



Book Review

Ghassan Chebaro's *2022* and the Forgotten Climate Crisis in the Middle East. Book Review: Chebaro (2009). 2022. Beirut: Arab Scientific Publishers. ISBN: 978-9953875118

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Abstract: The article discusses Ghassan Chebaro's novel *2022* and the importance of grassroots action in battling the impending climate disaster in the Middle East. The article contrasts the novel's optimism with the disappointing reality of inaction that is exacerbating the climate crisis. It also addresses the interconnectedness of capitalism, the military industrial complex, and the climate crisis.

Keywords: fiction; Arabic fiction; ecocriticism



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In 2009, Lebanese novelist and self-proclaimed environment and wildlife defender Ghassan Chebaro tried to imagine what Lebanon and the Middle East would look like thirteen years into the future. His novel *2022* is both a cautionary tale of the ever-worsening climate crisis and an optimistic look at a near future in which the new generations, feeling the danger of global warming, decide to take matters into their own hands and fight for the environment by challenging corrupt politicians and greedy capitalists. But, how close to reality was Chebaro's optimistic vision now that we have arrived at the year the novel is named after?

Arabic fiction like *2022* that addresses the climate crisis in the Middle East is astonishingly rare despite the clear signs of the impending climate disaster in the region. In fact, this absence reflects the failure of most nations in the region to effectively address the problem on the ground, in addition to the dire political and economic conditions in many Middle Eastern countries ravaged by wars, economic sanctions, and lack of resources. Although it did not address the climate disaster as explicitly as *2022* did, probably the most important Arabic novel to tackle the threat of climate change and the oil industry in the Middle East is *Cities of Salt* (1984) by Saudi novelist Abdulrahman Munif. This seminal petronarrative criticizes both the Gulf countries, like Saudi Arabia, and western nations, blaming them for turning beautiful communal oasis societies in the Arabian gulf into "cities of salt" after the discovery and extraction of oil.

Almost four decades after the publication of *Cities of Salt*, the region's climate pains have only gotten worse. Today, the Middle East is experiencing more scorching hot summers, longer droughts, floods, and wildfires. These changes have made scientists declare that the Middle East might soon become mostly uninhabitable as it continues to warm at twice the global average. In the meantime, political conflicts, wars and refugees, and the migration to industrial cities especially in the last two decades have exacerbated the problem even more, delaying any action that could slow down the pace of climate change. The region's instability and climate change are not separate issues, however. In fact, the political and social instability in many cases can be traced back to climate disaster. It was reported that among the causes of the Arab Spring revolutions that started in 2011 were the economic hardships brought about by climate change and the governments' inability to try to mitigate the impact of the crisis. Water shortages in Egypt and Libya and droughts in Syria have driven poor and struggling farmers to protests and disobedience.

Chebaro's novel, *2022*, is set in a not-so-unfamiliar world experiencing devastating hurricanes, fires, earthquakes, stifling pollution, and excessive heat, in addition to back-breaking energy costs. The only difference is that the very people bearing the brunt of this have finally been awakened and have decided to rise and try to save what can be saved. The novel's protagonist, Diana Faris, is a young Lebanese woman who for over a decade has dedicated her life to fighting for the environment. Diana is a fearless environmental firebrand who can be seen as a combination of Greta Thunberg and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a rebellious grassroots environmental activist turned politician. Faris' activism started when she led a campaign to rescue Palms Islands Natural Reserve, a Lebanese island near the city of Tripoli that suffered an environmental disaster during the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. The Israeli Air Forces bombed Jiyeh Power Station which caused a massive oil spill. One of the areas affected by the spill was Palms Island, home to the endangered green sea turtles. Faris worked fervently, mobilizing and leading clean-up campaigns to protect sea life and wildlife on the Island. She ultimately was able to turn the Island into an environmental utopia, hoping it would set the example for other cities.

