



In April 2017, an international caravan, which gathered activists from North Africa and Latin America hit the road for a journey of solidarity with communities affected by extractivism, dispossession and environmental injustice in southern Tunisia. The picture was taken under a memorial for Algerian and Tunisian martyrs that fought French colonialism.

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# North Africa and West Asia: Voices of Resistance, Struggles for Justice

**With all the momentous changes unleashed by the Arab uprisings in 2011, the intensification of social struggles and the opening up of new horizons for radical change in the North Africa and West Asia (NAWA) region, War on Want has decided to create a new programme specifically focused on this area.**

**Our aim is to platform the voices of progressive, organised, representative social movements, women, community and worker led collectives, giving emphasis to resistance and social justice struggles.**

as well as submissive women oppressed by their Muslim/Arab men. This deeply problematic and often racist/Islamophobic representation of the people in the region is the outcome of a colonial legacy and ongoing imperialist domination that use such narratives as a pretext to justify support for ally dictators, military interventions and a silencing and repression of whole populations. This is all done in order to safeguard Western economic interests

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(including British), to ensure unlimited access to natural resources and to give credence to growing anti-immigration sentiments in Europe.

Similar to other regions where War on Want focuses its work, NAWA continues to be negatively impacted by an interventionist British foreign policy as well as by the operations of British companies in fossil fuels extraction, mining and armament.

The partners we work with in NAWA tell a different story: a story of people active in resisting different forms of exploitation and oppression; of communities fighting for sovereignty on their land and natural resources against predatory multinationals; of revolutionary women's collectives; of peasants fighting for food sovereignty; of workers' organisations mobilising for their rights for a decent livelihood.

## Arab uprisings

In 2010-2011, a wave of uprisings that swept North Africa and West Asia, dragging away a series of Western-backed tyrants, appeared to set in motion a domino effect throughout the region. After the deposal of Tunisia's Ben Ali and Egypt's Mubarak, it seemed the list of toppled dictators was likely to grow. These uprisings were unforgettable historical events and the emancipatory experience was so contagious that people all over the world were inspired. The wind of revolution has spread from Tunisia to Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria and Oman.

The people of this region were long confined to racist stereotypes and media representations such as Arabs and Muslims are not fit for democracy and they are incapable of governing themselves. The "Arab Spring" shattered these stereotypes. The people in this region rose up against the oppressive socio-economic conditions under which they lived for decades – conditions imposed by a profoundly unjust global system. Several attempts have been made to contain and put a brake on these uprisings by foreign interventions (Syria, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen) and by supporting military coups (Egypt) but the spirit of revolution lives on, especially where it all started: Tunisia.

This brief is a step towards highlighting some of these stories within a historical, political and socio-economic context. The goal is to offer a much closer picture to reality by focusing on the people of the region and their struggles for social justice and a better life.

## Why NAWA and not MENA: Middle of where? And East of what?

Unlike other geographical areas in the world, "Middle East" does not refer to a place that is related to a specific continent. It is a geopolitical space that has been constructed by and in opposition to the West. This designation is part of the legacy of *Orientalism*, of creating a different "other", and of constructing an imaginary about the "Orientals" in order to better master, control and exploit them.<sup>2</sup>

"Middle East" is not a precise designation as it means different things for different people: some people think of North Africa as in the "Middle East", some see Egypt as mainly in the "Middle East", others think that Turkey and Iran are not part of it, implying that only "Arab" nations get to be included. Others even include Afghanistan in the pervasive attempt to lump all Muslims together, especially when thinking about them as all extremists and fundamentalists.

The task in front of us therefore is partly about contesting how the region is represented, how it is named and categorised. A more appropriate description of the region would be North Africa and West Asia – terms rooted in geography.



An anti-fracking protest in Ouargla, Algeria in February 2015. The boy holds a sign reading: "Enough Contempt, Enough Marginalisation".

## Our areas of work

Since the 1980s, the region has suffered under the global North's neoliberal assault on the global South. In almost every country in the NAWA region, the social gains of the 1960s and 1970s from popular nationalisations, free functioning public services, huge state investment in infrastructure,

agriculture and industrialisation were reversed.<sup>3</sup> These neoliberal policies were imposed by the new instruments of imperialism such as the **International Monetary Fund (IMF)**, the **World Bank**, the **World Trade Organisation (WTO)** and **EU association agreements**. It is within this context that multinationals and other private companies acquired a greater role in the region by furthering their plunder of resources, exploitation of the working force and destruction of environments and livelihoods, just as they did under colonial rule. It also marked the period of privatisation of basic services, the undermining of job creation and the opening up of economies to multinationals. Resistance was crushed, resulting in the consolidation of neo-colonialism by domestic elites, subservient to foreign interests.

