

Extractivism, Neoliberal Governance and Environmental Racism in the Maghreb

Hogra (حفرة): An Intersectional Approach to Racism in the Maghreb – POLICY BRIEF
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INTRODUCTION

The concept of environmental racism has been popularized in recent years with the new visibility and high politicization of the climate change problematic. Born in the United States in the eighties, it essentially refers to an internal colonial model that exploits the labor and land of colored minorities to the benefit of the dominant class.¹ In the Maghreb, this model mainly performs through extractivism.

Climate change is a growing concern in the region, threatening the socioeconomic and ecological livelihoods of millions. Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia are witnessing regular heat-waves, droughts, water-scarcity and an advancing desert. Seawater intrusion into groundwater reserves, in parallel to the overexploitation of groundwater, will soon lead to the Maghreb's categorization as extremely water-poor.²

These factors overwhelmingly affect the countries' poorest regions, in which, ironically, most of natural wealth is located. This disparity can be conceptualized as environmental racism, a process through which not only a region's resources does

¹ Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices From the Grassroots Robert D. Bullard

² <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/fighting-for-climateenvironmental-justice-in-maghreb/>

not benefit its inhabitants, but those inhabitants have to bear the environmental costs of wealth-creation as well.



Anti-shale gas protest in Ain Salah, Algeria, March 2015

1.1 DECOLONIZING ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM: A CONTEXTUALIZED UNDERSTANDING

Environmental racism, also called climate injustice, refers to the way in which minorities and marginal groups overwhelmingly bear the environmental costs of producing capital. These neighborhoods, cities, or regions, suffer from toxic waste, garbage, unpleasant odors and other forms of pollution that lower the quality of life and might lead to deadly diseases. In addition to living close to waste and pollution, minority and marginalized groups often work for these industries, being constantly exposed to toxic materials and unregulated work conditions.³

The notion of environmental racism is closely linked to that of institutional racism, a process through which institutions and organizations fail to provide adequate services to people because of their color, culture, origin, or ethnicity. It manifests itself in discriminatory norms, practices and behaviors adopted in everyday life, which are the result of racial prejudice, an attitude that combines racist

³ <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/alamo-sociology/chapter/reading-environmental-racism/>

stereotypes, carelessness, and ignorance. Either intentional or unintentional, institutional racism places people from discriminated racial or ethnic groups at a disadvantage in accessing the benefits offered by the State, and by other institutions and organizations.⁴

In the Maghreb, post-independences' assimilative models buried the visibility of minorities, and therefore minorities' demands, through imposing a hegemonic national identity that purposefully invisibilized any particularism, whether tribal, ethnic or religious, in the name of national cohesion and equality.⁵

However, reality contradicts this social justice facade. Regional disparities often translated into racial segregation as black communities have historically been in the poorest, most underdeveloped and, contradictorily, resource-richest regions of the Maghreb. Per instance, in Tunisia, black communities are mainly located in the regions of Medenine, Gabes and Gafsa. In Algeria, racialized groups inhabit the southern part of the country, starting from Biskra. In Morocco, black Moroccans are principally situated in the Sahara.

These regions, coined by Naomi Klein as "*sacrifice zones*", suffer the most severe consequences of environmental degradation due to the activities of extractivist industries. Social marginalization often equates geographic marginalization.

Hamza Hamouchene explains that extractivism

*"refers to those activities which remove large quantities of natural resources that are not processed (or processed to a limited degree), especially for export. Extractivism is not limited to minerals or oil. It is also present in farming, forestry, fishing and even tourism."*⁶

Extractivism is neither new nor exclusive to the region. Consolidated in the nineteenth century under colonialism, it was crucial to fulfilling the demands of central European metropolises. Post-independences, the same economic logics survived. The Maghreb's role is strategic *vis-à-vis* Europe due the richness of its soil

⁴ van Deursen Varga István, « Racisme et terrorisme environnemental au Maranhão », *Multitudes*, 2016/3 (n° 64), p. 193-198. DOI : 10.3917/mult.064.0193. URL : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-multitudes-2016-3-page-193.htm>

