Essay

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Posted Date: 17 March 2026

doi: 10.20944/preprints202603.1226.v1

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 doi:10.20944/preprints202603.1226.v1

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Urban Climate Order in the Arab Region: Sustainability, Justice, and Uneven Urban Transformation

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Abstract

Cities are increasingly expected to reorganize governance, planning, infrastructure, and everyday life in response to climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and widening inequality. However, much scholarship on climate urbanism still treats these processes primarily through the lens of sustainability transition, emphasizing policy uptake, resilience, and institutional innovation. This paper argues that such approaches are incomplete because climate urbanism is not only a technical or policy response to environmental change; it is also a struggle over urban order. Climate change reorganizes what cities value, what they build, whose vulnerabilities become visible, and how protection, risk, and legitimacy are distributed across urban life. To capture this, the paper introduces the concept of urban climate order, understood as the material and normative organization of urban life around climate-related priorities, including mitigation, adaptation, energy transition, and justice. The Arab region provides the basis for developing this argument. Across its 22 countries, climate change unfolds within conditions shaped by authoritarian governance, displacement, infrastructural fragility, rapid urbanization, deep inequality, and recurrent conflict. Under these conditions, climate urbanism does not simply appear as a delayed sustainability transition; it takes distinctive, uneven, and politically embedded forms. The paper therefore develops a provisional typology of three forms of urban climate order in the Arab region: conflict-displaced order, branded-technocratic order, and defensive-pragmatic order. These forms reveal the limits of transition-centered accounts and show that climate urbanism in the region is fragmented, selective, and inseparable from broader struggles over power, survival, and justice. The paper argues that the Arab region should be treated not as a peripheral case in climate urbanism, but as a critical site from which urban sustainability theory itself can be rethought.

Keywords: urban climate order; Arab region; sustainability; climate justice; climate urbanism; adaptation; mitigation; resilience; Global South; urban theory

1. Introduction

A

A new urban condition is taking shape across the world. Cities are increasingly expected to confront climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and widening inequality while simultaneously advancing resilience and justice. In this context, sustainability is no longer a peripheral planning aspiration; it has become a central normative and political horizon of urban governance. Cities now occupy a prominent place in climate politics as sites of mitigation, adaptation, experimentation, and institutional innovation [1–5]. Urban planning has likewise been reshaped by efforts to address climate change, as reflected in influential city-scale agendas and the broader turn toward resilience-oriented forms of governance [6–10].

Yet much of the literature on climate urbanism continues to assume that cities are moving, however unevenly, toward a broadly comparable sustainability transition. Even when such movement is recognized as incomplete, contested, or unequal, the underlying logic often remains

 doi:10.20944/preprints202603.1226.v1

transitional: climate norms enter public discourse, are translated into planning and policy, and gradually reshape urban governance and urban form. This assumption has generated important insights, but it has also narrowed the field. It privileges relatively stable and visible cases, often drawn from Europe, North America, and a limited set of globally connected metropolitan centers [5,11–13].

This paper intervenes in four overlapping bodies of scholarship: urban climate governance, sustainability transitions, resilience urbanism, and comparative urban theory [1–13,61–67]. Across these fields, cities are frequently analyzed as if climate response were principally a matter of institutional design, policy uptake, technological innovation, or scalar coordination. These literatures remain highly valuable, but they often understate the extent to which climate urbanism is mediated by political violence, authoritarian governance, infrastructural unevenness, and crises of social reproduction. This limitation becomes especially visible in regions where climate change does not appear as a discrete policy domain, but is refracted through broader struggles over survival, legitimacy, sovereignty, and social order.

