

Quicker adoption of EVs: An upside of the war

There is an upside to the current global oil crisis — quicker adoption of electric vehicles (EVs). To understand why this crisis could be a positive development, especially for nations seeking energy independence, consider the OPEC fuel crisis of the 1970s, when there was not enough fuel to go around. When Egypt and Syria attacked Israel in October 1973, during what became known as the Yom Kippur War, the US rushed to provide emergency military aid to Israel. In a concerted response to American support for Israel, Arab members of OPEC reduced oil production and implemented an embargo against the US and other nations supporting Israel, causing global shortages. The 1979 Iranian Revolution further deepened the oil crisis.

Around the world, especially in the US, long queues formed at the petrol pump, with drivers waiting for hours simply to fill their tanks. This was particularly damaging for the three biggest automakers in Detroit — Ford Motors, Chrysler and General Motors (GM) — which relied on sales of large, fuel-hungry vehicles with heavy V8 engines (such as the 1970 Chevelle SS 454), averaging only 7-10 miles per gallon (2.9-4.25km/ltr). Smaller 1970s cars such as the Ford Pinto and Toyota Corolla were equally inefficient by modern standards, travelling only 25-35 miles per gallon (MPG). To appreciate how poor these vehicles were on fuel consumption, consider that the 2026 Toyota Prius achieves upwards of 57 MPG, the 2026 Honda Civic (non-hybrid) up to 48 MPG and the 2026 Hyundai Elantra (hybrid) up to 54 MPG.

Faced with sagging consumer demand for large cars that consumed fuel at an alarming

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rate, Detroit's three automakers changed tack. Instead of producing fuel-hungry vehicles that dominated the roads, they opted for smaller, more economical cars. The era of the large, powerful automobile was over and in came smaller, more manoeuvrable vehicles. From that point to the present day, the trend in innovative automotive manufacturing has continued towards building fuel-efficient cars.

The current global oil crisis, precipitated by the attack on Iran by the US and Israel and the subsequent closure of the Strait of Hormuz, could compel the automobile manufacturing sector to move more swiftly towards building environmentally friendly hybrids and electric vehicles. Even before the current oil crisis, consumers were already warming to electric vehicles. China, the largest industrial consumer of oil, is also one of the biggest manufacturers of electric vehicles for both domestic use and export. Last year, for example, China's New Energy Vehicles (NEV) reached almost 16 million units, including battery EVs (BEVs) and plug-in hybrids (PHEVs), accounting for 70% of world production. Domestic

sales of 12.7 million absorbed most of the electric vehicles produced in China, leaving approximately 3.5 million for export, largely to Europe.

Global consumer uptake of hybrid and electric vehicles, which has been relatively slow — largely due to a lack of infrastructure such as charging stations and strong lobbying by the oil industry — is now poised for rapid growth. European Union production of electric vehicles, which had stagnated at 2.4 million units in 2024, posted sales reaching four million units in 2025, reflecting an increase of almost 33% in consumer adoption of EVs.

For American drivers, largely because fuel was inexpensive, the US market for electric vehicles had been soft, never exceeding 1.3 million units sold each year since 2021. The return of Donald Trump to the White House worsened matters. On the campaign trail, he pledged to expand oil drilling and in July 2025, under the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, he repealed federal tax rebates worth \$7,500 for new owners of electric vehicles. By

November 2025, US sales of electric vehicles had dropped by almost 50%.

Yet despite opposition to electric vehicles from the Trump administration, as the experience of the 1970s demonstrated, consumers adapt to new conditions and realities. With current fuel prices doubling across the US and around the world, consumers will come to accept that petrol is the past and clean electric energy is the future. As demand for electric vehicles rises, so too will production of EVs that rely principally on batteries and clean energy. For world economies, there will be urgency to build more, better and more reliable infrastructure to support electric vehicles,

including more charging stations along major highways.

In some respects, this will be reminiscent of how petrol stations were built along major highways in the 1920s and 1930s to accommodate the increased use of automobiles for long-distance personal and commercial travel. This was the era when automobile manufacturing — the Ford Model T and later Chevrolet — shifted towards producing cars for the masses, resulting in an increase in US car ownership from 6.5 million to 23 million between 1920 and 1929. The sudden surge in demand compelled governments to improve road infrastructure, as seen with the Canadian Highways Act of 1919 and the US Federal Aid Highway Act of 1921, which funded paved highways connecting cities.

As the next revolution in automobile use gathers momentum through the building of better infrastructure to support electric vehicles, African nations must not be caught off guard. Governments must build rapidly on initiatives already underway across the continent. Driven by local manufacturing such as Kiira Motors, Uganda has been an early continental leader in rapidly adopting electric vehicles. Kenya and Rwanda, meanwhile, have focused primarily on two-wheeler and three-wheeler e-mobility and start-ups, while Ethiopia leads in total EV fleet size.

The way forward requires a renewed focus on promoting electric vehicles, including attracting consumers with tax rebates and cash incentives, as well as 0% excise duty on all imported electric vehicles — a policy already implemented by Rwanda and Ethiopia. Other commendable incentives include Rwanda's offer of free government land for the construction of EV charging stations and Ethiopia's complete ban on the importation of all petrol and diesel vehicles since 2024. Indeed, this decisive measure by Ethiopia caused the proportion of EVs on the road to rise from less than 1% in early 2024 to nearly 6% by early 2026 — far above the global average of 4%.

If there was ever a moment for Africa to lead the world on electric vehicles, that moment is now.

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