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Comparative Islamist Perspectives on the Politics of Energy in the Middle East and Beyond

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The deadly jihadi attack on the Tigantourine gas plant near Ein Amenas, Algeria in January 2013 brought some attention to Islamists’ understanding of energy as a strategic commodity. Yet, it was not the first time that jihadi groups targeted the oil and gas infrastructure. Indeed, there have been a growing number of attacks against energy facilities in the Middle East, North Africa, and the former Soviet Union. Broadly speaking, due to its political and economic significance, energy has increasingly been featured in Islamist discourses.

Energy remains a highly controversial issue throughout the world, due to recent high prices and geopolitical concerns over the security of supply. Consequently, there is a fierce competition among countries to control the exploitation of energy resources. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, oil is the dominant fuel, accounting for approximately 36 percent of total energy consumption, followed by coal at 26 percent, natural gas at 22 percent, renewables at 10 percent, and nuclear energy at 6 percent. During the past decade, natural gas has been the fastest growing fuel source, mainly because coal’s share of global energy mix has declined due to environmental concerns.

While energy resources can be found in nearly every state, the modern oil industry is largely identified with the Muslim world. The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries has nine Muslim-majority member states out of a total 12; Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait are among the first ten top producers of oil; and more than two thirds of the world’s oil reserves are located in Muslim countries. Yet, none

The article will describe the general Islamic approach on energy based on the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad, as well as the writings of prominent Muslim thinkers. Then it will examine and compare the energy perspectives of four Islamist groups: Hizballah, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Al Qaeda. It will be argued that Islamist groups have attempted to achieve their external energy objectives by either using violence or exercising political blackmail against their opponents. Moreover, Islamists have developed globalized, glocalized, or localized “scale of engagement,” depending on the targeted audience. Finally, the article will examine the security implications stemming from Islamists’ interest in energy issues.
of them has avoided the so-called oil curse, namely the combination of conflict, corruption, and underdevelopment.

The political march of Islamists in the greater Middle East has resulted in a growing body of literature. Despite the centrality of oil and gas in the political life and economy of many Middle Eastern countries, scant attention has been paid to Islamist perspectives on energy issues. This article will first outline the general Islamic approach to energy based on the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, as well as the writings of prominent Muslim thinkers. Then the article will describe and compare the energy perspectives of four major Islamist groups: Hizballah, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Al Qaeda. Finally, it will examine the security implications stemming from Islamists’ interest in energy issues.

Islam and Energy

At first glance, the Quran does not discuss energy issues. However, a famous Hadith, reported by Abu Dawud, states that “Muslims are partners in three things, in water, green pastures and fire.” Islamic scholars have interpreted the word fire (al-Naar) as any resource that can generate energy, but principally hydrocarbons. However, this Hadith has been open to variant interpretations. Within Sunni Islam, schools of religious jurisprudence (madhab) have different views on the ownership of energy resources. The Maliki school dictates that minerals, including oil, cannot be privately owned, whereas the Hanafi school claims that minerals can be owned by individuals as long as they pay royalties to the state. The Shi’i-oriented Ja’fari school prohibits private ownership of hydrocarbon resources.

Moreover, the importance of oil and gas in the economy of many Muslim states has compelled Islamic thinkers to address energy issues. Taquddin an-Nabhani, the founder of the Sunni group Hizb ut-Tahrir, was probably the first Sunni scholar to draw attention to energy issues. In The Economic System of Islam, published in 1953, he argued that “the public properties of water, oil, iron, copper and the like, are properties which must be utilised in order to achieve economic progress for [the ummah] because these properties belong to the ummah [i.e., the community of believers], and the state is merely in charge of them for their administration and development.” Moreover, an-Nabhani explained how the future Islamic state could conduct its oil trade with foreign countries; he stated that “the Islamic lands possess commodities which all other countries need, for example oil. The Islamic State could restrict the sale of such commodities unless they are paid for by gold.”

Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of the most influential contemporary Sunni religious leaders, has advocated the use of oil as a political weapon. During an interview with a Qatari newspaper in September 2002, the Muslim Brotherhood–linked Egyptian theologian argued that Arab and Muslim countries could put pressure on the West to solve the Palestinian problem by stopping or reducing production of oil for a period of time. Qaradawi also argues that “it is imperative to spend [all the oil money] in the interests of Muslims, including the interests of the poor and other needy groups.” Moreover, he believes that individuals and corporations exploiting oil and gas are obliged to pay zakat (almsgiving) of one-fifth because these mineral resources are rikaz; namely, they were buried in the earth at the time of jahiliyyah (i.e., the pre-Islamic period).

The hydrocarbon-centric analysis of Sunni thinkers has not gone unchallenged. Ibrahim Abdul-Matin, an Afro-American intellectual who converted to Islam, has differentiated “energy from heaven” (solar and wind), which is environmentally friendly from “energy from hell” (coal, oil, and gas), which is hazardous to the environment. From his point of view, Islam commands an environmentally friendly use of energy.
Shi’a clerics and intellectuals have also discussed the importance of the oil industry. In his famous book *Our Economics*, the Iraqi Shi’a cleric Mohammad Baqir as-Sadr wrote about the exploitation of oil in an Islamic economic system. In his words, “oil is one of the things of common sharing between all of the people. Islam does not recognize anyone’s appropriation of them and the possession of private ownership of them . . . it comes under the orbit of common ownership.” Nevertheless, the prominent Shi’a leader argued that *Sharia* allows an “undertaking to acquire such quantity of this mineral material as meets the individual need of a person.” In other words, he envisioned public–private partnerships where a company could lease public land and waters for the purpose of developing oil and gas reserves.