⁵ <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/invisibility-and-negrophobia-in-algeria/?fbclid=IwAR3WAlmJzzGuYhy-BV52zLbuTQwk6GDv6z0d8D4xalReovwov1dbMjl95CO>

⁶ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/fighting-for-climateenvironmental-justice-in-maghreb/>

and its proximity to the West. Algeria is Europe's third gas provider. Tunisia and Morocco are major actors in the production of phosphate, indispensable for artificial fertilizers, in addition to the export of agricultural products.⁷

1.2 THE PRIMARIZATION OF THE ECONOMY

Extractivism does not only affect the health and environment of certain categories of people. In Algeria, the economy's rentier logic, based on the exportation of food to international markets, prevents food sovereignty. Land and water are massively exploited in the agrobusiness industry of Tunisia and Morocco, fueling tension and conflicts over the scarce resources left.⁸ Water scarcity is of particular concern in the Maghreb. Energy-production and the extraction of cosmetics' raw materials, like jojoba in Tunisia, are operated in water-poor regions like the Sahara. Similarly, fish stocks and biodiversity, both essential to the livelihood and environment of millions, are threatened by foreign industrial fishing companies.⁹

Alberto Costa argues the "*social and environmental causes*" of extractivism are not considered when determining the products' prices. The large-scale extraction of oil and gas in Algeria, phosphate in Tunisia, and water-consuming agriculture and tourist models in Morocco and Tunisia, are the principal examples of a combination of land privatization, water commodification, the extraction of natural resources and the degradation of ecosystems.¹⁰ In simpler terms, the economies of Maghrebi countries are based on polluting, environmentally-harmful industries that are mostly located in disadvantaged areas. These economic models also offer few opportunities for development and competitiveness as they are based on raw materials' exportation.

⁷ https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/web_maghreb_en_21-11-19.pdf

⁸ https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/web_maghreb_en_21-11-19.pdf

⁹ https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/web_maghreb_en_21-11-19.pdf

¹⁰ <https://nawaat.org/2019/12/04/le-desastre-de-lextractivisme-en-afrique-du-nord/>



Air Pollution in Gabes, July 2017

1.3 VARIOUS FORMS OF RESISTANCE TO ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM IN THE MAGHREB

“They exploit and pollute the South, they dry up its resources, but nobody cares, because it takes place here”¹¹

In recent years, protest movements have erupted in the region’s peripheries in a continuation of the classic opposition between a marginalized south and a relatively developed north in the Maghreb. Environmental and social demands are often entangled.

In Algeria, the south is where natural wealth (oil and gas) is located, yet its inhabitants still suffer from underdevelopment and socio-economic vulnerability. In 2019 a report by the Transnational Institute (TNI), the notion of racism is specifically evoked by a community leader of the 2015 uprising in Ain Salah.¹²

In January 2015, around 25.000 people marched to protest the pollution of water tables due to the State’s shale gas exploitation in the oasis town.¹³ Two years prior,

¹¹ Interview of Naouel Belakhdar with an unemployed man in Ouargla in June 2014.

¹² https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/web_maghreb_en_21-11-19.pdf, p.8.

¹³ <https://www.bic-rhr.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/Algeria%20Analyzing%20the%202015%20Power%20Struggle%20at%20the%20Heart%20of%20the%202019%20Unrest-updated%2005.03.pdf>

in Ouargla, the national coordination for the defense of the rights of the unemployed (CNDDC) mobilized more than 8000 protesters against *hogra*¹⁴, unemployment and the economy's neoliberal shift. Naouel Belakhdar argues southern Algerians' frustration stems from a series of embedded reasons: socioeconomic disenfranchisement, certain racist and classist narratives and the feeling its inhabitants' *algerianness* is not fully recognized.¹⁵

In Tunisia, several resistance movements emerged in recent years. In the southern oasis of Jemna per instance, a struggle between a group of inhabitants and the State has been going for over a decade. Ten years ago, an alternative model, a social and solidary economy, was put in place by locals.