The Arab region challenges transition-centered assumptions in particularly forceful ways. It is one of the world's most climate-vulnerable regions, facing intensifying heatwaves, prolonged droughts, water stress, sea-level rise, reduced rainfall, salinization, and mounting threats to food security and public health [14–19]. At the same time, it is rapidly urbanizing, demographically dynamic, and deeply unequal [20,21]. Climate change unfolds here amid authoritarian governance, war, displacement, economic crisis, and recurring humanitarian strain [19,22,23]. In such settings, climate change does not arrive as a self-contained planning problem. It is mediated through already existing structures of inequality, infrastructural fragility, and political turbulence.

This paper argues that Arab cities should not be treated simply as under-researched cases awaiting incorporation into existing theory. Rather, they reveal a deeper limitation in dominant accounts of climate urbanism. Much of this scholarship approaches climate change primarily through the language of sustainability transition, resilience, and governance, thereby treating climate response mainly as a technical, institutional, or policy problem. What these approaches insufficiently capture is that climate urbanism is also a struggle over urban order: over what is prioritized, whose risks count, which forms of development are legitimized, and how protection, vulnerability, and opportunity are distributed across urban space. To address this problem, the paper advances the concept of urban climate order.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it introduces urban climate order as a framework for understanding climate urbanism as both a material and a normative reorganization of urban life. Second, it develops this argument through the Arab region, where climate change is mediated by authoritarian governance, displacement, infrastructural fragility, rapid urbanization, inequality, and recurrent conflict, making especially visible the political ordering work of climate urbanism. Third, it develops a provisional typology of Arab urban climate orders—conflict-displaced, branded-technocratic, and defensive-pragmatic—to show that climate urbanism in the region is neither absent nor uniform, but differentiated, contested, and politically embedded. The broader implication is that the Arab region should be understood not as a missing case within climate urbanism, but as a critical site from which urban sustainability theory can be rethought.

Methodological Note: Conceptual and Comparative Approach

This is a conceptual and interpretive paper rather than a single-case empirical study. Its argument is developed through a structured synthesis of four strands of material: (1) scholarship on urban climate governance, sustainability transitions, resilience, and just sustainability; (2) regional literature on Arab urbanization, planning, and environmental change; (3) international policy and assessment reports on climate vulnerability, adaptation, displacement, and conflict; and (4) comparative urban theory on order, inequality, and socio-spatial transformation [1–39,50–80]. The purpose is not to produce a comprehensive regional inventory of climate policy, but to develop an analytical framework that makes visible patterns often obscured by transition-centered narratives.

 doi:10.20944/preprints202603.1226.v1

The concept of urban climate order is constructed through iterative comparison across four domains: public discourse, institutional practice, material urban development, and civic engagement. The typology proposed later in the paper is therefore heuristic rather than exhaustive. It does not claim that every Arab city fits neatly into a single category, nor that the three forms identified here are mutually exclusive. Rather, the typology is intended as a comparative device for identifying recurrent configurations through which climate priorities are incorporated, displaced, or selectively governed across the region. Cities may combine elements of different orders, and they may move between them over time.

2. Why the Arab Region Forces a Rethinking of Climate Urbanism

The Arab region occupies a paradoxical position in climate and sustainability scholarship. On the one hand, it is among the regions most exposed to intensifying environmental pressures. On the other hand, it remains underrepresented in mainstream debates on urban climate transition. Existing work has generated important insights into urban planning strategies, adaptation, flood mitigation, green space provision, and sustainability policy in specific national settings [24–29]. However, this literature remains fragmented, unevenly distributed, and often disconnected from broader theoretical debates.

The region is confronting an acute convergence of climate, urban, and governance pressures. In parts of the Arab world, warming is occurring at rates close to or above the global average, while rising temperatures, intensifying aridity, and extreme heat threaten ecosystems, infrastructure, public health, and economic stability [5,17,18]. Water scarcity has become one of the region's most critical structural stressors, as declining freshwater availability intersects with rapid population growth and accelerated urbanization, placing mounting pressure on already fragile hydrological systems [15,16]. These pressures are compounded by continued reliance on carbon-intensive energy systems, which constrains movement toward low-carbon and climate-resilient development pathways [30]. Environmental risk is also inseparable from social and spatial inequality: climate impacts fall disproportionately on low-income households, residents of informal settlements, migrants, and displaced communities, who are often most exposed to environmental hazards while benefiting least from mitigation and adaptation investments [31]. For this reason, sustainability in the Arab region cannot be understood through technical or sectoral approaches alone. It must be analyzed through the intersections of governance, inequality, and justice.