In addition, the leader of Iran’s Islamic Revolution, Ruhollah Khomeini, debated the role of oil in Iranian and Middle Eastern affairs. While he was in exile in the holy Shi’a city of Najaf in southern Iraq in the early 1970s, Khomeini delivered a lecture entitled “The Incompatibility of Monarchy with Islam” where he asked “are we not to protest that the oil belonging to Iran and Islam is sold to a state at war with the Muslims? Why is Israel able to gain influence in the affairs of a Muslim country?” Khomeini was referring to Shah Pahlavi’s privileged relationship with the Jewish State, which has been viewed by most Islamists as an arch enemy. It should be noted that Iran under the Shah not only was selling oil to Israeli companies, but had also built and operated the Eilat-Ashkelon pipeline to transport crude oil from Iran to European markets. More importantly, Khomeini understood the strategic importance of the oil sector for the survival of the Iranian regime. In November 1978, he stated that

> it is the duty of all oil company officials and workers to prevent the export of oil, this vital resource. Do those workers and officials know that the bullets that pierce the breasts of our precious youths, that drown our men, our women, our infants in blood, are paid for with money earned by the oil that their exhausting labor produces?  

Khomeini was not the only Iranian leader paying attention to energy issues. Ali Sariati, an famous Iranian intellectual who blended Islam with Marxism, even made an odd connection between raw materials (including oil and gas) and Western sexual ethics. In his words, “Western colonialism exports sexual liberty into the Eastern countries in exchange for their raw materials. In place of the oil, diamonds, gold, rubber, etc. which the West takes from the East, it gives sexual liberty to them.” There is obviously an anti-imperialist flavor in the writings of Khomeini and Shariati. Both viewed oil as a cause of foreign interference in Iranian domestic affairs; Khomeini focused on Israel, while Shariati accused the West of exploiting the resources of Muslims.

To sum up, despite their fundamental differences, Sunni and Shi’a religious leaders share a similar understanding of energy. They all view energy resources as property of the *ummah* that has not yet served its full purpose. Furthermore, they tend to politicize the use of energy resources both internally and externally.

The article will now turn to how Hizballah, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Al Qaeda have viewed energy issues, especially in relation to Western countries and Israel. Their selection was based on the availability of information and the need to examine different groups (Sunni-Shi’a, violent–nonviolent, national–transnational).
Hizballah

The Party of God was established by Shi’a Muslims in 1982 to fight against the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon. Hizballah, which once campaigned for the establishment of an Islamic state, has been one of the pioneers in developing an energy agenda. This is hardly a surprise since Hizballah has evolved into a large and sophisticated organization that went through a process of Lebanonization by participating in the country’s political system.  

In May 2000, the Israeli retreat from south Lebanon undermined the group’s raison d’être, which had been the expulsion of Israeli forces. Nevertheless, the group did not give up its arms to become an ordinary political party. In July 2006, Hizballah attacked Israel first and then Tel-Aviv launched a campaign against the group. On the first anniversary of the July 2006 war, Nasrallah stated that Israel is “an enemy whose nature is aggression with historic ambitions for our land, waters and natural wealth.”  

Not many people understood at the time what Nasrallah meant by “natural wealth,” but it became clear a few years later that he was referring probably to gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean. 

With new gas discoveries in the last few years containing significant reserves, the Eastern Mediterranean will soon become the new gas frontier. More specifically, the Tamar field with estimated reserves 9.7 trillion cubic feet (tcf) was confirmed by the Israelis in 2009. In November 2010, the U.S. company Noble Energy, as part of a consortium including Delek Drilling, Ayner Oil, and Ratio Oil, discovered the Leviathan field off the Israeli coast with an estimated 19 tcf of natural gas. In November 2011, Noble Energy announced another major gas discovery in the seabed between Cyprus and Israel; the Aphrodite field is estimated to contain 7 tcf. The United States Geological Survey has estimated that the Eastern Mediterranean basin may hold 200 tcf of ultimately recoverable natural gas.  

Nevertheless, Lebanon claims that Israel is in breach of its maritime rights. More specifically, Beirut has argued that there is a disputed area of 328 square miles between Cyprus, Lebanon and Israel which is part of Lebanon’s Exclusive Economic Zone. The fact that Lebanon and Israel are still technically at war and do not currently have diplomatic relations has made the demarcation lines into the Mediterranean even less clear. In August 2010, Lebanon passed a law through parliament to survey and explore the Eastern Mediterranean for energy resources, contesting ownership rights within Leviathan. Such a development could well alter Israel’s plans to develop its gas fields, and even act as a flash point for a military confrontation between Israel and Hizballah. According to Hizballah Deputy Secretary General Sheikh Naim Qassem, “Lebanon will stand guard in order to protect all its rights, no matter the cost.”  

Besides, Hizballah has refused to recognize an agreement with neighboring Cyprus, signed by former prime minister Fouad Siniora in January 2007, drawing the Lebanese–Cypriot maritime border. Following the Israeli gas discoveries, the issue has gained new political significance. In October 2012, a Hizballah official stated that “the agreement between Lebanon and Cyprus is null and void because the Lebanese side that signed it had its official capacity revoked. . . . The sea, like land, is a one hundred percent legitimate Lebanese right, and we shall defend it with all our strength.” In reality, the group does not only oppose the Lebanese–Cypriot delimitation agreement but is also concerned about the rapidly improving relations between Israel and Cyprus. Hizballah was taken by surprise because Nicosia pursued a pro-Lebanese and pro-Palestinian policy for decades. This strategic alignment could possibly explain the mini-crisis between Nicosia and the Lebanese group in July 2012, when a Hizballah operative was arrested by the Cypriot police for planning attacks against Israeli tourists.  