The Palestinian struggle for freedom and self-determination has always been central to the efforts of liberation in NAWA. The Palestinian struggle against settler-colonialism, dispossession and Apartheid has always been, from the start, a key touchstone issue for the project of Arab liberation from imperialist domination.<sup>4</sup>

## Natural resources and extractivism

'Extractivism' is an economic model that is dependent on the large-scale removal of natural resources from the global South for export to the global North – with a massive redistribution of wealth away from the communities that need it most. It results in high levels of poverty and inequality, forced removal of people from their land, widespread human rights abuses and environmental devastation. The extractivist model of development is largely incompatible with social justice.<sup>5</sup> It has been a mechanism of colonial and neo-colonial plunder and appropriation and has been put into practice regardless of the sustainability of extractivist projects or even the exhaustion of resources.<sup>6</sup>

The NAWA region is rich in natural resources, most notably fossil fuels, which makes the area very attractive to foreign investors set on extracting those resources with little regard for the people who live there. Transnational companies operating in the region such as **BP**, **Shell**, **Petrofac**, **Total**, and **ExxonMobil** stand accused of facilitating corruption, massive environmental destruction and human rights abuses – with the complicity of Western governments.<sup>7</sup>

In **Iraq** – which has some of the world's largest oil reserves – Western governments and international

oil companies have been ruthless in attempting to gain more control over oil by removing barriers to foreign ownership and securing the lion's share in contracts.<sup>8</sup> Given that Iraq's economy is heavily dependent on oil, this constitutes a pillaging of Iraqi people's wealth and a threat to their democratic control of their resources. In **Tunisia**, despite a new article in the constitution stipulating popular sovereignty over natural resources, oil and gas companies continue to garner obscene profits and enjoy impunity while local communities continue to shoulder the social and environmental impacts of this industry.

Take the case of **Shell-British Gas (BG)**, the largest gas producer in the country. It holds a 100% interest in the most productive gas field: Miskar. The gas extracted is then supplied, under a long-term contract, to Tunisia's state electricity and gas company, at international market values and in foreign currency. The result is that Tunisian gas is sold to Tunisians as if it were an imported commodity.

Another British company **Petrofac**, which acquired a gas concession on the archipelago of Kerkenah through a corrupt deal under the ousted President Ben Ali, provoked an uprising on the islands in 2016 by refusing to adhere to its engagement to contribute to a local development fund for employment purposes.<sup>9</sup>



A protest organised in the industrial town of Gabès, Tunisia in April 2017. The phosphate chemical factory in the background was installed on the shores of the coastal oasis in the early 70s. The factory has caused an ecocide by heavily polluting the air and water.

In December 1995, just three years after the military coup in **Algeria** that cancelled parliamentary elections, **BP** finalised a contract worth \$3 billion, giving it the right to exploit gas deposits in In Salah in the Sahara for the following 30 years. This made it the biggest foreign investor in



the country. This contract alongside others with companies such as **Total** bolstered the regime as it exerted systematic violence across the country. Tied to Algeria through huge investments, these companies along with Britain and the EU had a clear interest in making sure that the repressive regime did not go under.<sup>10</sup>

**Algeria** is the third-largest provider of natural gas to Europe and has three connecting pipelines to it. This position enabled the corrupt and authoritarian oligarchy to maintain its rule by purchasing relative peace and garnering Western backing.<sup>11</sup> Despite all the created wealth, there is a growing discontent around issues such as housing, unemployment and infrastructure, especially in the Sahara where most of Algeria's oil and gas reserves lie.

The plight of **Western Sahara** and the military occupation by the Moroccan monarchy cannot be dissociated from the history of Western colonialism and from the fact that Saharawis continue to pay the price for this legacy. Today, Western Sahara remains an occupied territory and more than 150 thousand of its people live in refugee camps in southern Algeria. They continue to resist and cling to the hope that one day they will return to their confiscated homeland.<sup>12</sup>

With the complicity of Western companies including British ones like **Cairn Energy** and **Teredo Oil**, the Moroccan monarchy continues to plunder the rich natural resources of Western Sahara from phosphate and fish to agricultural produce and oil.<sup>13</sup>

## Land and food sovereignty

More than three decades of neoliberal economic restructuring and deregulation have heavily impacted small-holder farming in NAWA. The Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) have transformed the region's farmers, dispossessing many, raising prices for inputs to unaffordable levels and promoting export-led agriculture of largely cash crops, rather than of staple food crops for local consumption. This has been the case in several countries such as **Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen**.<sup>14</sup>

NAWA countries are amongst the largest food importers in the world, relying on world markets for more than 50% of their food.<sup>15</sup> The world food crisis in 2007-2008, urgently put the issue of food sovereignty and family/small-holder farming on the agenda. The famine and the "bread riots" that swept several countries like **Egypt** showed how the food system is broken, monopolised by corporations that maximise their profits through export-led mono-crop agriculture, land grabbing, agro-fuel production, speculation on basic staple foods, as well as exploitation and abuse of workers. Women are the hardest hit as they face terrible working conditions, suffer sexual harassment and abuse and endure appalling and dangerous transportation to farms and factories.

