

ISIS militants ‘likely to target more Syrian gas pipelines as they lose ground’ – expert

A pipeline delivering gas from Syria’s largest gas field is back in service after being sabotaged by militants at the weekend, according to state media, however armed groups are increasingly likely target oil and gas infrastructure in the country as they lose territory, according to one regional energy market expert.

The pipeline running from the Al-Shaer gas field to the Ebla gas processing plant in the government-controlled Homs province was downed on Sunday but returned to service the following day, according to state news agency SANA.

Gas from Ebla feeds ~10% of the country’s power generating capacity – with the plants located in Damascus and central Syria. No militant group has yet claimed responsibility, however SANA said the attack occurred in the Badia desert region where “remnants of Daesh ‘ISIS’ terrorists” remain.

University of Oxford Middle East energy scholar Justin Dargin said that ISIS is the group “most likely to have carried out the attack as it occurred in an area where ISIS has shown activity” but cautioned that another group may ultimately claim responsibility.

He told Gas Matters Today that militant groups are more likely to target government held energy infrastructure as they lose ground. “In most areas of unrest in the world, a strategic pillar of militant groups has been to attack energy infrastructure as a means to weaken state power, both symbolically and economically.

“As the territorial power of ISIS and other militant groups has been reduced, we will witness an uptick in energy infrastructure directed attacks. Previously, militant groups were somewhat careful not to damage critical energy assets, however, now that their power has weakened considerably, that consideration has flown by the wayside,” said Dargin.

Protecting energy infrastructure not only keeps the lights on generates state revenue; it also shows “that the government is not only regaining control, but it is firmly in control of the hydrocarbon fields,” he added. At stake is the perception of which side is winning.

“[F]or the Syrian regime, having firm control over the pipeline infrastructure, and being able to successfully resist attacks will assist the regime in showing that the rebellion has lost steam,” said Dargin.

However, “even if militants continue attacks, it does not mean that the government is failing in its efforts to control strategic energy assets”, he added. Countries that are not officially in civil war – such as Mexico, Nigeria and Iraq – “regularly experience pipeline attacks from various disaffected groups”.

“[I]f anything, attacks on transport infrastructure illustrate that the remnants of the rebellion are significantly weakened and not able to hold the hydrocarbon fields as they were able to previously,” said Dargin.

He described the likelihood of an ISIS resurgence in Syria as “exceedingly unlikely” because the group’s “hard power” has been damaged “nearly beyond repair” – and major powers will be keenly observing if militants attempt to regroup.

Import impediment

The attack on the gas pipeline came a month after an attack on subsea crude pipelines, leading to a disruption of an oil delivery from Iran.

Crude imports into Syria are expected to become increasingly difficult, according to Dargin, with the British navy last week seizing an Iranian crude tanker off the coast of Gibraltar after suspecting the ship was destined for the war-torn nation.

“[S]yria is finding it difficult to continue to acquire oil at reasonable rates to meet demand as one of its primary patron’s, Iran, is undergoing economic woes of its own. [I]ran is being targeted with renewed American sanctions on its oil exports [and] is finding it increasingly difficult to support its ally.

“If militants continue to target Syria’s energy infrastructure at an increased tempo, and Iran finds it more difficult to supply the Syrian government, then we will witness enhanced power and hydrocarbon allocations issues befall Damascus in the interim,” Dargin concluded. - ET



Consulting

+44 (0) 20 7332 9900
consult@gasstrategies.com



Alphatania Training

+44 (0) 20 7332 9910
training@gasstrategies.com



Information Services

+44 (0) 20 7332 9976
subscriptions@gasstrategies.com