It seems that the group has attempted to add a new issue to the Israeli–Lebanese confrontation. By claiming that Israel is stealing Lebanon’s gas resources, Hizballah has
in effect demonized further its opponent which is accused of energy imperialism. Such a claim resonates well with many Lebanese who perceive Israel as an aggressive neighbor that has not respected the territorial integrity of their country. In this way, Hizballah could keep presenting itself as a determined and genuinely patriotic group that fights against Israel in the name of national independence and sovereignty. More importantly, the energy issue could reshape Hizballah’s image at a time that it has faced strong criticism for its involvement in the Syrian civil war. Its rhetoric about natural gas resources is clearly influenced by Sadr’s and Khomeini’s communal and anti-colonial approach.

During a televised speech marking the fifth anniversary of the 2006 war, Nasrallah did not hesitate to threaten Israel with a strike against its energy infrastructure; he stated that “we warn Israel against extending its hands to this area and steal Lebanon’s resources from Lebanese waters. . . . Whoever harms our future oil facilities in Lebanese territorial waters, its own facilities will be targeted.” In the same speech, the leader of Hizballah claimed that the disputed sea area between Israel and Lebanon has oil and gas reserves that are worth hundreds of billions of dollars. If Beirut gains access to these reserves, the argument goes, Lebanon could soon become a wealthy country.

Hizballah has certainly the military capacity to attack offshore gas platforms in the Eastern Mediterranean if it chooses to do so. The 2006 war revealed that the Lebanese group is in possession of Chinese-manufactured C-802 anti-ship missiles (range 120 km), as well as Zelzal-2 rockets (range 200 km–400 km). Indeed, the new Israeli gas discoveries near Lebanon could provide Hizballah with an excuse to retain and possibly expand its military capabilities for the purpose of threatening its enemy’s energy lifeline.

In short, the Lebanese Shi’a group has adopted an energy agenda that concentrates on the gas reserves off the coast of Lebanon. More specifically, it has used the question of offshore gas fields to mobilize support for its fight against Israel, while providing a vision for the transformation of Lebanon’s debt-ridden economy. Hizballah’s preoccupation with gas reserves derives from a realist assumption that energy could impact domestic and international politics, rather than an idealist claim that the group ought to protect the property of the ummah.

Hizb ut-Tahrir

Hizb ut-Tahrir is a political party founded by Taqiuddin an-Nabhani in East Jerusalem in 1953. The Islamic Party of Liberation aims at peacefully re-establishing the historical Caliphate in order to unite all Muslims in a single state. In recent years, the Palestinian-led group has gained popularity among Muslims in Europe, the former U.S.S.R., the Middle East, and South-East Asia. Being an Islamist group with global membership, it was only natural for Hizb ut-Tahrir to include energy issues in its agenda.

To start with, Hizb ut-Tahrir has favored state control over the oil industry. The group views oil as a strategic commodity that could provide the future Islamic state with a significant additional source of revenue. The viewpoint of Hizb ut-Tahrir is based mainly on an-Nabhani’s writings, which coincided with the emergence of anti-colonial struggles for national liberation in Asia and Africa in the 1950s. Therefore, the group has taken an anti-colonial view on the Western oil companies, which are accused of looting the Muslim world’s rich energy resources. In the words of a Hizb ut-Tahrir columnist,

[Muslim rulers] are responsible for squandering the resources of the ummah to feed Western demands. The top sources of US crude oil imports from the Muslim world for April 2009 were Saudi Arabia (1.021 million barrels per
day), Nigeria (0.673 million b/d), Iraq (0.479 million b/d) and Algeria (0.398 million b/d). Such abundant resources are therefore slowly being stripped away from the ummah in an attempt to continue Western hegemony over Muslim lands and prevent any type of self-sufficiency.\textsuperscript{34}

Such a view adds to the widespread sense of injustice that exists among Muslims regarding the Western policies vis-à-vis the Islamic world. In fact, many Muslims blame Western governments for the lack of prosperity in their own countries.\textsuperscript{35} Hizb ut-Tahrir has distorted the debate about the relationship between oil producing and consuming countries, which is based on mutual interdependence, in order to capitalize on grievances that many Muslims have.

Besides, Hizb ut-Tahrir has used energy as a factor explaining great power competition in the international system. The United States is often presented as an aggressive and greedy country seeking to seize and control energy resources. However, at times, the group has made some strange claims about how oil interests can dictate U.S. foreign policy. In 1999, for example, the group argued that

\ldots the war [i.e., the second Russian–Chechen war] being waged in the Caucasus is aimed at severing the blood vessels of the Russian livelihood, so that Russia remains under the will of the United States; it is also aimed at making America control the oil fields of that region, the production levels, the price and the supplies.\textsuperscript{36}

It appears that Hizb ut-Tahrir interpreted the invasion of Dagestan by Chechen Islamists in the summer of 1999 as a U.S.-organized effort to undermine Russian energy interests in the Caspian Sea. In this way, the United States would have gained control over the Caspian oil and gas reserves. Surprisingly, the group chose to ignore the religious dimension of the conflict.

