



## **Al Qaeda's Oil Weapon Katrina and Rita highlighted our energy vulnerabilities. What did the terrorists learn?**

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There can be no doubt that our terrorist enemies keenly watched both Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita. One clear lesson they will seize on is the inadequacy of the governmental response to Katrina, which suggests that we're unprepared to handle the effects of a major terrorist attack. Another clear lesson is the U.S. economy's vulnerability to high energy prices.

Even a cursory glance through the news reveals the kind of economic damage caused by a disruption to the nation's energy supply. For example, John Felmy, chief economist and director of statistics at the American Petroleum Institute, [predicted](#) to the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* that the combination of high

gas prices and record home heating bills would "have a profound impact on consumers" this winter. The worst-case scenario, he stated, was that diminished consumer spending could drive the country into recession. Anticipating the ripple effect that Rita could have on the economy, the *Tampa Tribune* [warned](#) readers to "[e]xpect higher prices for gas, insurance, food, construction supplies--and pretty much anything else, including a gallon of milk or this year's holiday gifts."

Our economy's vulnerability to high oil and gas prices makes an early September discovery by the Saudi Arabian police particularly worrisome. A 48-hour shootout at a villa in the seaport of Ad Dammam en-

ded on September 6 after Saudi police brought in light artillery to finish the job. *Newsweek* [reports](#) that when police searched the erstwhile terrorist compound, they found "enough weapons for a couple of platoons of guerrilla fighters," including more than 60 hand grenades and pipe bombs, machine guns, and rocket-propelled grenades. But of even greater concern is the terrorist cell's apparent target.

Along with the weapons cache, police discovered forged documents that would have provided the terrorists with access to some of the country's key oil and gas facilities. Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayef confirmed to the daily newspaper *Okaz* that the cell had planned to attack oil and gas facilities, and stated, "There isn't a place that they could reach that they didn't think about."

The disruptions caused by Katrina and Rita make Saudi Arabia, which boasts a quarter of the world's proven petroleum reserves, more important to the world oil supply than ever before--and al Qaeda knows it. *Newsweek* quotes former CIA agent Robert Baer, who describes the effect that a coordinated attack on Saudi Arabia's oil installations would have on world oil prices:

*A few ruptured pipes could be repaired quickly, says Baer, but a concerted attack at several points could bring on the kind of nightmare scenario that U.S. officials have been dreading since the Reagan years, pushing oil prices up from their current prices in the range of \$60 to \$70 a barrel to well over \$100 for weeks or even months.*

Although this is the first time the Saudi government has acknowledged that a terrorist plot had targeted its oil installations, al Qaeda's recent pronouncements provide us with a stark warning that the terrorist group is likely to do so again.

In his 1996 [declaration of war](#) against the West, Osama bin Laden indicated that Saudi oil wealth was off limits as a military target because he viewed it as a key resource for the pan-Islamic super-state that he wished to establish: "I would like here to alert my brothers, the Mujahideen, the sons of the nation, to protect this [oil] wealth and not to include it in the battle as it is a great Islamic wealth and a large economical power essential for the soon to be established Islamic state, by Allah's Permission and Grace."

Despite this initial promise, bin Laden's thinking on the subject shifted as he came to see crippling the U.S. economy as key to winning his war against the West. In the [video](#) that bin Laden released just before the 2004 election, he bragged that al Qaeda spent only \$500,000 on the 9/11 attacks, while the attacks cost America over \$500 billion and a large number of jobs. This, coupled with the size of the U.S. budget deficit and the fact that President Bush had to request emergency funding for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, led bin Laden to trumpet the success of his "bleed-until-bankruptcy plan" for defeating America.

Then, in a mid-December 2004 [audiotape](#), bin Laden reversed his earlier promise to protect the Arab oil wealth. For the very first time, he called for attacks on the oil industry, framing them as part of al Qaeda's "bleed-until-bankruptcy" strategy:

*One of the main causes for our enemies' gaining hegemony over our country is their stealing our oil; therefore, you should make every effort in your power to stop the greatest theft in history of the natural resources of both present and future generations, which is being carried out through collaboration between foreigners and [native] agents. . . . Focus your operations on it [oil production], especially in Iraq and the Gulf area, since this [lack of oil] will cause them to die off [on their own].*

Since then, the supposed theft of Muslim oil has been prominent in al Qaeda's public rhetoric. For example, Ayman al-Zawahiri's early August [videotape](#) warned the United States to "stop stealing our oil and wealth."

Al Qaeda operatives also appear to have taken the message to heart. The Washington, D.C.-based SITE Institute has [reported](#) that a mid-August post on a password-protected internet forum affiliated with al Qaeda asserted that attacks on Saudi oil pipelines would have a greater effect on the United States than a chemical weapons attack by creating "a big economic disaster for the American public." The post's author noted that bin Laden had referred to this as an effective method of damaging the American economy, and concluded with a call to arms: "Start it. Start it, al-Qaeda men."

By exposing the U.S. economy's vulnerability to high energy prices, Katrina and Rita make oil installations a tempting terrorist target. And bin Laden's speeches make clear that the first acknowledged terrorist plot against a Saudi oil installation is probably not an aberration.

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