Urban areas are the primary spatial arena in which these pressures are concentrated. As in other world regions, Arab cities are increasingly exposed to extreme heat, flooding, sea-level rise, and infrastructure stress [3,4,17,24–29]. Yet they remain significantly underrepresented in both climate scholarship and comparative urban theory. This gap is striking given the scale of regional urbanization: the Arab region comprises 22 countries, a rapidly growing population, and a highly urbanized settlement structure, with some countries exceeding 90% urbanization [20,21]. Existing scholarship often privileges a narrow set of visible or globally connected cases—especially wealthier Gulf cities—while leaving many cities in North Africa, the Levant, and conflict-affected contexts comparatively understudied [12,13,24–29].

Three limitations in the existing literature are especially important.

The first is geographical concentration. Wealthier Gulf states, especially Qatar and Saudi Arabia, have attracted disproportionate attention, partly because they possess the resources to invest in sustainability strategies and to project them internationally [33–37]. This work is important, but it risks distorting the regional picture. Arab cities are not reducible to flagship megaprojects, entrepreneurial sustainability narratives, or state-led green branding. Many are shaped instead by fragile institutions, overstretched infrastructures, informal urbanization, unequal service distribution, and direct exposure to displacement and conflict.

The second is conceptual narrowing. Climate action is often evaluated through sectoral policies or technical interventions without sufficient attention to the broader political and moral order in which such interventions are embedded. This is especially problematic in a region where public

 doi:10.20944/preprints202603.1226.v1

priorities are repeatedly reordered by war, authoritarian governance, fiscal pressures, and uneven citizenship. Climate change cannot be understood in abstraction from these conditions.

The third is justice marginalization. Social sustainability, distributive fairness, participation, and the protection of vulnerable populations have become central to climate governance scholarship [38,39]. Yet regional analyses often treat justice as secondary to resilience, technological modernization, or policy innovation. In contexts of sharp inequality, precarious labor, and uneven access to services, climate action can easily reproduce exclusion while speaking in the language of sustainability.

The Arab region matters, then, not only because it has been neglected, but because it reveals that climate urbanism is inseparable from political order. Cities do not simply adopt climate transition. They negotiate climate pressures through existing structures of power, crisis, and development. The region should therefore be read not as an exception to climate urbanism, but as a decisive site from which its assumptions can be tested and revised.

3. Regionalized War and the Fragmentation of Climate Urban Order

The climate question in the Arab region cannot be understood apart from war. Contemporary conflicts across the region and the wider Middle East should be analyzed not only as security crises or humanitarian emergencies, but also as processes that intensify climate vulnerability and fragment the conditions of sustainability. Armed conflict does not merely coincide with ecological stress; it reproduces it by destroying infrastructure, displacing populations into environmentally precarious settings, weakening governance, and redirecting fiscal and administrative capacity away from adaptation and long-term recovery. The region is therefore shaped by a double crisis: a crisis of organized violence and a crisis of climate vulnerability, each deepening the other [5,19,40–51].

This argument is sharpened by the increasing regionalization of conflict. The ongoing devastation in Gaza, escalating violence in the West Bank and Lebanon, mass atrocity in Sudan, the fragile and violent transition in Syria, and Yemen's continued insecurity together indicate not a series of isolated emergencies, but an interconnected geography of violence whose effects spill across borders, infrastructures, and civilian lifeworlds [40–49]. For the purposes of this paper, the key issue is not the precise chronology of each conflict, but the common mechanisms through which war fragments urban climate order.