The fact that Diana's environmental activism started as a response to war and military destruction does not come as a coincidence. At the heart of the novel, and the overall climate crisis, is the interconnectedness of unfettered capitalism, the military industrial complex, and the inaction towards climate change. In fact, the antagonist of the novel, Mansour Qashoosh, is a ruthless capitalist, who started his career as an arms dealer and trafficker. Qashoosh, who "built his wealth on the remains and spilled blood of his countrymen by selling weapons during the Lebanese Civil War" (translation mine), used the money he made from war and arms sales to build his corporate empire, which later included Master Group, Master Bank, and Balsam Hospital. Mansour Qashoosh's name in Arabic carries symbolic meaning. His first name means "the victorious." According to Qashoosh and the people around him, he is someone who does not lose. He gets anything he wants by any means necessary. His last name means the one who devours everything, and everyone, around him. He also goes by "the Master," which is indicative of how he sees and treats everyone around him. He believes that he can enslave everyone with money. He buys the silence, friendship, and even obedience of politicians, army generals, healthcare professionals, and media personalities. For him, climate justice and environmental activism are silly dreams that the "elitists," like Diana, sell to the poor. Also, Qashoosh's connection to war and arms trafficking can be read as a reflection of the region's arms race while the environment is literally burning. Diana described Mansour and all the other corrupt politicians and capitalists as "moral pollution" (translation mine), stating that sacrificing the planet for financial and political gains is immoral and that only when moral pollution is curbed will environmental pollution subside.

Chebaro's main message in the novel is that change is coming. His optimism stemmed from the belief that a new movement both on the public and governmental levels to save the environment is the only logical response to the accelerating climate crisis. In the year 2022, we see that Diana's voice is no longer ignored like that of the climate activists of 2009. As the novel progresses, Diana becomes more and more convincing. She goes from being a local activist with a very small group of followers to becoming a national icon. She is able to lead and win a political campaign and become a parliament member after defeating her nemesis, Mansour Qashoosh. Winning an election as a climate warrior is an incredible feat even in the most progressive countries. The novel also shows that corrupt politicians and capitalists are starting to lose their firm grip. The old minister of environment, who shows disdain towards climate activists and has vetoed green projects, is replaced by a new minister known for his genuine care for the environment. Hemp is replacing cement as a green alternative in building and manufacturing, and the reliance on fossil fuels is sharply decreasing. Even Qashoosh's own son, Malik, has joined the climate movement defying his father and showing that the new generation will not tolerate the damage the old generation has caused or ignored. The novel ends with an arrest warrant issued for

Mansour Qashoosh and then news of his ironic demise as his yacht capsizes during a hurricane caused by climate change.

The year 2022 has arrived, and the future that Ghassan Chebaro has imagined is finally here. However, change never came. In fact, Chebaro himself lamented the lack of change in his native country and the region in one interview in 2021:

In 2009, I published my novel, *2022*, whose title was printed in pink to show optimism that the coming years will bring important environmental changes. However, after twelve years, instead of increasing environmental awareness (as I was dreaming), and implementing steps for the benefit of the citizens and the country, we witnessed a huge decline as can be seen in the high rates of pollution in the air, water, rivers, wells and the sea [. . .] As for the change in the practices of politicians and the ruling class, the sectarian mentality continues to cause discrimination between the citizens [. . .] and thwart any attempts for change. Unfortunately, there are no signs of any future change, which leads me to believe (and I hope I am wrong) that the situation will continue as it is until the year 2050. (translation mine)

It is hard to blame Chebaro for his pessimism. The lack of action and the continued neglect of the climate disaster is demoralizing. Hope, however, will need to live on because voices like that of Chebaro and the dozen other activists are sorely needed. Despite sounding pessimistic in this interview, Chebaro continues to do incredible work as he turns his attention to children's books. In 2018, he published a series of books to educate young learners about the dangers of climate change. The "Environment Protection Series: Animals in Danger" includes titles such as *Save the Flamingos*, *Save the Fish*, and *Save the Rhinoceros*. Only through education will the next generation finally bring change.

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