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Green power politics in North African countries: Continuity or change?

Morocco has set a goal of generating more than half of its power from renewable sources by 2030

In 2023, environmental and climate issues will again be at the top of the policy agenda in the Middle East and North Africa. The upcoming COP28 climate conference in Dubai and the rapid growth in the renewables sector in Egypt and North Africa both point to the growing power of MENA states within global climate politics. This has been backed up by these countries' ambitious renewable energy targets. Morocco aims to produce 52% of its electricity from renewables by 2030 and Egypt has a 42% renewable electricity target for 2035.

How, though, will renewable energy reshape the region's politics? And to what extent do renewables represent a continuity of older energy politics dynamics at the domestic, regional, and international level?

Too often, energy policies remain siloed from other policy areas. It is necessary to situate energy politics within the broader economic, political, and social sphere that it both reflects and constitutes. As was previously the case with oil and gas, green energy technologies are being used to reinforce hegemonic geopolitical relations in the MENA region.

Extraction in the Maghreb

In 2009, Morocco launched a national energy strategy that aims to transition to domestic renewable energy sources. Historically an "energy-poor" country, Morocco has turned to renewables as a means to transform its energy security and dependencies, setting the goal of generating more than half of its power from renewable sources by 2030.

The solar energy mega project, Noor Ouarzazate, located in southeast Morocco at the foot of the High Atlas mountains, is made up of four solar plants covering an area of 3,000 hectares and possessing a 580-megawatt capacity to produce around 6% of Morocco's total energy supply. It also includes the world's largest concentrated power plant.

This public-private partnership was partly funded by the EU Neighboring Investment Facility (NIF), which put up €106.5 million, as well as the European Investment Bank, the French Agency for Development, the German Development Bank, and others. It was built and is operated by a consortium consisting of ACWA Power (based in Saudi Arabia), the Moroccan Agency for Solar Energy (Masen), Aries, and three Spanish

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companies: TSK, Acciona, and Sener. Meanwhile, Noor II and Noor III were built by the Chinese company Shandong Electric Power Construction.

The Noor Ouarzazate project is a feat of solar technology, bringing together a constellation of international engineering, construction, and financial knowledge and means. Its infrastructural monumentalism, however, belies local political and social dynamics.

The Noor solar complex is located in one of the poorest and most water-stressed regions of southeast Morocco and is built on land previously held in common by a Moroccan Amazigh community. While the project included a \$6.8 million fund for local development projects, it offered no compensation to local pastoral farmers, and there are fears that its high water

Morocco has been viewed as a possible solution to Europe's energy requirements.

requirements will increase water pressures.

Russia's now year-old war in Ukraine and the ensuing global energy crisis jumpstarted a search by European states for alternative energy supplies that would reduce reliance on Russian gas. Morocco—and the wider Maghreb—have been viewed as a possible solution to Europe's energy requirements.

The EU has thus redoubled its efforts to invest in green energy in North Africa. In 2022, the EU and Morocco signed the EU-Morocco Green Partnership, which "aims to advance the external dimension of the European Green Deal through action on the ground."

Existing interconnectors between Morocco and Spain that since 2019 have been exporting electricity to Spain could easily be used to link Morocco to the European grid. More ambitious still, green energy startup Xlinks plans to lay an Atlantic submarine cable connecting Morocco with the UK at a cost of \$22 billion. As of January 2023, it remains unclear whether the project will draw energy from solar and wind farms in the Western Sahara.

Such green energy projects and interconnectors are being replicated across North Africa. In Tunisia and Algeria, there are similar plans to connect solar plants to Europe. As such, some have argued that the world is now witnessing a new form of environmental colonialism that is powering Europe at the expense of North Africa's indigenous populations. While this is certainly true, it is necessary to focus on the different and varied forms this colonialism is taking, including Europe's exploitation of its North African neighbours.

Egypt and Geopolitics in the Eastern Mediterranean

In the eastern Mediterranean, Egypt has been looking to become a regional hub for liquefied natural gas (LNG), green hydrogen, and ammonia and has the potential to become a significant global energy hub. As in Morocco, Egypt's energy infrastructure is closely entwined with regional political relations reinforcing the eastern Mediterranean's geopolitical hierarchies.

LNG, which is greener than coal and oil, has been sold as a "transition fuel" that can act as a bridge between high-polluting fuels and green technologies.

Moreover, since the start of the war in Ukraine, it has been touted as a viable replacement for Russian gas.

The geographic proximity of these eastern Mediterranean gas fields has led to economic cooperation between Egypt, Israel, and Cyprus. States have looked to take advantage of economies of scale, pooling gas infrastructure such as Egypt's LNG facilities at Damietta and Edku and existing pipeline infrastructure.

These economies of scale have also produced political effects, precipitating new bilateral and multilateral relations across the eastern Mediterranean and entrenching conflict. Economic cooperation was instituted through the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum in 2019. This regional intergovernmental organisation, which includes Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Greece, Italy, and Jordan, reflects a realignment of states in the region and is notable for those states it excludes, namely Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon.

Eastern Mediterranean gas discoveries have also rearranged the direction of the flow of gas— and political power—in the Arab Gas Pipeline.

Eastern Mediterranean gas discoveries have also rearranged the direction of the flow of gas— and political power—in the Arab Gas Pipeline. Originally commissioned in 2003 to export gas from Egypt to Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, a branch to Israel was added in 2008.

In 2016, a deal was signed to transport gas from Israel to Jordan, and in 2022 an agreement was signed in Cairo



to allow for the transport of two billion cubic meters of gas per year from Israel to Egypt before it is turned into LNG and sent along to Europe.

The European Union acknowledged this tripartite relationship officially when it signed a memorandum of understanding with Egypt and Israel to establish a framework for the export of natural gas to Europe via Egypt. As some analysts have noted, economic cooperation on gas exports between Israel and

Egypt is leading to ever-closer political alliances and to the normalisation of Arab countries' relations with Israel.

In the longer term, Egypt aims to turn the Suez Canal Economic Zone into a global hub for the production of green hydrogen and ammonia. During COP27, Egypt took advantage of its host status to sign eight framework agreements for green hydrogen and ammonia projects, including with Indian renewables company ReNew Power and Dubai-based AMEA power.

While recent reports hype the transformational effects of hydrogen on energy geopolitics, such positive effects may have been overstated. Indeed, it is revealing that hydrogen movers are often those states—such as Egypt—that wish to further secure their positions as energy powers. Green transitions are overlaid upon older global energy inequalities, and energy powers are able to capture new green technologies so as to maintain their geopolitical positions and interests.

Egypt's emergence as an energy hub was by no means certain, but required putting in place economic, legal, political, and economic infrastructure that would make Egypt a hinge point for the transport of energy. This was both partly reliant upon and has sped up Arab countries' normalisation of relations with Israel and the creation of a new political bloc in the eastern Mediterranean.

Complex Geopolitics

It sometimes appears that the geopolitics of the green transition are both inevitable and natural, a reflection of the global distribution of wind, solar, and tidal resources. But the green transition then becomes solely a technical matter of connecting together energy producers (such as Western Sahara) with energy consumers (the cities of Europe).

This narrative, however, obscures the politics of renewable energy infrastructure. Wind farms, solar plants, electricity interconnectors, and LNG pipelines are all, in important ways, imbricated in the region's geopolitics, reinforcing, renewing, and occasionally challenging geopolitical hierarchies in the region. ■