Moreover, the group has viewed energy resources as a potential political weapon against non-Muslims. For example, the Bangladeshi branch has criticized Dhaka for allowing gas exports to India, a country viewed by many Islamists as an enemy state. In one of its leaflets, the group argued that

exporting gas to India means to strengthen the hand of the enemy. Over the last few decades India has clearly proved its animosity and hatred towards Islam and the Muslims. For decades she has been occupying and killing the Muslims of Kashmir. \ldots She has openly declared her relationship with the US and Israel in their fight against Islam in the name of the so-called “War on terror”. Exporting gas would be helping our enemy with our own hands.\textsuperscript{37}

Although the group is famous for its Manicheistic view on the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims,\textsuperscript{38} Hizb ut-Tahrir has adopted a rather mainstream Islamist view in this case. Due to its alleged mistreatment of the Muslim population in Kashmir, the Indian government has been the object of harsh criticism by many Islamists in Bangladesh.\textsuperscript{39} But Hizb ut-Tahrir has been the first Islamist group in the country to make a connection between energy and Bangladeshi foreign policy toward India.

The group has not only provided an analysis of contemporary energy affairs, but has even suggested an energy policy for the restored Caliphate. In an article published by an Hizb ut-Tahrir website, this energy policy is described as follows:
The Muslim lands have no shortage of energy resources, but most of the Muslim lands suffer from load shedding and crumbling infrastructure. . . . The Caliphate brings its assets together and develops the necessary infrastructure so that the citizens can benefit from them. . . . This energy policy is one example of what the Caliphate can do to develop [its economy].

From the Hizb ut-Tahrir’s point of view, energy resources are vital for the survival and prosperity of ummah. In the proposed Islamic state, the Caliph would administer the energy resources after consulting the experts. Obviously, the group recognizes that this sector of the economy cannot be run effectively by a single individual, not to mention that energy has long been associated with corruption; the consultation of energy experts could function as a control mechanism.

Despite its preoccupation with the geopolitics of energy, the group has not ignored energy market issues at the national level. For instance, the British branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir has warned that “the privatized energy sector is causing consternation not too dissimilar to the financial sector of 2008 . . . a huge amount of energy is also traded and speculated on in the wholesale energy market in forward and futures contracts resulting in a market which is far from open and transparent.” The group has criticized U.K. private energy companies of being profit-obsessed, and socially irresponsible. Instead, the group has advocated a Soviet-type nationalization of the energy industry because “energy providers are not run to make profit let alone to maximize profits.”

Likewise, the Pakistani branch has put forward proposals for a more efficient energy market because the country has suffered from high prices and frequent power cuts. It has promised that the Caliphate will abolish taxes upon electricity and fuel in order to achieve the “massive industrialization of Pakistan.” Other branches have also commented on energy issues. The Sudanese branch has condemned the minister of finance for liberalizing fuel prices, while the Yemeni office has criticized the decision of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi to invite foreign oil companies to drill for oil and gas in onshore and offshore blocks. All Hizb ut-Tahrir’s statements and publications have a common denominator: they insist that the energy resources have been stolen from the legitimate owners and the restored Caliphate will manage them in a proper Islamic manner.

The Muslim Brotherhood

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is the world’s first Islamist organization, established by Hassan al-Banna in 1928. From the outset, its relationship with the Egyptian authorities was confrontational; as a result, thousands of its members were imprisoned and tortured. For many years, its semi-legal status did not permit the development of a political program offering solutions for everyday problems. During the 2000s, however, the Muslim Brotherhood went through a phase of pragmatization by integrating slowly into Egypt’s political system.

Egypt’s growing population and troubled economy only meant that the Muslim Brotherhood had to develop an energy agenda. The 2011 electoral program of the Freedom and Justice Party, a Muslim Brotherhood satellite, proposed “increasing use of alternative energy, especially renewable types, focussing on solar energy projects, and working on nationalising and developing technologies relevant to those projects.” Moreover, the party advocated “the establishment of a Higher Council for Industry and Energy and Mining that works for the integration of efforts in these three sectors.” In this way, “energy projects
to reach the maximum capacity of 30–35 Gigawatt in proportion to economic growth rates as follows:

- Substitution of diesel with natural gas in electric stations.
- Increasing the pace of building power plants based on renewable water, wind, and solar energies.
- Developing electrical energy joint-projects with the Nile Basin countries.\textsuperscript{50}

It seems that the Muslim Brotherhood was the first Islamist group discussing openly the need for a policy on renewable energy that could improve the energy security of Egypt. In addition to a nationalization program, the party favored institutional reform to face energy challenges.

The Muslim Brotherhood also criticized the Mubarak regime for exporting Egypt's gas to Israel. Yet, the party opposed sabotage actions against the 55-mile Arish-Askeron gas pipeline transporting Egyptian gas to Israel and called for peaceful protests.\textsuperscript{51} In the summer of 2010, the Muslim Brotherhood stepped up its criticism; it claimed that electricity blackouts were the result of gas exports to Israel.\textsuperscript{52} In April 2012, as a result, Egypt’s interim government cancelled a 20-year contract to supply Israel with gas. When the group came to power, however, President Morsi did not freeze economic relations with Israel; the new Muslim Brotherhood–dominated government was keen to prove to the United States and European countries that it did not plan to change Cairo’s foreign policy toward Tel-Aviv.\textsuperscript{53} Nonetheless, Morsi did not resume gas exports to Israel probably as a solidarity gesture to the embattled Hamas and a bargaining chip against the neighboring country.