The first mechanism is forced displacement. Conflict generates refugees and internally displaced persons on a massive scale, but the significance of displacement lies not only in movement itself. It lies in the fact that displaced populations are frequently pushed into places already marked by water scarcity, extreme heat, weak infrastructure, food insecurity, and ecological fragility. UNHCR's *No Escape II* finds that three in every four refugees and other forcibly displaced people fleeing war and persecution live in countries highly vulnerable to climate-related hazards [50]. The IPCC similarly emphasizes that vulnerability and exposure are shaped not only by physical hazards, but also by wider social, economic, and institutional conditions [5]. Armed conflict therefore multiplies the number of people who must confront climate shocks with fewer assets, thinner legal protection, degraded public services, and reduced adaptive capacity. In this sense, refugee crises generated by war are also climate-vulnerability crises [5,50,51].

Displacement is also social and spatial. It is not merely the movement of bodies across territory, but a disruption of trust, familiarity, place attachment, and ontological security [52–56]. Work on displacement, routinization, and urban ontological security shows that forced movement destabilizes the everyday spatial conditions through which people anchor identity, social belonging, and security [52–56]. For climate-vulnerable urban populations, this destabilization magnifies exposure to risk. War fragments climate order not only by relocating people, but by unraveling the social infrastructures through which adaptation becomes possible.

The second mechanism is environmental and infrastructural destruction. Armed conflict degrades the ecological foundations of civilian life by damaging water systems, sanitation networks, agricultural land, urban infrastructure, and coastal or terrestrial ecosystems. UNEP's assessment of

 doi:10.20944/preprints202603.1226.v1

Gaza identifies severe damage to soils, freshwater resources, and the coastline, alongside large-scale destruction of agricultural land and debris burdens requiring careful management to avoid further contamination [57]. UNEP has also warned that in many conflict settings displaced populations take refuge in ecologically fragile areas, where the demands of shelter and survival accelerate deforestation, desertification, and soil erosion [58]. The climate significance of war is therefore not reducible to battlefield emissions or immediate destruction. War restructures the ecological basis of future life by diminishing water security, eroding productive land, contaminating environments, and increasing the long-term costs of recovery [57,58].

The third mechanism is institutional erosion. Climate resilience depends on institutions able to plan, regulate, finance, and implement adaptation over time. Conflict weakens precisely these capacities. The ICRC notes that people affected by armed conflict are among those most vulnerable to climate and environmental risks and among those most neglected by climate action [51]. UNEP has likewise argued that rebuilding environmental governance in conflict-affected countries is essential to sustainable development, economic recovery, and adaptation [58]. Yet the financing gap is profound. UNEP's *Adaptation Gap Report 2025* estimates that developing countries face adaptation finance needs of roughly USD 310 billion annually by 2035, while international public adaptation finance flows reached only USD 26 billion in 2023 [59]. War thus erodes not only physical infrastructure, but also the institutional architecture required for climate-resilient urban development [51,58,59].

The fourth mechanism is militarized political economy. Prolonged conflict shifts state priorities toward emergency security, war finance, reconstruction after repeated destruction, and military expenditure, thereby narrowing the fiscal and political space available for social provision, ecological restoration, and adaptation planning. SIPRI estimates that military expenditure in the Middle East reached USD 243 billion in 2024, while global military expenditure rose to USD 2.718 trillion [60]. UNEP has also warned that the production and use of weapons and munitions increase greenhouse-gas emissions and create long-term pollution burdens [58]. In a region repeatedly reordered through bombardment, displacement, and escalation, sustainability becomes politically subordinate to survival, deterrence, and emergency response.

For these reasons, war should be understood not as an external interruption to climate urbanism, but as a force that fragments urban climate order itself. It weakens the institutional, ecological, and material conditions necessary for adaptation, recovery, and human security. It also intensifies climate injustice by concentrating exposure among displaced, impoverished, and politically marginalized populations. The relationship between war and climate change in the region should therefore be framed not as a loose linkage between two separate policy domains, but as a mutually reinforcing structure of insecurity [50–60].

