

DISMANTLING GREEN (NEO)COLONIALISM: ENERGY AND CLIMATE JUSTICE IN THE ARAB REGION

ARTICLE

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The reality of climate breakdown is already visible in North Africa and the Arab region, undermining the ecological and socioeconomic basis of life. Addressing this global climate crisis requires a drastic reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and a rapid transition towards renewable energies. However, there are potential risks and dangers that such a transition would maintain the same practices of dispossession and exploitation that currently prevail, reproducing injustices and deepening socioeconomic exclusion.

Every year, the world's political leaders, advisers, media and corporate lobbyists gather for another United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP) on the issue of climate change. But despite the threat facing the planet, governments continue to allow carbon emissions to rise and the crisis to escalate. After three decades of what the Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg has called 'blah blah blah', it has become evident that these climate talks are bankrupt and are failing. They have been hijacked by corporate power and private interests that promote profit-making false solutions, like carbon trading and so-called 'net-zero' and 'nature-based solutions', instead of forcing industrialised nations and fossil fuel companies to reduce carbon emissions and leave fossil fuels in the ground.

With COP28 held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE), between 30 November and 12 December 2023, the Arab region had hosted the climate talks five times since their inception in 1995. COPs attract massive media attention but tend not to achieve major breakthroughs. COP27, held in Sharm el-Sheikh in 2022, achieved an agreement on Payment for Loss and Damage that has been lauded by some as an important step in making richer countries accountable for the damage caused by climate change in the global South. However, as the agreement lacks clear funding and enforcement mechanisms, critics worry it will meet with the same fate as the broken promise (first made in COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009) to provide \$100 billion in climate finance by 2020. As for COP28, the UAE's appointment of Sultan al-Jaber, CEO of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, to preside over the talks seems to many activists and observers to symbolise the deep commitment to continued oil extraction, regardless of the cost, which has characterised negotiations to date.

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It is becoming clear that the same greedy and authoritarian power structures that have contributed to climate change are now shaping the response to it. Their main goal is to protect private interests and to make even greater profits. While the international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Northern governments and their agencies, such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Union (EU), and the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), are all now articulating the need for a climate transition including in the Arab region, their vision is of a capitalist, and often corporate-led, transition, not one led by and for working people.

The vision of the future that is pushed by these powerful actors is one where economies are subjugated to private profit, including through further privatisation of water, land, resources, energy – and even the atmosphere. The latest stage in this development includes the public–private partnerships (PPPs) now being implemented in every sector in the Arab region, including in renewable energies. Morocco is already advancing along this path, and so are Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia. In Tunisia for example, a major push is under way to expand the privatisation of the country's renewable energy sector and to give huge incentives to foreign investors to produce green energy in the country, including for export. Tunisian law – modified in 2019 – even allows for the use of agricultural land for renewable projects in a country that suffers from acute food dependency, a dependency that was starkly revealed during the COVID-19 pandemic and that is evident once again as war rages in Ukraine.

Green colonialism

Inspired by a colonial and orientalist environmental narrative, the Arabian deserts (Sahara) are usually described by these powerful actors as a vast empty land that is sparsely populated – representing an El Dorado of renewable energy and a golden opportunity to provide Europe with cheap clean energy.

Several examples from the Arab region show for example how energy (neo)colonialism and extractivist practices are reproduced even in transitions to renewable energy, in the form of what is described as 'green colonialism' or 'green neocolonialism'.

Such dynamics are clearly discernible in the renewable projects erected and being built in occupied territories such as Palestine, the Golan Heights, and Western Sahara because they simply take place at the expense of colonised people and go against their right to self-determination.

In Western Sahara, illegally occupied by the Moroccan Kingdom, there are currently three operational wind farms. These wind farms are owned by Nareva, the wind energy company that is owned by the Moroccan royal family's holding company. These renewable projects are being used to entrench the occupation by deepening Morocco's ties to the occupied territories, with the complicity of foreign capital and companies.

In occupied Palestine, the story is not that different if somewhat much more brutal and violent. Israel has portrayed Palestine pre-1948 as an empty, parched desert, which has become a

blooming oasis after the establishment of the state of Israel. Israel covers up its war crimes against the Palestinian people by posing as a green and advanced country, in a superior position to a fearsome and arid Middle East. This position has been reinforced with the signing of the Abraham Accords with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan in 2020, and through agreements to jointly implement environmental projects concerning renewable energy, agri-business and water, which are a form of what is described as eco-normalisation.

Export-oriented projects


In the context of the war in Ukraine and the EU's attempts to cut reliance on Russian gas, we see once again that EU energy security comes above everything else. We are seeing more gas lock-in, more extractivism, more path dependency and a halt to the green transition where those extractive projects are taking place, as with the agreement for Algeria to boost gas supplies to Italy. In fact, Algeria's national company Sonatrach and Italian ENI is pumping an additional 9 billion cubic metres from 2023/2024.

The export-oriented projects that are geared towards safeguarding the EU energy security also extend to the renewable energy sector in projects such as Desertec, Xlinks, TuNur and planned green hydrogen projects in North Africa.

In 2017, the company TuNur applied to build a 4.5 GW solar plant in the Tunisian desert in order to deliver enough electricity via submarine cables to power 2 million European homes. This still unrealized project was openly describing itself as a primarily solar energy export project linking the Sahara and Europe. Given that Tunisia depends on Algeria for some of its energy needs (gas), it is outrageous that such projects are turning to exports rather than producing energy for domestic use.

The same goes for another project proposed in 2021 by a former Tesco CEO, in partnership with the Saudi ACWA Power, which aims to connect Southern Morocco to the United Kingdom through underwater cables that will channel electricity over 3,800 km. Once again, the same relations of extraction and the same practices of land grabbing are maintained while people in the region are not even self-sufficient in energy. These big renewable projects, while proclaiming their good intentions, end up sugar-coating brutal exploitation and robbery. It seems that a familiar colonial scheme is being rolled out in front of our eyes: the unrestricted flow of cheap natural resources (including solar energy) from the global South to the rich North, while fortress Europe builds walls and fences to prevent human beings from reaching its shores!

A green and just transition must fundamentally transform the global economic system, which is not fit for purpose at either the social, ecological or even biological level (as revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic). It must put an end to the colonial relations that still enslave and dispossess people. We must always ask: Who owns what? Who does what? Who gets what? Who wins and who loses? And whose interests are being served? Because if we do not ask these questions we will go straight to a green colonialism, with an acceleration of extraction and exploitation, in the service of a so-called common 'green agenda'.



In many ways, the climate crisis and the needed green transition offer us a chance to reshape politics. Coping with the dramatic transformation will require a break with existing militarist, colonial and neoliberal projects. Therefore, the struggle for a just transition and climate justice must be fiercely democratic. It must involve the communities who are most affected, and it must be geared towards providing for the needs of all. It means building a future in which everybody has enough energy, and a clean and safe environment: a future with an ecosocialist horizon that is in harmony with the revolutionary demands of the African and Arab uprisings: popular sovereignty, bread, freedom, and social justice.