Solar power

Huge Tunisian solar park hopes to provide Saharan power to Europe

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Developer TuNur has applied to build a 4.5GW plant in the Sahara and pipe enough electricity via submarine cables to power two million European homes

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Arthur Neslen

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The plant would harness the power of the Saharan sun with towers up to 200m tall, similar to ones in Andalusia. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

An enormous solar park in the Sahara could soon be exporting electricity to Europe if Tunisia's government approves an energy company's request to build it.

The 4.5GW mega-project planned by TuNur would pipe electricity to Malta, Italy and France using submarine cables in the grandest energy export project since the abandoned Desertec initiative.

Kevin Sara, TuNur's chief executive said: "If European governments take the Paris accord seriously and want to meet the less than two degrees target for global warming, we need to start importing renewables."

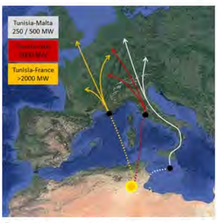
"60% of Europe's primary energy is currently imported from Russia or the Middle East. Does the EU really want to be investing in infrastructure that lasts 50 years but which just enables more fossil fuel use?"

The EU is already considering awarding priority status to an underwater cable linking Tunisia with Italy, and TuNur expects construction work on a €5bn plant to begin by 2019 in southwest Tunisia.

"We would target delivering power to the European grid via Malta by 2021," Sara said. The following year, the first of two cables to Italy could be laid, with a French connection up and running by 2024, he added.

The resulting solar complex would sprawl over an area three times the size of Manhattan, harnessing the power of the Saharan sun with several towers up to 200m tall.

These would reflect sun rays on to hundreds of thousands of parabolic mirrors, heating molten salts that would in turn broil water, generating enough steam to power turbines that could electrify two million European homes.



Map of the planned TuNur solar project. Photograph: Handout TuNur

Up to 20,000 jobs could be created by the private sector initiative, which unites the London-based solar developer Nur Energie with Tunisian and Maltese developers.

But Chafik Ben Rouine, a spokesman for the Tunisian Economic Observatory, questioned whether the mega-project's gold would match its glitter.

"Our biggest concern is with TuNur's credibility as their website says they only have experience with two small solar projects," he said. "We have big concerns about their capacity to deliver this project and their financial ability to leverage it."

Four years ago, the €400bn Desertec initiative imploded, leaving dreams of a Saharan power battery for Europe in the dust – and a lasting regional wariness.

"It seems that a familiar 'colonial' scheme is being rolled out in front of our eyes," said Hamza Hamouchene, War on Want's North Africa and West Asia officer.

"Projects like TuNur deny local people control and access to their land, rob them of resources and concentrate the value created in the hands of domestic and foreign predatory elites and private companies."

TuNur says that it agreed to lease the project's land from a local tribe which remains "extremely positive" about the project.

Water usage will be restricted to wastewater from a local date tree plantation that would not otherwise be recycled, Sara said. The company also remains willing to supply electricity within Tunisia, which is itself facing power shortages.

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