Likewise, there are strong indications that the Morsi government utilized, during 2012, gas exports as a foreign policy tool against Amman. The Jordanian economy has heavily dependent on Egyptian gas due to a bilateral agreement signed in 2001. Following the outbreak of protests by the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in winter 2011, the Morsi government reduced gas exports to the neighboring country as soon as it came to power in order apparently to keep the pressure on Amman. Consequently, the Jordanian national electricity company came close to bankruptcy when it resorted to costlier heavy fuel oil.\textsuperscript{54} Morsi government’s manipulation of gas exports vis-à-vis Israel and Jordan could have been the result of the influence that Qaradawi wields as intellectual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood; in other words, President Morsi possibly put in practice Qaradawi’s idea of utilizing energy resources for political purposes.

Furthermore, the Morsi government monitored closely energy developments in the Eastern Mediterranean following the Israeli and Cypriot gas discoveries there. It appears that Egypt, under the Muslim Brotherhood, supported the Turkey’s claimed seabed rights off the coast of Cyprus.\textsuperscript{55} One possible explanation for Egypt’s energy rapprochement with Turkey is the ideological affinity between the Muslim Brotherhood and Tagip Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party; both represent a new political Islam that combines liberal market principles with a conservative social agenda.\textsuperscript{56}

As of this writing, it is not known how the military coup d’État and the subsequent banning of the Muslim Brotherhood in the summer of 2013 will affect the group’s ability to develop further its energy agenda. However, the Muslim Brotherhood (or its successor group) is very likely to maintain a strong interest in energy affairs. Due to the deterioration of the economy and the urgent need to deal with new energy challenges, Egyptian Islamists cannot afford to overlook energy issues.
Al Qaeda

Al Qaeda is a global Salafi-jihadist terrorist group that has remained active despite the killing of its founder Osama bin Laden in May 2011. The group has showed a particular interest in energy affairs. In his statements and videos, bin Laden often analyzed the political and security implications of the energy trade for Arab countries. After all, the top leadership has been of Middle Eastern origin, which means that it is aware of the importance of oil in the region. Indeed, Osama bin Laden first mentioned energy during an interview with The Independent on 10 July 1996. In his words,

The ordinary man knows that [Saudi Arabia] is the largest oil producer in the world, yet at the same time it is suffering from taxes and bad services. Now the people understand the speeches of the ulema in the mosques—that our country has become an American colony. . . . What happened in Riyadh and Khobar [when 24 Americans were killed in two bombings] is clear evidence of the huge anger of Saudi people against America.57

Three months later, bin Laden declared his jihad against the United States and its allies. Once again, he brought up the energy dimension of the conflict by arguing that “as a result of the policy imposed on [Saudi Arabia] . . . [oil] production is restricted or expanded and prices are fixed to suit the American economy.”58 On 18 March 1997 he elaborated on the importance of the oil industry. He claimed that

Since 1973, the price of petrol has increased only 8 dollars per barrel while the prices of other items have gone up three times. The oil prices should also have gone up three times but this did not happen. . . . We are suffering a loss of 115 dollars per barrel every day. Only Saudi Arabia produces 10 million barrels oil per day and thus the loss is one billion dollar per day. . . . In the past 13 years, the United States has caused us a loss of more 1100 billion dollars. We must get this money back from the United States. . . . Muslims are starving to death and the United States is stealing their oil.

The leader of Al Qaeda obviously needed to provide a rationale before targeting the oil industry, which has been a highly profitable and job-creating business in the greater Middle East. From his point of view, the oil price was not fair for the producing Arab countries because the United States was able to keep it low. His argumentation resembled that of neo-Marxist thinkers like Noam Chomsky who have accused the United States of exploiting Third World countries.59

As a result, Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda–franchised groups have attacked energy infrastructure (e.g., pipelines, power plants) in North Africa and the Middle East. On 6 October 2002, the French-owned oil tanker Maritime Jewel was hit by a suicide bomber. Following the attack, Al Qaeda claimed responsibility and bin Laden issued the following statement:

By striking the oil tanker in Yemen with explosives, the attackers struck at the umbilical cord of the Christians, reminding the enemy of the bloody price they have to pay for their continued aggression on our nation and robbing our riches.60
Again, the group presented the attack in an anti-colonial fashion that emphasized the righteousness of its cause: it was an act to defend the ummah and its wealth against foreign aggression.

Since the mid 2000s, Al Qaeda–affiliated groups have also targeted onshore energy infrastructure. On 24 February 2006, members of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) attacked the Saudi Aramco-operated refinery at Abqaiq but they caused limited damage. In September 2006, AQAP attempted unsuccessfully to attack the Safer and Dabba refineries in Yemen. In late March 2010, Saudi authorities announced the arrest of 113 AQAP members who allegedly planned to attack energy facilities.

Further to Osama bin Laden’s statements, there have been efforts to theorize the jihad against energy facilities. In June 2004, Shaykh Abdullah bin Nasser al-Rashid, the so-called Al Qaeda minister of propaganda, elaborated on the targeting of oil infrastructure. In *The Laws of Targeting Petroleum-Related Interests and a Review of the Laws Pertaining to the Economic Jihad* he argued that

1. The targeting of oil infrastructure is a legitimate means of economic jihad against the opponents.
2. The infidels do not own what they have seized from the ummah because it is still its property.
3. The destruction of infidel property as part of jihad is legitimate, as long as the benefits outweigh the costs of such action.
4. It is acceptable to destroy Muslim property if infidels have seized control of it, or if there are fears that something like this may happen.
5. There are four types of oil related interests: oil wells, pipelines, oil facilities, oil business executives.