4. Beyond Transition Narratives

Urban theory has provided a rich vocabulary for understanding city-making. Scholars have described the modern city, the postmodern city, the global city, the neoliberal city, the post-neoliberal city, the liberal city, the just city, and the risk city [7–10,61–67]. These frameworks have been productive because they identify dominant logics that organize urban transformation. Yet climate urbanism cannot be adequately understood through transition narratives alone. While the languages of sustainability transition, resilience, and governance illuminate important dimensions of climate response, they do not fully capture the broader ordering work through which climate change is translated into urban priorities, material arrangements, legitimacy, and unequal distributions of protection. What is needed, therefore, is a concept that brings these dimensions together.

Yet these frameworks also tend to privilege a singular explanatory principle—capital accumulation, state restructuring, globalization, liberalism, justice, or risk. Climate urbanism is often added to this field through the language of transition, resilience, governance, or experimentation. What remains underdeveloped is a concept capable of capturing the broader ordering work through

 doi:10.20944/preprints202603.1226.v1

which climate change is translated into urban priorities, material arrangements, and legitimate forms of intervention.

This is why the language of order is useful. In political and philosophical traditions, order has long referred to the structured organization of social life, authority, norms, stability, and transformation [68–72]. Urban studies, however, has rarely treated order itself as a central object of inquiry. Cities are commonly analyzed through governance, development, spatial restructuring, and inequality, while the question of what kind of order these processes produce often remains implicit.

Climate change makes that omission more difficult to sustain. Climate urbanism is not simply a new policy domain. It is a struggle to reorder urban life around new vulnerabilities, infrastructures, values, and hierarchies of protection. This reordering is simultaneously material, political, and moral. It concerns not only what cities do, but what they deem urgent, rational, equitable, modern, and defensible. In this sense, climate urbanism is not only about environmental response. It is also about the redistribution of urban legitimacy.

5. Urban Climate Order as a Conceptual Framework

I define urban climate order as the structured way in which a city organizes its material development, institutional practices, public discourse, and social priorities around climate change. Urban climate order is not reducible to a master plan, a climate strategy, or a portfolio of green projects. It names the broader configuration through which climate change becomes embedded—or marginalized—within urban life. The value of the concept is that it shifts analysis away from climate urbanism as transition alone and toward climate urbanism as a contested reordering of urban life.

5.1. What Urban Climate Order Explains

The value of the concept lies in what it explains that adjacent terms do not. Climate governance directs attention to institutions, policies, and multi-level coordination. Resilience emphasizes coping capacity, preparedness, and system recovery. Just sustainability foregrounds equity and inclusion as normative goals. Each of these approaches is valuable. Yet none, on its own, adequately captures how climate priorities become woven into the broader moral hierarchy and socio-spatial ordering of the city.

Urban climate order addresses that gap. It asks not only whether cities govern climate risks, but how climate change reorganizes urban legitimacy, development priorities, public discourse, and the distribution of protection. It asks not only how cities absorb shocks, but which lives, spaces, and futures are stabilized, improved, neglected, or sacrificed in the process. Its analytical payoff lies in explaining why climate urbanism may appear as visible, fragmented, performative, selective, or justice-deficient across different urban contexts.

5.2. Material and Normative Dimensions

This framework has two interrelated dimensions.

The first is material. It includes planning systems, infrastructures, housing, land-use patterns, energy systems, transport, flood protection, green spaces, and the geography of investment and neglect. The material dimension concerns how climate priorities are translated into the built environment and into everyday conditions of urban life. It asks where cities invest, which spaces are protected, how housing is produced, whether public transport and energy transition are prioritized, and which populations benefit from adaptive or mitigative interventions.