Issues of the right to food and just access to land are still at the heart of people's socio-economic demands, which have been expressed once again in

The Saharawi refugee camps in Tindouf, southern Algeria have been there since 1975-1976 when Saharawis ran away from Morocco's bloody repression. The camps lie on the eastern side of the "Wall of Shame", a 2700km long berm built by the Moroccan monarchy and lined with millions of land mines. This desert wall separates a narrow liberated zone from the rest of Western Sahara, still occupied by the Moroccan monarchy.



Picture by Hamza Hamouchene

the popular demands of the Arab uprisings: "Bread, freedom and social justice". While most attention focused on urban rebellions in **Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco** and other countries, rural dissent and protest were also present across the region. It is not a coincidence that the 2010-2011 Tunisian uprising started in Sidi Bouzid, an impoverished agricultural region, where speculative capital and agribusiness flourished. It is also no minor detail that the incident that set the Arab uprisings into motion was the self-immolation of a fruit vendor: Mohamed Bouazizi.

The oasis of Jemna in southern **Tunisia**, a region famous for its excellent quality dates called Deglet Nour, also suffered from this kind of neo-colonial forms of managing and exploiting the land. Its confiscated land under French colonialism was not recovered after independence. The liberalisation of the agricultural sector in the 1980s opened the way to private investors who shamelessly made obscene profits while paying derisory sums to the state as rent costs.<sup>16</sup>



Picture by Nada Trigui

The oasis of Jemna in southern Tunisia has been dispossessed of its lands since colonial times. After the 2011 revolution, it has seen an inspiring community struggle to recover the land and work it collectively.

## Workers' rights

The push towards more privatisation and liberalisation of the economies of countries in the NAWA region coupled with the pillage of resources by multinationals and domestic private companies continue to significantly undermine workers' rights, generating more precarious work and unemployment. Harassment and repression of trade unionists as well as weakening of autonomous trade unions and workers' organisations has become common place.

Trade union organising and workers' movements have played a crucial role in fighting the imposed neoliberal agenda in the region. For example, the general strike launched by textile workers in the **Egyptian** industrial city, Al Mahalla Al-Kubra in 2008 is believed to have helped spark the 2011 uprising against the Mubarak regime.<sup>17</sup> In **Tunisia**, the Tunisian General Labour Union (French acronym: UGTT) was an integral part of Tunisia's anti-colonial independence movement in the 1950s and more recently it helped organise protests against the ousted President Ben Ali in 2011.

## Struggles and stories of resistance in NAWA

The social mobilisations, struggles and popular uprisings in the region need to be understood in this context of neo-colonialism, economic subordination, the scramble for resources and the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few by dispossessing the majority.

Local groups in the region are coming together to resist extractive industries, agri-business and growing unemployment. They have organised into networks and movements that challenge the status quo, fight for popular control over resources and propose equitable alternatives to the current development model.

## Struggles against extractivism

Between April and June 2017, thousands of young people erected a protest camp in Tataouine, southern **Tunisia** to block access for oil companies to sites of production.<sup>18</sup> They demanded jobs, a more equal distribution of wealth, development for their region, and above all, the halt of the plunder of their natural resources. One protestor said:

**"Sure, employment, that's our first demand. And our second demand is that the resources that have been stolen be returned to the country, that natural wealth be returned to the country whatever the region, whether Tataouine, Zarzis, Gafsa or anywhere else."**

The camp was violently dismantled and repressive methods were used by the authorities who were acting to protect the interests of oil and gas multinationals.

War on Want is working with the **Tunisian Observatory of Economy (TOE)**, which focuses on issues of economic and environmental justice and works on extractivism, trade deals and debt.



We are supporting their project on the exploitation of shale gas in southern **Tunisia** where the British company **Perenco** is involved. The purpose of the project is to document the political, economic, social and environmental impacts of fracking in the region of Douz.

The rural Berber Imider community in south-east **Morocco** is a great example of resistance to extractivism. The villagers that rely on agriculture and family farming for their survival erected a seven-year protest camp blocking a water pipeline that feeds the Royal family-owned silver mine that is grabbing their water, polluting their environment and destroying their livelihood.<sup>19</sup>



Picture by Nadir Bouhrouch

Berber women of Imider protesting against the silver mine that has drained their water reserves for decades and devastated their agricultural community.

