

GEOPOLITICS IN ENERGY OVER? NOT QUITE

“Typical of the huge growth in the new and renewable energy sector is photovoltaic’s... the Middle East, with a virtually unlimited source of sunlight, is ideally placed to take full advantage of solar power.” – Sarah Woodbridge, Group Director Exhibitions, IIR Middle East (organizers of The Middle East Electricity Exhibition)



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With the increased awareness of the limited availability of traditional fossil fuels, even oil rich nations are beginning to invest heavily on alternative renewable energy sources-primarily solar (photovoltaic) [1]. Following the first Gulf War, Saudi Arabia’s and its surrounding regions’, solar energy resource potential was discovered to be one of the greatest in the world. Along with the Middle East’s vast petroleum repositories, it also boasts the best solar resources on earth.

These desert nations, such as Saudi Arabia, are in the heart of the most potentially productive region for harvesting solar power on earth [2]. From the eastern edge of Central Asia to the western edge of North Africa, this rainless region is identified as the “sun belt”. With the new investments in various renewable energies, this “sun belt” is attracting the attention of European leaders, who are embracing a bold proposal to harvest this solar energy for their nations [2].

The Trans-Mediterranean Renewable Energy Cooperation (TREC) is developing a political initiative that involves building a transmission super-grid. This “Solar Transmission Super Grid” is essentially concentrating solar thermal power plants and long distance power lines to supply this untapped energy source to Europe, while also simultaneously providing energy to the plants along the Middle East and North Africa [2]. This ambitious scheme has attracted numerous powerful supporters such as the President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, and UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown [2]. The irony of the developed world, once again, depending upon the Middle East for powering their economies is inevitable. Thus, posing an interesting notion; that perhaps **the end of the oil age does not necessarily denote the end of the geopolitics, national rivalries and resource wars that oil created**[2].

Well one may question, but solar power is available to everyone? Can't it simply be harnessed in our own backyard? Why does Europe need to capitalize on the Middle East's sun, when frankly, they have their own? Now, while the technology is present to convert solar energy into electricity and power anywhere worldwide, it is far more cost efficient to harness and convert the sunlight in areas which receive the most powerful forms of sunlight – sunlight that loses the least amount of radiant energy while moving from space to earth [1]. The Sun Belt receives this greatest form of energy-rich sunlight [2].

Ali al-Nuaimi, Saudi Arabia's oil minister, said "the country hopes to become as expert with solar energy as it is with oil. For a country like Saudi Arabia ... one of the most important sources of energy to look at and to develop is solar energy..." [2]. One of the research efforts Saudi Arabia plans to undertake is creating a center for solar energy research and enhancement which will become a megawatt exporter. Furthermore, in Algeria construction has begun on a new power plant, which combines solar, and natural gas energy sources. Its long-term goals are to export over 6,000 megawatts of solar generated power to Europe by 2020 [2]. Tewfik Hasni (the managing director of New Energy Algeria, NEAL) claims that the potential in thermal solar power is four times the world's energy consumption.

Perhaps this is why scientists and economists alike are beginning to speculate that the economics of solar energy may someday look very similar to that of fossil fuels. “*Energy security ultimately means more than access to energy; it means access to cheap energy*” [2]. Therefore, it is undeniable that the “sun belt” provides the greatest and cheapest solar energy in the world

In the same way as certain Middle Eastern nations have become massive oil exporters; they may monopolize the solar power industry as well, and thus become an exporter of power.

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