

Media coverage of urban resilience in Athens and Tunis

THEMATIC AREA: Cities

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Environmental challenges:

Accommodating between a quarter and a half of their national populations, Athens and Tunis are coastal capitals particularly at risk from violent climate change, in a Mediterranean region [anticipated](#) to be affected 20% more harshly than the global average.

Both Athens and Tunis are situated in an expanding zone of aridity, placing them at a global warming frontline. In recent years, their downtowns have witnessed expanding urban thermal islands, and their margins gnawed away at by catastrophic annual fires. The number of climate change refugees they host increased, adding further pressure to water resources and driving up urban real-estate prices.

Both cities are extremely exposed to climate change, with Athens registering its six hottest years in the last decade, and an average median temperature of 19°C, marking a 1,5°C rise and already placing it at the limits of the temperature increase that the Paris Agreement seeks to avoid. The city appointed its first ever Chief Heat Officer in 2021, shortly before enduring record summer temperatures and as reports pointed to it as the EU's hottest capital.

Athens participates in the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate Change, and is marked as suffering an [extremely serious](#) risk of hot temperatures, and a [serious](#) risk of flood and sea level rise. Tunis' participation in the Covenant is modest, with the capital itself not appearing on the list, although the upscale, seaside, residential district of La Marsa has registered. La Marsa is still in the [Mitigation](#) stage (the first of three), and has yet to calculate its greenhouse gas emissions or draw up a mitigation plan.

Tunisia's capital, where summer temperatures can [exceed](#) 45°C, is already at a risk greater than Athens, caught between soil salinization, creeping desertification and the urban heat-island phenomenon. Potable water [shortages](#) are already a reality, as well as seawater incursions into the water-table, prompting farmers to artificially raise the level of their land to avoid the threat of major storms or flooding [submerging](#) the fertile lowlands leading to the capital's northwestern suburbs in Ariana.

Aims:

This review assesses levels of state preparedness and public awareness, as expressed by the coverage offered urban resiliency issues in the Greek and Tunisian national media. Do they help educate readers on the consequences of climate change on their living space? Do they treat proliferating heatwaves, internal and external climate refugees, and climate change-related natural disasters as interconnected and related phenomena, or as separate, isolated, and uncontextualised?

We have monitored national media in Arabic, French, Greek and English for the regularity, depth and perspective from which they cover issues like renewable energy, climate-adjusted architecture, urban agriculture and green-space initiatives, and economies structured around sharing and circularity. We then assess the extent to which the media shapes public opinion vis-à-vis the creation of more resilient urban spaces.

Media coverage of urban resilience in Athens

The term urban resilience began appearing in the Greek media from the mid-2010s, when the city joined the [100 Resilient Cities](#) framework, founding an [Office of Resilience and Sustainability](#).

In 2015, 78% of Athenians polled had yet to hear of the term. In 2018, Athens joined the C40 City Solutions Platform, drawing up an action plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that aimed by 2030 to reduce emissions by 40%. Challenges identified were heatwaves, days of extreme heat, and flash floods caused by soil non-retention due to the extensive forest fires plighting Attica since the 1970s. Officials observed a 5.2% increase in mortality for every 1°C increase in daily max temperatures over 31.5°C.

Greek media has covered how the city sought to both adapt to changes in the climate and mitigate them, through maintaining and increasing green spaces, engaging in alternative ways of greening, such as vertical green techniques and the use of water elements in urban planning. It also considered investing in sustainable materials, cool pavements, and

materials with low embodied energy. Finally, it engaged in public information and awareness campaigns.

Some of the most intense media coverage focused around the city's offering citizens [access](#) to the European Regional Development Fund, starting in 2018, to insulate and render its private and public buildings energy-autonomous. Around that time, media coverage of initiatives taken to fortify the city against climate change increased.

Articles and TV news reports focused on efforts to shift from petroleum to natural gas, install green roofs, regenerate parts of the city through a bioclimatic approach, establish pop-up green spaces, and promote sustainable transport. Private cultural foundations such as [Niarhos](#) and [Onassis](#) also played a role in urban resilience issues. These faltered in 2020 due to the Covid-19 epidemic.

Meanwhile, since 2019, media began paying increased attention to studies positing what consequences climate change would have on Greece, with titles such as "[Athens will have a climate similar to Fez, Morocco, by 2050](#)" illustrated by images of dystopian-looking scorched landscapes and warnings of water-shortages and up to 6°C hotter temperatures.

National media slightly increased coverage of the regional repercussions of climate change as posited by nationally or internationally-published environmental analysis reports. It also covered EU-imposed environmental measures with local impact.

Nevertheless, much of the reporting fails to progress beyond the level of lip-service or marketing, and overwhelmingly involves newsroom journalists lightly rewriting press releases issued by the authorities or companies as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility activities.

Environmental reporting is largely absent from the agenda-setting television news, there are no environmental reporting beats, and signs of an emerging culture of ecologism - whether on the popular or policy level - are only gradual and insufficient to the issue's urgency. This extends to the political arena: in the 2019 elections, the only political party to table a proposal that gas reserves in the East Mediterranean remain unexploited, garnered only 3% of the national vote.

Media coverage of urban resilience in Tunis

The situation in the Tunisian media is characterised by erratic and disconnected communication on a graver and more imminent series of factors. Urban resilience related coverage appears predominantly in the French over the [Arabic](#)-language press. It involves information related to the country's inclusion in international funding networks related to urban resilience or 'green cities', and issues such as cleaner urban air and water, and better waste-treatment. Occasionally, coverage can be deceptive, e.g. [reporting](#) that Tunis has been included in a resilience-related network not being confirmed by [reality](#).

The large urban populations living in informal residential districts in the town's center and periphery, are affected by the related issue of social exclusion, which impedes them from the advantages of city living like job opportunities, municipal maintenance of public infrastructure, access to parks and municipal events. Adjustable levels of policing can also affect citizens' experience of the city and youth from marginal districts participation.

Nevertheless, media coverage amplifies messaging and promises about the prospect of introducing photovoltaic energy, cycle-paths, rainwater cisterns and developing green spaces.

Still, it seems that current reality on the streets of Tunis remains distant from [claims](#) of Tunisian achievement of 80% of the UN's Sustainable Development objectives, or accelerating its transition to new energy infrastructures, electric vehicles and new environmentally-friendlier construction materials.

Hopeful spots in the Tunisian media landscape are offered by independent, citizen sourced media like [Inkyfada](#), tackling the [intersection](#) between urban resilience and social issues.

Conclusions:

Neither the Greek nor the Tunisian media attain a satisfactory level in preparing their respective publics to deal with the looming environmental challenges of the decades ahead. This is problematic given that Athens and Tunis are particularly vulnerable to climate change, concentrate large segments of their national populations, and suffer from weak support systems (electricity, infrastructure and building construction quality) that are already demonstrably breaking down during extreme weather events.

With climate change resulting in less rain overall that is, however, more

intensely concentrated, low-lying parts of Tunis and Athens are regularly flooded during intense rainfall. A single day of snow in Athens in February 2021 resulted in the city coming to a complete halt, and hundreds of thousands of homes being left without electricity for days after, yet most of the pro-government media's coverage was muted.

To fulfill their informational role, as relating to an important public interest issue, both Greek and Tunisian media will have to improve the penetration and range of their coverage.

AUTHORS:

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