On January 12, 2011, two days before Ben Ali fled, the inhabitants already saw the end of the regime. Awaiting its fall, they seized a State-owned palm grove exploited by private investors close the former dictator's clan. In this village 600 km south of Tunis, the association for the protection of the oases of Jemna was created and took charge of the operation. In five years, the turnover rose to 1.7 million dinars (more than 500,000 €) for the 2016/2017 harvest.¹⁶

The enterprise was community-oriented. It provided employment for 150 permanent and seasonal employees, planted 2000 palm trees, bought an ambulance, built classrooms, gifted computer equipment to the national gendarmerie, etc. This reappropriation of ancestral lands to the benefit of local communities echoes an old postcolonial struggle. Jemna's peasants saw their lands confiscated by the French colonial power in the twentieth century and these lands have been nationalized post-independence. Poor management led to the intervention of private investors in 2002 and a neoliberal shift.¹⁷ The experience of collective management through a social and solidary economy is a bold example of resistance to both marginalization and neoliberal governance.

¹⁴ Term in maghrebi dialects referring to any form of injustice, contempt or abuse of power.

¹⁵ Belakhdar Naoual, « « L'éveil du Sud » ou quand la contestation vient de la marge. Une analyse du mouvement des chômeurs algériens », *Politique africaine*, 2015/1 (N° 137), p. 27-48. DOI : 10.3917/polaf.137.0027. URL : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-politique-africaine-2015-1-page-27.htm>

¹⁶ <https://news.barralaman.tn/tunisiejemna-letat-jaloux-dune-ong-depasse/>

¹⁷ https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/web_maghreb_en_21-11-19.pdf

Safi is a heavily industrialized town in Morocco. It hosts a phosphate and a cement factory. The town is so polluted that its inhabitants developed chronic illnesses as respiratory problems and bone vulnerability¹⁸, similarly to its Tunisian twin Gabes.



Industrial waste directly thrown into the ocean in Safi, 2014

As observed in previous cases, the presence of industries neither equal employment nor development. Safi's infrastructures remain underdeveloped and its inhabitants, poor. The situation worsened since the implementation of extractivist companies. People formerly relied on fishing, pasturing or agriculture, are all now heavily impacted by pollution.

Safi's inhabitants have often been framing their protests in environmental terms. In 2014, they mobilized against a power station project which includes a coal-fired thermal plant. The promises of a clean energy did not match the bitter memories of air pollution caused by significant sulphur dioxide leaks a few years prior.¹⁹ In 2016, a major environmental conference was hosted in Safi to organize against the neoliberal management of climate change. Participants highlighted the ties between social inequality, extractivist industries and environmental catastrophes in the region.²⁰

¹⁸ <https://attacmaroc.org/fr/2015/10/18/la-station-thermique-a-safi-un-ecocide-en-preparation/>

¹⁹ <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/safi-power-station-protests>

²⁰ <https://attacmaroc.org/fr/2016/11/10/declaration-de-safi-changeons-le-systeme-pas-le-climat/>

CONCLUSION

Environmental racism is a notion that fits the reality of the Maghreb's "sacrificed zones". Extractivist industries are principally located in towns inhabited by black communities. These zones suffer the economic, environmental and health consequences of pollution and waste. Yet, the wealth obtained through extractivism is not redistributed to the benefit of resource-rich, marginalized communities. These communities still lack the most basic infrastructure and often register high unemployment rates compared to the national average.

In recent years, this state of *hogra* has been challenged and social movements explicitly demanding environmental and social justice have bloomed across Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. Resistance took different forms, from the experience of self-managing lands in Jemna to mobilizing against polluting industries, as shale gas and coal, in Algeria and Morocco.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Social justice should be considered as a comprehensive process, not a temporary, make-up solution. Wealth redistribution, balance between regions, investment in infrastructure and public services should be at the heart of public policies.
- The so-called social responsibility of private companies should be concretely engaged. Businesses should both give back to local communities and evaluate the environmental and social costs of their activities when investing in activities that exploit a country's natural resources.
- Alternative, non-neoliberal economic models should be experimented on a national level, as the example of the social and solidary economy in Jemna.

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

Hogra (حفرة): An Intersectional Approach to Racism in the Maghreb

This project takes critical aim at the racism problematic in the Maghreb from an intersectional prism: 1. The intersection of gender and race, 2. Environmental racism, 3. The heritage of slavery, 4. The subsaharan African migration presence.



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