The second is normative, or what may be called the sensible dimension of urban order. Building on broader reflections on sensibility, discourse, and order [73–77], this dimension concerns the values, priorities, ideologies, and moral hierarchies that shape what climate action means in a given city. It asks: What is recognized as a climate problem? Which forms of intervention are seen as legitimate? Whose vulnerability is publicly visible? What forms of development remain celebrated even when they intensify exposure or exclusion?

 doi:10.20944/preprints202603.1226.v1

This framework also builds on work that treats sustainability as a contested, multidimensional field rather than a single sectoral concern [78,79]. It further draws on methodological work on conceptual framework construction in qualitative and urban research [80]. As illustrated in Figure 1, urban climate order can be approached through four interrelated domains: public discourse, institutional practice, material urban development, and civic engagement.

Public discourse shapes whether climate change appears as a central public concern, a technocratic planning issue, or a marginal problem displaced by other crises. It includes media narratives, educational processes, official rhetoric, public debate, and the broader symbolic language through which sustainability becomes meaningful or remains alien [76–78].

Institutional practice concerns the extent to which climate concerns are translated into planning regimes, regulations, administrative routines, and urban policy. This includes emissions policy, adaptation planning, waste management, environmental regulation, energy policy, and support for circular-economy initiatives.

Material urban development refers to the actual forms of growth, infrastructure, housing, transport, and spatial restructuring taking place in the city. A city's climate order is visible not only in its strategies but also in its built form: whether it intensifies car dependency or public mobility, prioritizes green space or extraction, produces exclusionary enclaves or more inclusive neighborhoods, and invests in resilience for vulnerable districts or only for elite spaces.

Civic engagement concerns the relations among public authorities, businesses, developers, civil society organizations, grassroots groups, and residents. Climate urbanism is not made by states alone. It is shaped by power relations among actors with unequal resources, visibility, and access to decision-making [53,81–83]. For that reason, a strong climate order cannot be judged only by the presence of policy, but also by the extent to which underrepresented voices shape urban priorities.

Together, these domains shape four key outcomes through which a city's climate orientation can be assessed: mitigation, adaptation, energy transition, and justice. Justice is not an optional normative supplement. It is the decisive test of whether climate urbanism redistributes safety, voice, and urban opportunity, or merely reorganizes privilege under a green vocabulary.

