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**TUNISIA IS BUILDING EUROPE'S
HYDROGEN PIPELINE.
IT DOESN'T HAVE THE WATER TO FILL IT.**



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Tunisia Is Building Europe's Hydrogen Pipeline. It Doesn't Have the Water to Fill It.

Research Team

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Tunisia wants to export up to 6.3M tonnes of green hydrogen a year to Europe via a pipeline still under construction — but water scarcity and land disputes in Gabès are already testing the deal, with lessons for Sudan and East Africa's own hydrogen ambitions.

By 3Bi Research Team

The Hook

Tunisia wants to send 6 to 6.3 million tonnes of green hydrogen a year to Europe by 2050 — piped straight through a 3,300-kilometre corridor that doesn't yet exist, from a country that is already short on the one resource hydrogen production consumes by the tonne: fresh water (Green Hydrogen Organisation, gh2.org, accessed 29 July 2026; SouthH2 Corridor, south2corridor.net, accessed 29 July 2026).

This week, the Washington-based energy platform Attaqa mapped the three projects now anchoring that ambition (Attaqa, 29 July 2026): a 600,000-tonne-a-year joint venture with a Saudi renewables developer; "H2 Notos," a TotalEnergies–EREN–Verbund project targeting 200,000 tonnes annually by 2030 and up to a million tonnes at full scale, backed by up to €40 billion (\$44.8 billion) in eventual investment (TotalEnergies press release, totalenergies.com, accessed 29 July 2026); and a green-ammonia plant planned for the industrial zone at Gabès. All three feed into the SouthH2 Corridor, a pipeline linking Algeria and Tunisia to Italy, Austria and Germany, which the European Commission has designated a Project of Common Interest carrying up to 4 million tonnes of hydrogen a year (SouthH2 Corridor, south2corridor.net, accessed 29 July 2026).

It is, on paper, exactly the kind of energy-transition story North Africa needs more of: real capital, real offtake commitments, a real pipeline route. It is also, on the ground in Gabès, already contested — and the terms of that contest matter well beyond Tunisia's borders, including for Sudan and East Africa's own hydrogen ambitions.

The Argument

First, the numbers only work if water Tunisia doesn't have shows up anyway. Green hydrogen production is thirsty by design — electrolysis splits water into hydrogen and oxygen, and industrial-scale plants also need water to clean solar arrays in a dusty climate. Gabès, the city slated to host Tunisia's "green hydrogen valley," sits in one of the country's most water-stressed governorates, and researchers note that neither Gabès nor Tunisia currently has the freshwater surplus these projects assume (ReCommon, recommon.org, accessed 29 July 2026; PRIF Report 2/25, prif.org, accessed 29 July 2026). Desalination is the usual answer, but it shifts the resource



cost onto energy grids and coastal ecosystems rather than solving it.

Second, the land underneath these projects is already in use. The solar and electrolyser sites earmarked for Gabès and the surrounding region are, in large part, private pastureland that herding and rain-fed agricultural communities depend on for grazing and seasonal movement (PRIF Report 2/25, prif.org, accessed 29 July 2026). That is not empty desert being unlocked for the energy transition; it is productive land being reallocated to it, and the affected communities were not the ones who negotiated the memoranda of understanding with Vienna, Paris and Riyadh.

Third, the politics are already visible, and Tunisia's government has not yet had to answer for them. The Gulf of Gabès carries decades of damage from phosphate industry pollution, and in December 2024 that history fed directly into the first organized street protests against the hydrogen buildout, led by the "Stop Pollution" campaign (ReCommon, recommon.org, accessed 29 July 2026). A 26 July 2026 analysis from the Tunisian outlet Nawaat frames the wider EU-Tunisia energy relationship as one where European climate and security needs are being met at a cost Tunisian civil society is only now able to fully see and contest (Nawaat, nawaat.org, 26 July 2026). None of this makes the hydrogen deals illegitimate. It does mean the deals were structured before the people living next to them had full visibility into what they were agreeing to.

Why It Matters to the Reader

If you work on energy policy, investment, or climate diplomacy for Sudan or East Africa, Tunisia is not a cautionary tale from far away — it is a preview. Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti are all courting green-hydrogen and green-ammonia investors on the strength of the same pitch Tunisia made: abundant renewable resource, proximity to export markets, government appetite for a first-mover deal. None of that pitch, on its own, protects the communities who will live next to the electrolyzers, or the aquifers the plants will draw down.

The lesson from Gabès is not "don't build hydrogen export infrastructure." It is that the contract terms negotiated in year one — water allocation caps, land-use consent processes, local benefit-sharing, independent environmental review — are far easier to write into a memorandum of understanding than to retrofit onto a project already under construction. Tunisia signed its first MoUs in 2024; the public contestation over water and land only became visible in 2025 and 2026, after the framework was largely set. Any Sudanese or East African government beginning hydrogen talks now has the chance Tunisia didn't fully take: to put water-scarcity and land-consent terms into the founding agreement, not the post-protest amendment.



Close

Europe needs Tunisia's hydrogen more than Tunisia needs any single European buyer — that leverage exists, but only if it's used at the negotiating table now, not rediscovered later in the streets of Gabès. The same leverage will be available to the next country in the region that Brussels or Riyadh comes calling on. Whether it gets used is a choice, not a given.

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