The protest camp holds regular general assemblies using the **Agraw** system, an ancient model of Amazigh democratic tribal governance, where everyone participates – men, women, children and elders – without discrimination in a broader notion of community and participatory democracy.

War on Want is supporting the **Amussu: Xf ubrid n 96 – Imider** (Movement on the Road 96, Imider) who are leading this struggle against the impacts of mining on their community.

In **Western Sahara**, War on Want works with the **Saharawi Campaign Against the Plunder (SCAP)** who targets multinational companies involved in plundering and extracting their resources. They told us:

**“As long as the Moroccan monarchy continues to benefit – with impunity – from the plunder of Western Sahara’s natural resources, it will not be pressured to give up the territories it occupies and will make the Saharawi efforts to liberate the territories even harder”.**

## Struggles for land and food sovereignty

### Jemna in Tunisia: an inspiring land struggle in NAWA

War on Want stands in solidarity with the struggles of the people of Jemna. In 2011, the people of Jemna occupied their long-confiscated land and started working it in an astonishing experience of self-management. The first thing the community did was to set up an organisation called the **Association for the Protection of Jemna’s Oases (APJO)**, which took care of the agricultural management, the investment of revenues and the implementation of developmental projects in the wider community.

The results have been inspiring: production has doubled between 2011 and 2014 and the oasis currently employs around 300 workers compared to twenty before 2011.

In five years, the inhabitants of Jemna under the leadership of the association allocated more than half a million pounds (made in profit) for community projects that ranged from construction of a covered market, a sports venue and classrooms to refurbishment of primary and secondary schools and of the community’s small health centre.<sup>20</sup>



Picture by Nada Trigi

The people of the oasis of Jemna continue to resist and fight for their right to work and have sovereignty on their ancestral land.

In July 2017, alongside our partners **Agro-ecology and Green Environment (AGE)** and **ATTAC Morocco**, a few anti-capitalist organisations and activists from North Africa met in Tunis to set up the **North African Network for Food Sovereignty**. The Network strives to be a unifying structure for social justice struggles in North Africa and will be involved in local, continental and international mobilisations.<sup>21</sup>

The participating organisations in the meeting noted in the Network’s charter that:

**“Food sovereignty has been undermined by decades of neoliberal and anti-national policies in the region. This process started in the colonial period and is being reinforced by neo-colonial and extractivist policies (including agribusiness) implemented in the name of development at the expense of communities’ sovereignty over land and resources”.**

## Struggles against unemployment

Our partner the **National Coordination for the Defence of Unemployed peoples’ Rights (NCDUR)** that started in Ouargla, southern Algeria in 2013 – 85km away from the big oil town of Hassi Messaoud – succeeded in mobilising tens of thousands of people in huge demonstrations demanding decent jobs and protesting against economic exclusion, social injustice and the underdevelopment of their region. War on Want is supporting their political education project that focuses on extractivism and economic justice.



A meeting in February 2017 in Tunis between the representatives of the Algerian National Coordination for the Defence of Unemployed peoples’ Rights (NCDUR) and the Tunisian Union of Unemployed Graduates (UDC).

## Regional work and the linking up of struggles

War on Want took direction from its partners from the **Maghreb** (Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Western Sahara) to facilitate **regional work and exchange** through supporting initiatives that create alliances and networks around issues of food sovereignty, extractivism and anti-privatisation. We will also help organising **international solidarity caravans** to sites of community resistance against different forms of dispossession.



A workshop organised by the community of Imider in November 2016, part of an international solidarity trip that involved people from Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Kenya and a representative of an indigenous community from the US.

These alliances and networks need to go further than the Maghreb and extend to West Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and to other countries in the global South.

**International solidarity caravans have been an important part of our work of showing active solidarity with communities, social movements and organisations struggling against extractivism, the plunder of their resources and fighting for popular sovereignty and social justice.**

In April 2017, 25 activists and community representatives from **North Africa and Latin America** travelled to southern Tunisia to show their solidarity with communities and organisations fighting injustices associated with mining, resource plunder and land confiscation. Several partner organisations participated in this solidarity trip, which succeeded in linking up different organisations and social movements by learning from different experiences and by advancing a radical critique of extractivism in the region.<sup>22</sup> The caravan was a follow up from another solidarity trip to the ocean industrial town of Safi in Morocco, as well as a visit to the peasant villages of Imider.



Picture by Nadir Bouhrouch

Navajo Tribe from the United State meets Ait Atta Tribe in Imider, south-east Morocco. This encounter was part of an international solidarity trip that War on Want helped organise in November 2016.