

Al Qaeda's threat to oil and gas assets in the Baltic Region¹

By Peter F. Johnston

Contemporary energy security is threatened by terrorist attack, particularly since al Qaeda has encouraged strikes on oil and gas infrastructure. The Baltic Sea region is not immune to this threat and could find itself the target of an al Qaeda assault at any time. The impact of such an event would be extreme in terms of the ecological damage, clean-up and also the affect on global oil prices.

The Global Threat

The leadership of al Qaeda intends to overthrow what it considers to be corrupt regimes in Muslim countries and replace them with a single Islamic Caliphate. Osama bin Laden's 1996 fatwa entitled, "Declaration of War against Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," identified the expulsion of US and Western countries deemed to be supporting these regimes as a first step. In this fatwa bin Laden railed against what he argued to be artificially low oil prices controlled by the US. He insisted that the governments ruling the oil producing Muslim countries were robbing, in conjunction with the US, their own people. He also indicated that killing foreigners and causing economic hardship for the US through economic boycotts would convince them to leave. However, he argued against targeting oil and gas infrastructure in the Middle East in order to avoid hurting local economies.

In a 1998 fatwa, bin Laden reiterated the need to attack Americans, their economic interests, and the Muslim regimes supported by the US. He also widened the list of appropriate targets and locations to include US allies, declaring that it was the duty of all Muslims to attack these targets in any country possible.

In 2004, bin Laden advocated attacks aimed at oil and gas infrastructure in the Middle East used to supply the West. A January 2007 internet publication released by al Qaeda, *Sawt al-Jihad*, extended the threat to oil and gas infrastructure that provided resources to the US and its allies throughout the world and noted that oil is the lifeblood of the G-8 and the industrialized world.

Al Qaeda and other militant Islamist groups have responded by attacking energy infrastructure in the Middle East. Noteworthy incidents include the bombing of the French oil tanker, MV Limburg on October 6, 2002 off of the coast of Yemen; attacks on pipelines in Yemen in 2006 and 2007; and 2 separate attacks on foreign oil industry executives in Saudi Arabia in May 2004, killing 22. The oil and gas industry has also been targeted in Iraq. According to the Institute for the Analysis of Global Security Iraq Pipeline Watch, there were 469 attacks on pipelines, refineries, energy workers, and storage facilities in Iraq from June 12, 2003, to March 27, 2008.

More alarming was al Qaeda's thwarted February 24, 2006 attack on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq refinery. In April 2007 an al Qaeda cell was arrested allegedly preparing to strike Abqaiq again. This hub processes roughly two-thirds of Saudi oil thus is key to the Saudi Arabian and global petroleum industry. These attempts indicate al Qaeda's intention to inflict significant global economic damage.

The Baltic Threat

Oil and gas infrastructure in the Baltic region has not been specifically mentioned in al Qaeda fatwas or documents advocating attacks. However, this should not lead one to conclude that attacks will not occur. This is because, with the exception of Russia, the Baltic states are all members of the West and thus are all targets of al Qaeda. More specifically, all of these states, again except Russia, contribute troops to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (ISAF) while Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland have, or had, forces deployed with the Multi-National Force in Iraq (MNF-I), making them targets of al Qaeda and sympathetic militant Islamist groups. Russia is likely a target since it exports approximately 400,000 barrels per day (b/d) of crude oil and refined products to the US. Moreover, its military actions against Islamists in Chechnya are still fresh in the minds of many extremists.

Denmark has also gained al Qaeda's attention due to the publication, in a Danish paper, of cartoons depicting the prophet

Muhammed that offended some Muslims. The Danish embassy in Pakistan was attacked in June, 2008, and an al Qaeda spokesman released a statement in September promising that Denmark would endure more attacks in order to "...wipe you [all non-Muslim Danes] from the face of the earth."

The oil and gas infrastructure of the Baltic region offers many targets for terrorists. Russia exports much of its tanker-borne crude through the Baltic Sea via the port of Primorsk. Throughput in 2007 was roughly 1.5 million b/d and construction of the Baltic Pipeline II will increase this amount. Smaller volumes of Russian oil are shipped from Baltic ports located in Estonia, Kaliningrad, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. These facilities, along with the Mazeikiiai refinery in Lithuania, receive their oil either by pipeline or train from Russia. Russian gas also transits to other European markets via the network of pipelines in the Baltic region. As well, refineries in other Baltic states including Denmark, Finland, Germany, Poland, Sweden, and Russia are potential targets. Also, Russian oil major Lukoil's Kravtsovskoye offshore oil platforms are located in the Baltic Sea. Finally, the Nord Stream Pipeline, once built, could be vulnerable to attack.

The MV Limburg attack demonstrated that al Qaeda has the ability and intent to strike oil tankers. Tankers in the Baltic Sea are constrained by extremely busy and narrow shipping lanes. They can exit the Sea via the 3 Danish straits, which narrow to 4 km between Sweden and Denmark. They may also use the Kiel Canal to transit to the North Sea, although few tankers are small enough to do so. Regardless of their routes, oil tankers using the Baltic Sea are vulnerable to attack — more so at these choke-points.

A successful attack on a tanker in the Baltic Sea would have tremendous regional and international repercussion. Regionally, given the 30 year period required for a complete water exchange in the Baltic Sea, the ecological impact and the clean-up costs would be immense. Globally, it could cause economic problems by driving up the cost of oil.

Conclusion

The threat of an attack on oil or gas infrastructure in the Baltic region is real. Al Qaeda has specifically identified Denmark as a target and all other states in the region are implicitly targeted due to their association with the West and also, except for Russia, because of their participation in the MNF-I or ISAF. Russia's oil exports to the US make it an al Qaeda target. There are numerous vulnerabilities in the region, with oil tankers perhaps being the most lucrative. Granted, it is easier for al Qaeda and like-minded militant Islamist groups to strike targets in the Middle East. However, these terrorist organizations have demonstrated a desire and capacity to operate further afield suggesting that a major attack in the Baltic Sea region is possible.

Peter F. Johnston

Strategic Analyst

*Defence Research and Development Canada –
Centre for Operational Research and Analysis*

Canada

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