Interestingly, al-Rashid attempted to draw an analogy between Al Qaeda’s targeting of energy infrastructure and Prophet Mohammed’s “Medinan strategy.” Following his departure from Mecca and the establishment of the first Islamic state in Medina, the Prophet and his followers launched attacks against caravan routes in order to gain booty and harm the Meccan economy; this Medinan strategy has apparently been adopted by Al Qaeda in order to “bleed America economically.”

In the *Management of Savagery*, an Al Qaeda manual about jihadi tactics and strategy uploaded to the Internet in 2004, the author Abu Bakr Naji confirmed this way of thinking. He argued that “if an oil interest is hit near the port of Aden, there will have to be intensive security measures put in place for all of the oil companies, and their tankers, and the oil pipelines in order to protect them, and draining will increase.” Yet, Naji admitted that such attacks could alienate fellow Muslims. Therefore, he suggested a media campaign in order to inform the public about the “political importance of petroleum” and “the extent of injustice . . . which the ummah has suffered for decades on account of its devalued price.” Furthermore, Naji advocated the striking of “pipelines where no humans will suffer or tankers which the infidels command and work on.”

In spite of the aggressive rhetoric, it appears that economic targets are often viewed by jihadis as less desirable than military ones; the destruction of energy facilities could cause significant economic and environmental damage, as well as electricity power cuts that would make them less popular among the targeted audience. More importantly, jihadi attacks against energy infrastructure go against the teachings of Sunni Islam, which clearly view energy resources as common property of the Muslims. Thus, the primary aim of jihadi
attacks seems to be the disruption of the market, rather than the total destruction of the infrastructure.

Analyzing and Comparing Islamist Energy Perspectives

Islamists believe that the ummah could gain its independence only if it takes control of its energy resources which are a crucial component of state power. Their approach to energy is clearly hydrocarbon-centric because many Muslims countries rely almost exclusively on crude oil and gas exports for the bulk of their revenues. Therefore, Islamist groups have largely focused on oil and gas production and transportation. The only exception to this is the Muslim Brothehood, which has also considered other forms of energy, such as renewables (e.g., solar, wind, biomass). Overall, however, the use of renewables has not featured strongly in Islamist discourses; if only for two reasons—they could not be used politically against the opponents and could not generate large revenues for the state.

The four groups under study represent different types of political Islam. Hizballah is an armed group-turned-to political party that has participated in the Lebanese government but retains its arms; Hizb ut-Tahrir is an international Islamist party that has rejected political violence as a tool of political change; the Muslim Brotherhood is a former governing party in Egypt which was recently banned by the military; and Al Qaeda is a terrorist organization with a global reach. The question that naturally arises is why these Islamist groups, which are so different from each other, have decided to develop an energy agenda. Is this the result of a conscious strategic decision, or is it just an ad-hoc response to Muslims’ concerns about energy problems? It will be argued here that there are four reasons that may account for the emergence of this political trend.

First, it is a fundamental belief of Islamists that religion must dictate every aspect of life, both private and public. Therefore, they heavily rely on Islamic sources to ensure legitimization of their campaigns; for example, Hizballah, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Al Qaeda, and to a lesser degree the Muslim Brotherhood, have routinely supported their situation analysis and policy proposals with Quranic verses and Hadiths. Given that Islamists believe that have a sacred mission in life, developing or suggesting policy responses to energy problems is more than anything else a religious duty.

Second, the formation and promotion of energy agendas could serve as a valuable political weapon against the West and its principal ally in the Middle East, Israel. The high consumption of energy resources by Western economies is viewed by Islamists as a mere consequence of greed and irresponsibility. In turn, the argument goes that Western hunger for oil has given rise to neo-imperialist policies against the Muslim world. According to this logic, Western governments have enforced a “rentier state” model in the region, whereby most Middle Eastern countries get most, if not all, of their national revenues from the renting of their energy resources to foreign companies. Therefore, the exploitation of energy resources must remain in the hands of Muslims at any cost. In addition, Islamists’ interest in energy contributes to the demonization of Israel which is blamed for looting Egyptian and Lebanese gas.

Third, many Muslim countries have suffered from energy-related problems like electricity cuts and air pollution. Islamist groups are politically obliged to address these concerns; otherwise, they would look out of reality and anachronistic. To put it simply, talking about energy serves well the political objectives of Islamists who want to present themselves as a viable option to the current political elites ruling the Muslim world. They strongly believe that energy is a public good that cannot be provided cheaply and efficiently by the private sector. Consequently, the energy industry must be nationalized to serve the people.
Finally, Islamists have increasingly discussed energy issues because concerns over energy security and climate change have proliferated during the last few decades. Indeed, such concerns have been shared by a large number of leftist parties and groups in the Middle East and beyond, which could enable Islamists to develop important international and regional links. In effect, the debate about the West’s “energy imperialism” against Middle Eastern countries could bridge the ideological gap between Islamists and leftists by encouraging action against a common enemy.69

In any case, Islamists have applied two basic methods to pursue their external energy objectives vis-à-vis their perceived opponents: the use or threat of violence, and the use or threat of political blackmail. The first method has been utilized by armed groups which are self-trapped in a cycle of hostility that perpetuates itself. Therefore, Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda–affiliated groups have increasingly attacked energy facilities in the Middle East, North Africa, and the former U.S.S.R. Although Hizballah has refrained from attacking Israeli gas infrastructure, the group has issued military threats to bolster its position. Despite their different origins, both Hizballah and Al Qaeda view violence as a legitimate method to achieve energy objectives, ranging from disrupting the oil market and undermining Western energy security to securing ownership of gas reserves.

