



Yemen solar storage

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By Andrew Raven

Farmer Bachir Mohamed Saleh Rassam is standing in his family vineyard, a ribbon of green set in the parched, rocky hills outside Sana'a, Yemen's biggest city. The grapes are used to produce Yemen's high-quality dried raisins--a key local commodity for both domestic use and export.

Not far away, amid orderly rows of grape vines, are seven clusters of solar panels. They power a pump that siphons water from an aquifer 1,000 metres below the surface, largely replacing an expensive and polluting diesel-fired generator Rassam had been using.

He says the setup, funded by a local lender, is a lifeline in an area that has been without power because of Yemen's grinding conflict.

"We received financing for the system from Al Kuraimi bank and with the help of them, and God, we need much less diesel."

Across Yemen, a growing number of farmers are turning to solar power to irrigate their fields, a shift that comes as the country tries to stave off what the United Nations warns is an impending famine.

The migration to solar power is part of what researchers say is an energy revolution in the country of 28 million, where the electric grid has been decimated by fighting. More than 50 percent of Yemeni households rely on the sun as their main source of energy, and solar arrays power everything from shops to schools to hospitals.

"For many in Yemen, especially for farmers, solar power has been a lifeline," says Matt Leonard, who specializes in microfinance with IFC. "The key now is to scale up its use."

Fighting has left 80 percent of Yemenis at risk of hunger, according to the United Nations, and sparked a migration from cities, as residents seek safety and jobs in the countryside.

But a collapsing power grid--only 10 percent of Yemenis have access to central electricity--means that many farmers in Yemen's arid hinterland rely on diesel generators to power wells.

That has pushed farmers toward solar arrays. But the up-front costs can be high. Rassam paid about 50 million Yemeni rials (around \$90,000 based on the unofficial market exchange rate) for his system, which is considered large by local standards. The average cost of an array is around \$10,000.



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Rassam financed the solar panels with a loan from Al Kuraimi Islamic Bank, one of the country's largest private lenders. In recent years, the institution has ramped up lending to farmers, thanks in part to support from IFC.

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