symbolic power and embeds them in the collective memory of local communities, forming part of a longer, locally and nationally rooted trajectory toward water citizenship. This dynamic is evident in the "Thirst Revolution" protests in Zagora, the bill boycott campaigns in Figuig, and the recurring mobilizations in Basra following waves of state crackdowns.

Despite the growth and diversification

of water-related movements, they largely remain recurring, localized forms of protest rather than a consolidated social movement—either at the national level within individual countries or across the broader Arab region. The absence of structures that transcend localities, weak networking mechanisms, and variations in priorities and contexts all limit these movements' capacity to accumulate the power necessary to form a unified collective actor in the field of water justice. Moreover, the dispersal of struggles across separate local hotspots makes it easier for authorities to treat them as isolated crises rather than as expressions of a structural problem in resource governance.

In this context, the role of civil society and non-governmental organizations becomes pivotal—not merely as technical intermediaries or implementers of logistical projects, but as a political force supporting these movements. Their role involves connecting local struggles, amplifying their reach, and enhancing their capacity for impact. Achieving this requires investing in the creation of an Arab platform for water protest movements, building on and supporting the experience of the Tunisian Water Observatory. Such a platform would serve as a space for exchanging knowledge, fostering dialogue, supporting grassroots actors, and formulating a shared agenda that strengthens cross-border solidarity. It also necessitates reframing the water crisis from a "scarcity" narrative—which places responsibility on individuals and their ability to adapt—toward a "rights-based" discourse that holds production and distribution structures accountable for systemic failures.

Community-based documentation represents a strategic tool in this transformation. Local testimonies and narratives should be transformed into a resistant archive that holds state discourse accountable, exposes patterns of structural marginalization, and reinforces a water citizenship framework grounded in equal recognition of everyone's right to resources. If supported politically and organizationally, this approach can transform what currently appear as scattered fragments of water-related grievances into a broad social movement capable of influencing policy at both national and regional levels.

This strategy can be further expanded to include the digital protection of activists and environmental platforms—not only by providing secure technological tools, but also by fostering collective awareness of the digital space as an extension of the public sphere and as a legitimate arena of political contestation, rather than a substitute for it. In the same vein, it is crucial to strengthen alliances between water-related issues and other social and environmental concerns, such as housing, health, labor rights, and climate action. This multi-issue approach aligns with the literature on environmental justice, broadens the social base of activism, and links daily struggles over resources to wider structural transformations.

In this perspective, the struggle for water is, above all, a profoundly political struggle, as it raises fundamental questions about who decides on public matters, who is recognized as an actor, and who is granted the legitimacy to represent the public interest. As the literature on water justice emphasizes, rethinking water as a field of conflict, recognition, and negotiation can open new avenues for reshaping the relationship between the state and society—moving away from closed technocratic management toward a form of water democracy that fosters genuine hydraulic citizenship.

Within this framework, supporting water movements in the Arab region should not be seen merely as a temporary act of solidarity or humanitarian intervention, but as a long-term investment in building an alternative public sphere, where demands emerge from the grassroots and sovereignty is redefined based on the rights to life and justice.

Thus, it becomes clear that what unites the protests in Figuig, Basra, Zagora, the Bisri Valley, Khartoum, and Kafr El-Burullus is not merely the experience of water scarcity or pollution, but a broader struggle over recognition, sovereignty, the right to resources, and human dignity. Despite differences in location and tactics, these movements represent a rising social wave that, if supported, connected, and expanded, could evolve into a transformative Arab environmental movement. Such a movement would be capable of challenging the logic of commodification and privatization, while reshaping the environmental social contract to place water at the heart of the struggle for a more just and equitable future.

05

CONCLUSION: WATER AS A RIGHT AND A HORIZON FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS

A comparative reading of water-related protest movements in the Arab world reveals that these are not merely reactive responses to temporary service crises; rather, they embody deeply rooted struggles over ecological distribution, where environmental, social, and political dimensions intersect. From Zagora and Figuig in Morocco to Basra in Iraq, Kasserine in Tunisia, and Gaza in Palestine, water emerges not only as a vital material resource but also as a political and symbolic arena in which the boundaries of citizenship and belonging are continuously renegotiated. Here, demands for water extend beyond the pursuit of a basic service, becoming acts of resistance against structures of exclusion and the reproduction of marginalization.

Although these movements share recurring characteristics—such as their deeply rooted local nature, the high symbolic value of water, horizontal and decentralized organizational structures, and the use of digital tools—they largely remain isolated protest hotspots and have not evolved into sustained social movements at the national or regional Arab level. Factors limiting their ability to accumulate the necessary power to form a unified actor for water justice include the absence of cross-local organizational structures, variations in political and economic contexts, the dominance of neoliberal and authoritarian frameworks, and the lack of durable networking mechanisms. Moreover, the spontaneous nature of these mobilizations, often tied to specific local crises, allows authorities to treat them as isolated events rather than as manifestations of a structural crisis in the patterns of water production, distribution, and governance.

In this context, the role of civil society and non-governmental organizations becomes pivotal, extending beyond technical mediation or logistical support to active political engagement in backing these water-related protest movements. Establishing an Arab platform for water protest movements could provide a framework for exchanging experiences and knowledge, broadening debates, and developing a discourse of water citizenship that links environmental, social, and sovereign concerns. Such an approach would reframe water from a "scarcity" perspective to a "rights-based" perspective. This also necessitates investing in community-based documentation as a strategic tool to build a counter-archive to official narratives, capable of holding states accountable and exposing

structural marginalization, while strengthening digital protection to ensure the sustainability of protest actions.

The future of environmental justice in the Arab region hinges on recognizing water as a fundamental right and a prerequisite for human dignity, and on framing the struggle for it as a legitimate pathway to reimagining governance and returning control over water resources to communities. Through grassroots organizing, building solidarity at local, national, regional, and transnational levels, and accumulating critical knowledge, these local "fragments" of water-related anger can be transformed into a sustained social movement capable of shaping national and regional agendas. In the face of extraordinary pressures on resources, institutional fragility, and growing democratic demands, water becomes not only a source of life but also a foundation for environmental citizenship and deeply rooted social justice.

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