

ENERGY SOVEREIGNTY IN AN AGE OF FRACTURE: THE ARAB WORLD'S STRATEGIC RECALIBRATION

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Energy Sovereignty in an Age of Fracture: The Arab World's Strategic Recalibration

Energy is no longer just a commodity; it has become a tool of influence, a means of diplomacy, and a test of resilience.

From the war in Ukraine to maritime instability in the Red Sea, energy is no longer solely determined by market forces. It has become a battleground for sovereignty and a symbol of power. For the Arab world, long associated with abundant oil and gas, the question is no longer how much energy is produced, but how safely it can be transported, diversified, and protected. Energy routes are contested, infrastructure is politicized, and every pipeline or corridor is a strategic statement.

Conflict is no longer a distant factor. It is embedded in the infrastructure itself. From pipeline sabotage to maritime disruption, energy logistics are becoming more vulnerable to geopolitical volatility. The response is not just rhetorical. It is infrastructural and highly political.

The war in Ukraine disrupted gas flows and revived pipeline politics. Red Sea instability exposed vulnerabilities in maritime corridors. Gaza, Sudan, and the Sahel added layers of unpredictability to regional energy routes. These events have prompted a rethink across the Arab world.

Infrastructure Under Pressure

Arab states are adjusting their strategies. The Jordan–Iraq pipeline, UAE–Türkiye corridor, and Egypt's overland export plans show a shift toward land-based alternatives. These are more than just logistical decisions. They are strategic tools designed to reduce reliance, establish control, and communicate intentions.

The logic is straightforward. Maritime chokepoints are vulnerable. The Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Suez Canal are becoming more politicized and militarized. Energy flows through these routes are vulnerable to disruption, delays, and diplomatic issues. Overland infrastructure provides some protection. Less obvious, less contested, and more controlled by sovereignty.

In East Africa, a similar approach is developing. The Uganda–Tanzania pipeline, despite delays and criticism, shows a desire to avoid disputed waters and establish energy routes within sovereign territory. Sovereignty now starts with controlling the route, not just the resource.

But infrastructure alone is not sufficient. Ownership, operation, and alignment are crucial. In fragile contexts, credibility outweighs capital. Arab sovereign funds investing in African and Asian energy assets need to manage not only technical risks but also political complexities. Who builds, who funds, and who operates? These questions carry profound significance.

Energy infrastructure has become a symbol. Pipelines, ports, and power stations are no longer neutral. They reflect strategic positions, geopolitical ties, and long-term goals. In regions where alliances are fluid and trust is limited, infrastructure should be managed with discretion, cultural sensitivity, and institutional patience.

Strategic Hedging and Regional Agency

Energy sovereignty is increasing, but interdependence stays vital. Regional integration, like the GCC grid and Egypt's deals with Europe, faces challenges from fragmentation and shifting alliances. Conflicts make cross-border energy transactions more difficult. Trust diminishes. Timelines are pushed back. Risk premiums rise.

Arab states are hedging. China, India, and African unions are becoming energy partners, not just markets. These relationships are not purely transactional. They serve as strategic buffers against Western instability and regional unpredictability.

This diversification comes with tension. Western partners expect alignment on sanctions, climate targets, and governance standards. Eastern partners bring capital and flexibility, often with unclear terms. Meanwhile, African partners are asserting their own agency. They are renegotiating contracts, demanding local value, and rejecting unfair terms.

Conflict has sharpened their stance. Energy is now a tool of sovereignty, not just development. Engagement with the continent must evolve. Financing and technology are no longer enough. Context matters. So does humility.

Operators in high-risk markets must adapt. The old extraction model is outdated. A new model of partnership is emerging. This calls for a change in tone, structure, and expectations. It involves listening before making investments. It emphasizes co-creating instead of imposing. It also requires recognizing African agency instead of overriding it.

In places like Mozambique, Senegal, and the DRC, energy deals are increasingly influenced by domestic politics, regional factors, and sensitivities related to post-conflict situations. Foreign investors must handle these complexities with care. The aim isn't to dominate but to establish a presence. Not to control, but to gain credibility.

Sovereignty as Strategic Clarity

In a fractured world, energy sovereignty isn't about isolation. It's about clarity. It involves the ability to set priorities, hedge risks, and influence outcomes. Outsiders have the chance to recalibrate, invest in resilience, respect regional agency, and use infrastructure as subtle diplomacy.

This recalibration is already in progress. Saudi Arabia's diversification plans, the UAE's global energy investments, and Egypt's regional grid ambitions all show a shift from focusing on volume to prioritizing influence. Energy is no longer just about production or exports; it's about what is built, connected, and understood.

Conflict will continue to influence energy decisions. The focus isn't on avoiding it, but on navigating it with discretion, foresight, and trust. We need to learn to operate in contested spaces, negotiate with assertive partners, and build long-term credibility.

This calls for a new playbook. One that combines technical expertise with diplomatic agility. One that respects local agency while advancing regional strategy. One that views energy not just as a resource, but as a relationship.

In this new landscape, those who listen will lead. Those who adapt will survive. Those who build trust quietly, patiently, and strategically will shape the future of energy in the Arab world and beyond.