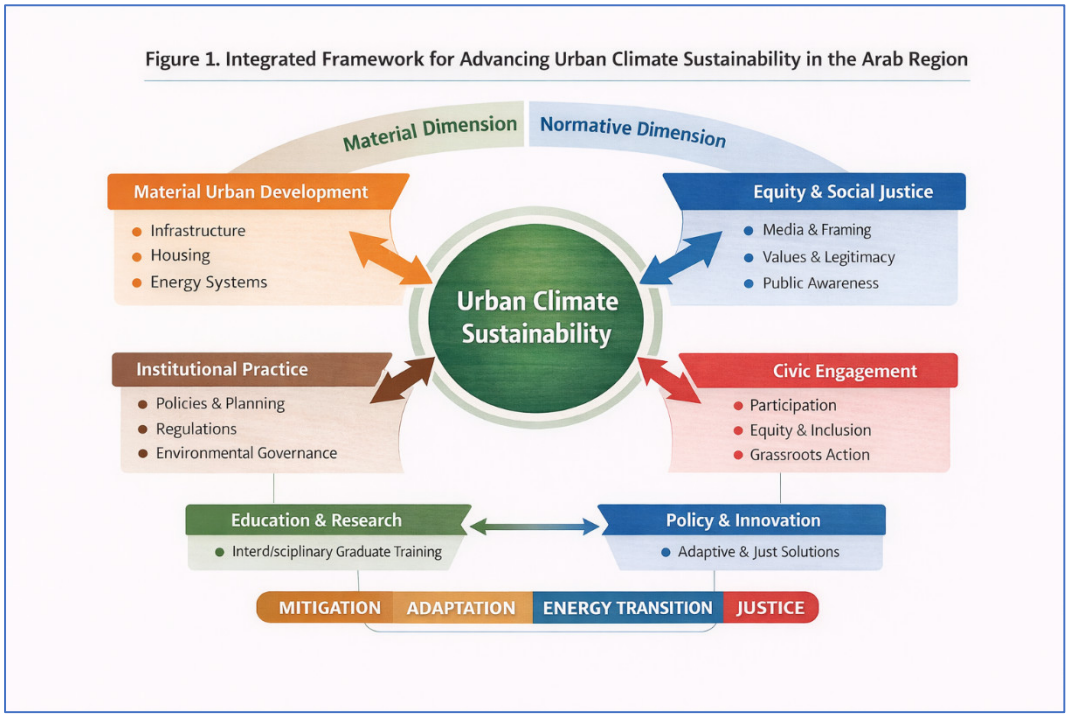

Figure 1. Integrated Framework for Advancing Urban Climate Sustainability in the Arab Region.

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6. A Provisional Typology of Climate Urban Orders in the Arab Region

The Arab region does not exhibit a single climate urban order. It displays multiple and uneven forms. At this stage, a heuristic typology is more analytically useful than any homogenizing account. The typology offered here is provisional, non-exhaustive, and partly overlapping. Its purpose is not to essentialize Arab cities, but to guide comparative inquiry by making visible the differentiated ways in which climate change is being incorporated, displaced, or selectively governed across the region.

The three forms identified here should therefore be read as ideal-types. In practice, cities may combine elements of more than one order, and their dominant climate orientation may shift over time as governance conditions, infrastructure capacities, conflict dynamics, and political priorities change.

6.1. Conflict-Displaced Climate Order

In conflict-affected and politically fragile settings, climate concerns are often displaced by war, humanitarian emergency, fiscal collapse, and institutional breakdown. Sustainability discourse struggles to enter public life in a sustained way, and climate action is frequently reactive, fragmented, or externally driven. Urban governance becomes oriented toward immediate stabilization rather than long-term transformation. Adaptation may exist, but often as crisis response rather than as a coherent political project. In these settings, climate order is weak not because climate risks are absent, but because they are crowded out by more immediate forms of insecurity.

Empirically, this order is identifiable through weak institutionalization of climate policy, limited public discourse beyond emergency response, degraded or destroyed infrastructure, strong reliance on humanitarian actors, and the concentration of vulnerability among displaced or marginalized populations. Its justice problem lies in triage: climate protection is often subordinated to survival, and already precarious populations confront both environmental exposure and political abandonment.

6.2. Branded-Technocratic Climate Order

In wealthier and more stable settings, especially hydrocarbon-rich Gulf cities, climate action often becomes visible through state strategy, master planning, entrepreneurial narratives, flagship developments, renewable energy visions, and international positioning [33–37]. Sustainability is articulated through policy language, innovation agendas, and institutional reform. Yet this form of climate order is frequently selective. It may be strong in representation, infrastructure, and international visibility while weaker in participation, labor justice, spatial equality, and everyday redistribution.

This order can be identified through highly visible sustainability discourse, strong state-led planning capacity, investment in emblematic green infrastructure, and the alignment of climate action with competitiveness, regime legitimacy, or global branding. Its justice problem lies in selectivity: climate urbanism may be materially consequential yet still reproduce enclave urbanism, labor precarity, and unequal protection.

6.3. Defensive-Pragmatic Climate Order

A third form emerges in secondary or less internationally visible cities, where climate pressures such as flooding, heat stress, water shortages, or infrastructure failure compel practical responses. These responses are not usually framed through ambitious transition narratives. They are localized, piecemeal, and defensive. Yet they matter because they show that climate urbanism does not only emerge through grand sustainability strategies. It can also emerge through practical efforts to preserve urban functionality under stress [24–29].