The second method has been used by groups eschewing violence and aspiring to stay in power or take over the government. Hence the Muslim Brotherhood attempted to blackmail gas-consuming countries, such as Jordan, for the purpose of making foreign policy gains. Likewise, Hizb ut-Tahrir has theorized about how the restored Caliphate could utilize its energy power against the rest of the world; apparently, the new Islamic state would export oil and gas only to friendly countries.

Additionally, each Islamist group has adopted its own scale of engagement that includes three levels of geographical space: local, glocal, and global. For Hizballah, the energy issue is significant locally and serves a higher cause, that of confronting its arch enemy Israel. The Muslim Brotherhood also formulated a localized energy agenda in order to address public concerns about electricity supply and prices, while attempting to utilize gas exports as a foreign policy tool against neighboring countries. In contrast, Al Qaeda has espoused a globalized approach, portraying energy problems as proof of Western imperialism and targeting energy facilities. Between the localized and globalized approaches stands the glocalized one of Hizb ut-Tahrir that addresses global energy issues, while suggesting policy responses at the national level.

The different combinations between scale of engagement and methods that have been adopted by the four Islamist groups are represented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale of Engagement</th>
<th>Method of Violence</th>
<th>Method of Blackmail</th>
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<tr>
<td>Localized</td>
<td>Hizballah</td>
<td>Muslim Brotherhood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Glocalized</td>
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<td>Hizb ut-Tahrir</td>
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<td>Globalized</td>
<td>Al Qaeda</td>
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The scale of engagement could also indicate the degree of pragmatism demonstrated by each group. Hizballah and the Muslim Brotherhood have the attributes of state-based actors which mean that they are accountable to a national electorate. The former has been careful not to open a second front against Israel for the sake of offshore gas reserves at a time that
the Lebanese society is heavily burdened by the Syrian civil war, while the later attempted to reorganize the hydrocarbon-dependent Egyptian energy market in order to foster economic growth and achieve environmental protection. In both cases, Islamists have made a decision based on political expediency. In contrast, Hizb ut-Tahrir and Al Qaeda are transnational non-state actors which can afford to be more dogmatic and reactionary for two reasons: they are not based on a specific country and they do not receive their legitimacy from electoral processes. The former could voice harsh criticism of state authorities for their handling of energy issues without offering viable options, while the latter has launched a campaign of attacking energy facilities that undermines economic development. In both cases, Islamists have formulated responses based more on ideological than political considerations.

The Security Implications of Islamist Energy Agendas

Islamists’ growing interest in energy issues has important security implications for Western and Muslim countries. Islamist parties in government would have to address issues of energy efficiency and the use of non-hydrocarbon energy, including renewable and nuclear energy. While the use of renewable sources by any Islamist government could be a welcome development, any effort to develop nuclear energy is bound to alert both regional rivals and Western countries. Interestingly, Islamists do not reveal much about their approach to nuclear energy. With the exception of Hizb ut-Tahrir which has discussed briefly the importance of nuclear energy for the economy of the restored Caliphate, Islamists have almost avoided the issue altogether. The conspicuous absence of nuclear energy from Islamist energy agendas may have several explanations. Nuclear energy is just not the objective for those who have attempted to develop or steal nuclear weapons (Al Qaeda), or possibly a hidden dream for others (Muslim Brotherhood). While condemning Israel’s nuclear deterrent, Hizballah may prefer to avoid the issue given Iran’s difficulties in convincing the international community of its peaceful aims.

Nonetheless, none of the Islamist groups under study could realistically get involved in a nuclear energy program in the near future: Hizballah has neither the economic means nor the domestic support to engage in such a dangerous endeavor that would inevitably provoke an Israeli response; the Muslim Brotherhood has been outlawed by the Egyptian military that has maintained a firm control of the country’s political system and its survival is in doubt; Hizb ut-Tahrir is a nonviolent group that has failed to transform itself into a massive movement capable of taking over power in any Muslim country; and Al Qaeda has been in disarray for many years since it has not been able to maintain a safe territorial base.

In fact, there is a more immediate and real threat stemming from Islamists’ interest in energy issues. According to the Global Terrorism Database, produced by the University of Maryland’s START Center, there have been more than 223 jihadi attacks against energy infrastructure in the Middle East, North Africa, and the former U.S.S.R. between 11 September 2001 and 30 December 2011. Data reveal that pipelines are most vulnerable to terrorist attacks; 118 or 52 percent of all attacks were against pipelines or pipeline-related targets (e.g., security guards protecting pipelines), with Iraq (44), Russia (17), Yemen (12), Algeria (10), Turkey (9), and Egypt (9) being the most dangerous places for pipeline development and operation. Some examples include the 2001 attack on an oil pipeline that feeds Saudi Arabia’s Ras Tanura terminal; the bombing of two pipelines in the Russian autonomous republic of Chechnya in January 2006; and the targeting of gas pipelines in the Sinai Peninsula during 2011. There have been also attacks on Western non-energy targets (e.g. expatriate compounds), since the United States and certain European countries have
allegedly supported a form of interstate clientelism in that Arab elites in power often trade energy resources for Western political and military support.

