Interview – Anas Fassih

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Anas Fassih is a PhD Candidate in Political Science with a dual emphasis on International Relations and Comparative Politics at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. He is interested in questions around the conflict dimension of decarbonization and in how the local, national, regional, and international scales of decarbonization impact the sovereignty of the Southern state and of the communities affected by solar projects' development in Africa. He holds a masters of international politics and security studies from Bradford in the UK. His research appeared in Futures, and in the Canadian Journal of Political Science.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

Being born and raised in Morocco, I was always fascinated by politics and international relations as fields of study and practice. This fascination intensified during my undergraduate degree in English and Postcolonial Studies, where I developed a keen interest in the influence of global politics on individuals of the Global South. Key postcolonial thinkers such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, and Achille Mbembe, whose works I encountered during this period, provided the foundation for my understanding of critical approaches to international relations.

With this foundation, I earned a scholarship to study International Politics at the University of Bradford, a hub for scholars of Peace Studies. There, I was introduced to the field of security studies and its subfields of energy security and environmental security. My curiosity was particularly piqued by the connection between security and development, the implications of climate change, the impact of energy transitions on democratisation, and the interplay between global energy governance and sovereignty. This intricate matrix of interests ultimately led me to embark on a Ph.D. in the field—a journey I am presently undertaking.

What are the trends in global energy politics that you have observed in your research so far that you feel do not get sufficient attention?

One such trend pertains to energy transitions in the Global South, a region frequently overlooked despite the rampant energy poverty that exists there. A key area of focus should be the potential role of renewable energy in expediting the shift to a post-oil society. This ought to be examined from the perspective of marginalized communities who bear the brunt of experimental initiatives in wind, solar, and green hydrogen technologies.

Further, there is an urgent need for in-depth research to develop and refine the concept of energy sovereignty. Centred on community empowerment and ownership of energy systems, energy sovereignty provides a potential framework to address questions such as: when and how can a community, state, or region achieve energy sovereignty? Given its under-theorization, this concept warrants thorough exploration to provide a clear analysis and comprehensive framework for analysing communities' response to giant renewable energy infrastructure in the Global South.

Lastly, an exploration of the geopolitical implications of energy transitions is also needed. Given that fossil fuel-based energy regimes have been marked by resource wars, violence, and colonial relationships, it is of pivotal importance to ponder a potential scenario under a new energy regime underpinned by renewable energy resources. What conflicts might arise? How might geopolitical shifts that result from the transition from fossil fuels to renewable resources impact global power structures? These are questions that require careful examination.

You co-authored a paper on 'just transitions' in Morocco and West Africa. Are there lessons from these cases that could be applied more widely?

Our research focused on 'just transitions' in Morocco and West Africa and provided insightful lessons that could be applied globally. Most notably, the case of Morocco, which is home to the world's largest concentrated solar power (CSP) station in Ouarzazate, which emphasized the importance of participatory ownership in energy systems. The country's Noor Midelt project, a massive combined photovoltaic (PV) and CSP plant which is currently in its pre-construction phase, demonstrated a commendable practice of community engagement and consultation. This lesson, underscored the need to include the public in the energy transition, and serves as a valuable example for other countries, especially those in the Global South.

Another critical takeaway is the need to balance renewable energy initiatives with the preservation of land, the minimization of environmental impacts, and the sustainability of livelihoods. This means that energy transition efforts should not lead to environmental harm, such as water stress or disruption to local farming practices, thereby deepening the inequalities and marginalization they're meant to address. Of equal importance is that adherence to international standards to secure funding should not overshadow genuine attention to local environmental and social concerns. This lesson holds particular significance for countries in the Global South, where energy transition is often financed by the Global North.

Do you think the current energy crisis in Europe presents more challenges or opportunities for 'just transitions' to renewable energy?

The current energy crisis in Europe offers a dual narrative of both intricate challenges and potential opportunities within the scope of a 'just transition' to renewable energy. The crisis is largely rooted in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and its cascading impacts on the European energy market. This situation poses a clear challenge as it has precipitated a spike in gas and oil prices. However, it also presents a unique opportunity for Europe to mitigate its dependence on Russian energy supplies, thereby catalysing a transition towards more sustainable alternatives. The crisis underscores the vulnerability and volatility that comes with overreliance on non-renewable energy sources. Germany and the Netherlands serve as tangible examples of countries successfully transitioning towards more sustainable energy practices amid the crisis.

However, these shifts are not without their complications. Financial constraints emerge as governments are forced to allocate resources towards managing the immediate repercussions of elevated oil and gas prices, which could potentially deter investment in renewable energy infrastructure. More significantly, the transition introduces complex ethical challenges on a global scale. For instance, the European Union's urgency to identify alternative energy markets could inadvertently perpetuate injustices in African and Middle Eastern countries. Some of these countries are expected to develop extensive solar and wind energy infrastructure primarily aimed at supplying Europe with electricity. This situation embodies a paradox in the energy transition, where justice for one region may result in an unjust imposition on another. It underscores the necessity for an equitable energy solution that takes into consideration the impacts on all countries involved.

How would you respond to critics of 'just transitions' who call it an idealistic or utopian theory?

I'd argue that labelling any ambitious endeavour, particularly one aiming to disrupt historically entrenched energy regimes and practices, as utopian is somewhat expected. Undoubtedly, implementing 'just transitions' necessitates considerable shifts in energy production, economic structures, and human-environment relationships. While this necessity is met with resistance, it doesn't make the concept purely idealistic or utopian. Instead, it emphasizes the

breadth of changes needed to tackle the pressing challenge of climate change. Moreover, we must perceive 'just transitions' as a transformation in the longue duree; we are replacing a centuries-old regime with a new one that significantly affects human behaviour, state-society relations, and human-environment interactions. Such a transition won't happen overnight; it is a journey over the process of longue duree.

What are you currently working on?

Currently, I am immersed in three projects. The first pivots on decolonizing transboundary energy policies, with a specific focus on Morocco. In this project, I assert that Global South countries possess substantial capacities to decolonize their renewable energy policies, thereby formulating coherent strategies that can complement (or challenge) global policy frameworks established by 'renewable energy hegemons,' like Germany, within global energy governance. While this project critically examines existing structures, it also endeavours to provide relevant policy recommendations. My second project delves into the repercussions of energy transition on sovereignty, scrutinizing how such transitions inform and reshape our understanding of sovereignty in International Relations. Lastly, my third project aims to explore the rupture between government's discursive framing of energy transition and the actual material realities in the ground. It questions the compatibility of global climate change mitigation discourses with local aspirations and expectations, probing the extent to which these global narratives align with local hopes and goals.

What is the most important advice you could give to other early career or young scholars?

My primary advice to early career or young scholars would be to stay the course. While graduate school and research can occasionally seem overwhelming, with persistent effort and motivation, you will eventually see the light at the end of the tunnel.