
ISLAMIST PERSPECTIVES ON ENERGY ISSUES

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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 [1]. This article will first outline the general Islamic approach to energy based on the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad, as well as the writings of prominent Muslim thinkers. Then the article will describe the energy perspectives of three major Islamist groups: Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Muslim Brotherhood, and al Qaeda.

Key words: Energy, The Middle East, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Muslim Brotherhood, al Qaeda.

Islam and energy

At first glance, the Quran does not discuss energy issues. However, a famous Hadith [2], reported by Abu Dawud, states that “Muslims are partners in three things, in water, green pastures and fire” [3]. 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 [4. P. 148—149]. The Shia-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. Taqiuddin an-Nabhani, the founder of the Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir, was probably the first Islamic scholar to draw attention to energy issues. In *The Economic System of Islam*, published in 1953, 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” [5. P. 57].

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 [6]. 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” [7]. 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).

Shia clerics and intellectuals have also discussed the importance of the oil industry. In his famous book *Our Economics*, the Iraqi Shia 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” [8. P. 112—113].

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 Shia 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” [9. P. 203]. Khomeini was referring to Shah Pahlavi’s privileged relationship with the Jewish State, which has been viewed by most Islamists as an arch enemy.

To sum up, despite their fundamental differences, Sunni and Shia 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 Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Muslim Brotherhood, and al Qaeda have viewed energy issues, especially in relation to Western countries and Israel.

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 [10. P. 315—334]. In recent years, the Palestinian-led group has gained popularity among Muslims in Europe, the former USSR, 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 favoured 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 1950s. Therefore, the group has taken an anti-colonial view on the Western oil companies, which are accused of looting Muslim world’s rich energy resources. 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.

Moreover, the group has viewed energy resources as a potential political weapon against non-Muslims. For example, the Bangladeshi branch has criticised 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.... 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! [11]

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 online 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] [12].

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 [13]. 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. 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" [14]. Other branches have also commented on energy issues. The Sudanese branch has condemned the minister of finance for liberalizing fuel prices [15], 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 [16]. 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 al-

ternative energy, especially renewable types, focussing on solar energy projects, and working on nationalising and developing technologies relevant to those projects” [17]. 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” [17]. 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” [17].

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 massive nationalization program, the party favoured institutional reform to face energy challenges.

The Muslim Brotherhood also criticized the Mubarak regime for exporting Egypt’s gas to Israel. 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 [18]. 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 [19]. 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.

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 jihadi-salafi 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 analysed 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 July 10, 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 [20].

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” [21]. On March 18, 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.

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 October 6, 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 [22].

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 February 24, 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 [23].

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" [24].

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.

Conclusion

The Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad has only briefly touched upon energy issues, but prominent Muslim 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. 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: 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 which 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.

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