This order is identifiable through incremental adaptation, localized infrastructure repair, risk management without strong rhetorical climate framing, and partial interventions focused on

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maintaining service provision or reducing immediate exposure. Its justice problem lies in uneven reach: defensive responses may protect some districts while leaving others exposed, thereby reproducing inequality through pragmatic but selective forms of protection.

Taken together, these three forms show that climate urbanism in the Arab region is neither absent nor uniform. It is patterned by different combinations of governance capacity, political turbulence, infrastructural conditions, public discourse, and social inequality. The typology therefore shifts analysis away from the question of whether cities have entered climate transition and toward the question of what kind of climate order is being produced.

7. Justice as the Decisive Test

If urban climate order is to function as a meaningful concept, it must be evaluated not only by the presence of climate policies but by their social consequences. This is why justice must be placed at the center of analysis. Arab cities are marked by wide disparities in wealth, service provision, environmental exposure, labor conditions, infrastructure quality, and access to political voice. Under such conditions, mitigation and adaptation can easily become selective forms of protection.

The point is not merely normative. It is analytical. A city that builds climate-resilient infrastructure for affluent districts while neglecting informal settlements, precarious laboring populations, migrant workers, or marginalized communities is not exhibiting a strong climate order in any meaningful sustainability sense. It is exhibiting a socially partial order. Likewise, a city that embraces renewable energy while preserving exclusionary planning regimes cannot be assumed to be advancing toward just sustainability.

Justice must therefore be understood as internal to climate urbanism rather than external to it. Social sustainability scholarship has shown that urban sustainability requires more than environmental performance; it also requires equity, inclusion, recognition, and the protection of vulnerable groups [38,39,82,84]. Recent work on just-oriented adaptation further demonstrates that adaptation policy cannot be separated from questions of recognition, participation, and distribution [39]. These insights are especially important in the Arab region, where social fragmentation, unequal development, and limited civic inclusion shape how urban risks are experienced and governed.

Justice also differentiates the three climate orders identified above. In conflict-displaced orders, injustice appears in the abandonment of displaced and highly exposed populations, whose vulnerability is intensified by institutional collapse and humanitarian triage. In branded-technocratic orders, injustice appears in selective inclusion: climate action may be materially visible while labor exploitation, limited participation, and socio-spatial exclusion persist beneath a sustainability narrative. In defensive-pragmatic orders, injustice appears through uneven protection, as piecemeal adaptation shields some infrastructures or neighborhoods while leaving others to absorb recurring risk.

The most important question, then, is not whether Arab cities have entered the global climate conversation. Many have, in different ways. The more important question is what kind of climate urban order is being produced, for whom, and with what social effects. That question places justice at the center of sustainability rather than at its margins.

8. Conclusions

The Arab region should not be treated as a peripheral or missing case in urban climate scholarship. Its cities reveal something theoretically consequential: climate urbanism is not adequately understood as a sustainability transition alone. It is also a contested reordering of urban life under conditions of unequal power, institutional unevenness, and overlapping crisis.

The concept of urban climate order helps capture this reality by bringing together the material and normative dimensions of climate urbanism. It directs attention to what cities build, what they regulate, what they publicly value, whose vulnerabilities they recognize, and how they distribute

 doi:10.20944/preprints202603.1226.v1

protection and opportunity. In the Arab region, this lens reveals not one path to sustainability, but multiple and uneven orders shaped by conflict, technocracy, pragmatism, and justice deficits.

The broader implication extends beyond the region. If climate urbanism is to become a genuinely global field of inquiry, it must move beyond frameworks that treat climate response primarily as a matter of transition, resilience, or governance and engage more directly with the question of urban order. Arab cities matter not simply because they have been overlooked, but because they make visible how climate change is governed through broader struggles over legitimacy, survival, inequality, and justice. They therefore do not merely need to be added to the literature; they require the literature itself to think differently.

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