Pipelines run over thousands of miles and across some of the most politically unstable areas in the world. A simple explosive device could easily damage a pipeline and halt the flow of oil and gas for days. Mortars are especially well suited for attacks on above-ground pipelines. Bazookas and similar unguided rockets could also be used for attacks on such stationary targets as pipelines. To make matters worse, jihadi groups have been easily able to gain access to conventional arms. Following the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, North Africa and certain parts of the Middle East are awash with light weapons and explosives.

In view of this security environment, state agencies could focus their risk management strategy on two key areas:

- Threat assessment: To provide an analysis of possible threats against onshore infrastructure. Where is the greatest concentration of incidents against pipelines? Where is the terrain most conducive to terrorist attack?
- Security Measures: Vulnerability and the long length of pipelines are two of the main factors to be considered. Recent advances in drone surveillance technology may be particularly helpful in providing pipeline security.

In any case, oil companies have built pipelines through potentially hostile terrain for many years (e.g., Columbia, Nigeria, Sudan). Additionally, the energy industry has ample experience in minimising direct collateral damage to its infrastructure assets caused by local conflicts. Although they are vulnerable to physical attacks, pipelines can be repaired relatively quickly. If adequate precautions are taken for the protection of a handful of key installations (e.g., pumping stations), it would be very difficult to disrupt oil and gas exports in any meaningful way through terrorism against pipelines.

Although there has been only one known attack against an oil tanker, the risk facing the tanker transportation industry remains significant. Tankers are too slow to maneuver away from attackers and they have no protection against incoming missiles. There are approximately 4,100 tankers sailing the oceans. Each of them can be attacked in the high seas or while passing through narrow straits. Tankers carrying much of the Middle East’s oil supply must pass through three choke points—the Bab el-Mandeb Straits in the Red Sea, Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, and the Straits of Malacca between Indonesia and Malaysia. These straits are controlled by Muslim countries with past or ongoing low-intensity conflicts. Any attack against tankers could destabilize the oil market by lifting prices and producing a climate of uncertainty.

Ultimately, the security of pipelines and tanker transportation must be treated by Western governments as a political, not a military, problem. The physical threats to oil and gas transportation reflect the political instability that prevails in the greater Middle East. Armed groups, like Al Qaeda in Yemen, have taken advantage of the state’s failure in providing security and public goods like cheap energy. In an era of increased energy independence, Western responses should include the “de-hydrocarbonizing” of foreign policy vis-à-vis Middle Eastern countries. The growing use of renewables and production of shale gas in the United States could eventually lead to a reorientation of the U.S. foreign policy in the greater Middle East, which has often been criticized as giving too much emphasis on energy interests. Having said that, the Middle East is highly likely to remain a strategically important region for the U.S. foreign policy. Indeed, Washington cannot
afford to lessen its security guarantees to its regional allies given that the world economy still largely depends on access to Middle East energy resources.

Conclusion

The Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad has only briefly touched on energy issues, but prominent Islamic thinkers have written about the impact of oil on politics. Islamist groups have paid increased attention to energy issues due to their significance for the economy of many Muslim-majority countries. But Islamists have hardly a unified and monolithic energy agenda. Hizballah has focused on questions of ownership of offshore gas fields; the Muslim Brotherhood has formulated an agenda addressing Egypt’s energy challenges and relations with consuming countries; Hizb ut-Tahrir has concentrated on the energy policy of Muslim countries, as well as the energy policy of the future Islamic state; and finally, Al Qaeda has pointed to Western neo-imperialist policies aiming at looting oil and gas reserves in the Muslim world.

Furthermore, each group has pursued energy objectives differently: Hizballah has issued military threats against Israel in order to secure Lebanese ownership of disputed gas reserves; Hizb ut-Tahrir has offered policy suggestions for Muslim countries and has prepared a blueprint for a “proper” energy policy that could be undertaken by the new Caliphate; the Muslim Brotherhood implemented an energy policy during its one-year rule that had both domestic and foreign components; and finally, Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda–affiliated groups have consistently targeted energy infrastructure in the Middle East and beyond. In sum, it appears that Islamists have relied on two basic methods to achieve external energy objectives: violence and political blackmail. Since Islamist energy agendas are addressed to different audiences, Islamists have adopted globalized, glocalized, or localized scales of engagement depending on their “area of operation.”

The growing interest in energy affairs on the part of Islamists has important security implications for Western and Middle Eastern governments that must be considered. While Islamist groups are unlikely to make progress in the sensitive area of nuclear energy, oil and gas infrastructure has been targeted by Al Qaeda–affiliated terrorists. Moreover, the tanker transportation industry remains vulnerable to terrorist attacks, although it is a key pillar of the world economy. When Islamist militants start talking about energy, it is time to pay attention.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their useful comments.

Notes


6. Hadiths are recorded oral traditions about Prophet Muhammad.


10. Ibid., p. 278.


15. Ibid.


17. Ibid., p. 243.


31. Ibid.


43. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
61. Al Shishani, “Al Qaeda and Oil Facilities in the Midst of Global Economic Crisis.”
It should be noted that the Medinan strategy is not unique to Al Qaeda. In fact, other militant groups have targeted the economic soft underbelly of Muslim countries. In Egypt, for example, al Gema’a al Islamiyah (The Islamic Group) launched attacks against the tourist industry in the 1990s, in the hope that it will provoke a “crisis of the state.” Despite its apparent failure, such a strategy has been adopted by successor groups in post-Morsi Egypt; suspected Islamist militants killed South Korean Christian pilgrims in the Sinai Peninsula in February 2014.


66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.


74. For a full list of incidents see the Global Terrorism Database. Available at http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/
