

Gabes is Suffocating, An Environmental Disaster, a Legacy of Colonialism

(Translated)

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The French colonialists first discovered phosphate in Metlaoui, near Gafsa, in 1883. Discoveries followed in the surrounding area, leading to the region being called the mining basin, due to the enormous reserves it contained. They began exploiting this wealth by transporting it to the port of Sfax and then transferring it to France. They then established railways to accelerate the depletion and plundering. However, after they left the country, they did not leave this treasure for the people of the country. The late Bourguiba, their agent, approved it for Tunisia in several agreements that ensured the continuation of his monopoly over underground resources such as salt, gas, oil, and phosphate, which is the subject of our discussion. These contracts remained secret, except for some leaks that reek of shame and disgrace for the current state and its founder, who falsely and misleadingly claims leadership and liberation.

In 1972, under glittering promises of industrial revolution and an end to unemployment, the infamous Bourguiba established the chemical complex in Gabès. Ostensibly a gesture of positive discrimination and a favor to the people of Gabès, it was in reality a sinister plot aimed at destroying Gabès, both its oasis and its coastline, and at destroying its environment and inhabitants. This complex was intended to process phosphates and produce chemical fertilizers, phosphoric acid, and sulfuric acid, in addition to other agricultural products primarily destined for export. It wasn't long before the people of Gabes discovered the catastrophe inflicted upon them by the heir to colonialism.

Toxic gases constantly filled their skies: from sulfur dioxide to ammonia to carbon monoxide to ozone—all with deadly effects on humans. Each one alone in sufficient dosage is enough to kill a person, and even if it doesn't kill, causes devastating illnesses and disabilities. If only the matter ended with the crime of toxic gases, but there are remnants of the phosphate processing process represented by phosphogypsum, which is a mixture of phosphate residues mixed with water and chemical elements under a high temperature. This sticky, semi-viscous mixture is poured into the sea, and according to the National Institute of Marine Sciences and Technologies in a study it conducted in 2022, the amount thrown into the sea is close to seven million tons, or about twenty thousand tons per day. This has led to the destruction of the vegetation cover that represents the refuge and food incubator for fish, especially mollusks, to mate and reproduce. Thus, after the Gulf of Gabes once teemed with over 300 different species of marine life, the total number has dwindled to less than 50. This hazardous substance, which accumulated in the sea, covered an area exceeding 60 square kilometers, according to a French study entitled "Modeling the Spread of Phosphogypsum in the Gulf of Gabes," with a thickness that makes life impossible for many creatures. A large number of sea turtles have been observed dead on the region's beaches, and many species of migratory birds that used to frequent these shores have departed. To make matters worse, phosphogypsum contains hazardous materials such as lead, mercury, and radium, and when temperatures rise in the summer, it releases toxic gases that pollute the atmosphere.

Another negative effect of this deadly project is its depletion of the water table, as the process of processing phosphate to produce chemical fertilizers requires huge quantities of water, which has led to the drying up of most of the surface springs that have characterized the Gabes oasis since ancient times. This is just a glimpse of this disaster, and there is simply not enough space to mention more.

The reasons that led to the explosion of the situation in Gabes and the unprecedented uprising of its residents are the catastrophic consequences of this complex. It has left no home in Gabes untouched by cancer, which has claimed a member in its various forms: lung, throat, skin, kidney, prostate, breast, and blood cancers, as well as numerous other diseases including delayed conception, infertility, and birth defects. While the involvement of the silent killer in these crimes is almost certain, the latest incident, which directly impacted the health of our children in the schools and preparatory schools near the complex, has created a state of outrage. Strangely, the residents' protests against these crimes, which are nearly ending the lives and hopes of their children, have been met with indifference. The death complex has continued its operations as if nothing has happened, resulting in new victims the next day. Civil defense personnel are unable to meet the demand, and hospitals are unable to provide oxygen to resuscitate the injured! This was followed by a massive march of nearly fifty thousand people demanding the downfall of the death complex. It was a peaceful march in which people spontaneously came out, bringing together adults, children, women, and men. However, the authorities had a different opinion, so they resorted to firing gases and using violence to disperse them and silence their voices. They also launched a smear campaign in the media, accompanied by a campaign of arrests and nighttime provocations, which prompted the young men to react by blocking roads at night, setting fires, and attacking the security forces.

Following this arrogant stance by the authorities, who thought they could silence the voice of the people of Gabes, the residents decided on October 21st, a historic day, to stage a general strike. All services were paralyzed, and economic life came to a complete standstill. The day culminated in a march of over 130,000 participants, chanting in unison, "The people demand the dismantling of the units." No incidents occurred during the march, which demonstrated the people's civility and their unwavering determination to achieve their unified demand. Faced with this movement, which surprised everyone, especially the authorities, the government was forced to acknowledge the legitimacy of the demands. The president declared that Gabes was being subjected to an environmental crime and that the environment was being assassinated, among other statements that offered no solutions. These statements reflected astonishment and helplessness, as if waiting for the days to pass to extinguish the movement and quell its fervor. However, alas, as he himself said on one occasion, "A bird that has left the cage cannot return to it." This is the situation of the people of Gabes, who have decided to end the accumulation of death.

It remains to point out that the hands of colonialism are always present in every battle, and that documents and evidence confirm that this country is stripped of sovereignty and decision-making power. It is enough to enter the official website of the Groupe Roullier, which is an institution that includes 109 companies distributed around the world specializing in animal feed and agricultural fertilizer, to find on their page that in 1963, a marine algae, the calcified red algae *Lithothamnium calcareum*, that is effective in fertilizing the soil, was combined with Gafsa phosphate to produce the best fertilizer in the world. Here, they speak as the owner who manages his money. Then, they add that the institution established a fertilizer production plant in Gabes in 2003, whose production in 2022 reached 26,000 tons, which is equivalent to 1,040,000 tons of phosphogypsum dumped into the sea off Gabes.

In conclusion, for these crimes and others, even if the modern state is forced to respond to the people if the pressure continues, the real solution can only be through an honest state that prevents such disasters from happening from the beginning and cares about human life before making material profit its concern, and this can only be the Second Khilafah Rashidah (Rightly-Guided Caliphate) on the Method of the Prophethood, may Allah (swt) hasten its establishment.