

How energy injustice fuels Middle East conflict and human rights abuses

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Abstract: *The abundance of Middle East oil reserves has shaped global politics for decades. United States foreign policy in particular is driven by the desire for energy security and efforts to safeguard this have inversely fuelled conflict and instability in the Middle East. Oil also plays a major role in European foreign policy, the importance of which has been intensified by the Russia Ukraine war which now threatens the continuity of Russian oil and gas supplies. Moreover, tension and inequalities within and between Middle Eastern oil-importing and oil-exporting countries have greatly contributed to human rights abuses in the region. Now is the time for the international human rights community to adopt an energy justice framework which acknowledges and considers compensation for harms committed by oil industry giants and the violent politics of oil.*

Keywords: *Energy justice; Middle East; Oil; Human Rights; US foreign policy; European foreign policy*

1. Global reach of oil politics

Late last year, one of us had a conversation with a woman who was putting US\$70 of gasoline into the tank of her large Sports Utility Vehicle. She explained that she needed the large car because her children would squabble if they had to sit near each other. Moments later she added that it was a pity that her brother had been wounded in Iraq, fighting to get cheaper oil to America. She, like many other consumers and even commentators and analysts in the energy studies field, did not see the ethical connection between her personal demand for oil, and military casualties related to securing that oil in the Middle East (Sovacool and Dworkin 2015).

The concept of energy justice is particularly relevant to the human rights situation in the Middle East right now. Many countries in the region are still living through the aftermath of the Arab Spring with either chaos, authoritarianism or transitional states at the heart of their political scene.

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The Gulf has been gaining much more power and regional dominance over the past decade with skyrocketing inflation in the United States and higher dependence on Gulf oil as a substitute for Russian resources.

With that in mind, the politics of energy impacts human rights in the Middle East in two ways. First, it affects interstate dynamics—which vary between the region's oil-exporting and oil-importing countries—and how this influences the distribution of energy production costs and benefits, given the new political order. The second issue is the question of how Western—particularly US—foreign policy towards countries in the Middle East is shaped, given the current energy crisis and increasing dependence on oil in its fossil fuel-based economy. This article aims to reflect on these two questions by defining energy justice and its relationship to human rights, understanding its implications for US and European foreign policy towards the Middle East and finally how it can be contextualised in regard to specific countries in the region.

2. Human rights

While energy justice is considered a relatively new field for academics, policymakers and non-governmental organisations, it has developed as a by-product of both the environmental and climate justice movements that rose to action between the 1970s and 1990s.

Environmental justice started as a movement in the US in response to the unequal distribution of environmental ills such as pollution and waste facilities which were often borne by people of colour and ethnic minority Americans (Jenkins 2018). Initially, environmental justice aimed to mobilise the public into a fair distribution of environmental hazards and access to all natural resources while ensuring that the affected communities are involved in the decision-making process. It gathered traction when several civil society organisations employed it in their push for political action. Environmental justice then expanded outside the US and started gaining momentum but became too broad, encompassing many subfields like activism, policymaking and advocacy for the various environmental challenges that were specific to each community. The concept was also critiqued for its failure to translate into economic and actual policy decisions (Jenkins 2018). By the 1990s, another movement developed with the sole purpose of addressing climate change implications.

Unlike previous environmental justice campaigns, climate justice set out to tackle the issues globally rather than dealing with a series of local and national concerns. It aimed to identify those responsible for CO₂ emissions, who should bear the burden of mitigation and adaptation to reduce it and how to protect vulnerable communities most likely to carry that burden (Lyster 2015). Both environmental and climate justice impact

basic human rights, namely the right to food, health and water and the right to live in your own country. While the former is concerned with protecting the environment in which the people live in, the latter is additionally concerned with protecting low income and indigenous communities from the damage caused by climate change. Nonetheless, critiques of environmental and climate justice often allude to the fact that despite some success at local level over the years, both movements have failed to make significant international impact due to different understandings of what counts as (in)justice and the challenges of application on a global level, even though these are universal problems.

Energy justice cannot work as a substitute for environmental and climate justice: however, it adopts a more focused approach based on the politics of energy production and consumption (Jenkins 2018). Founders and proponents of energy justice aimed to develop the concept in a way that acknowledges the philosophical grounding of (in)justice while simultaneously developing it as an analytical and decision-making tool. For example, by employing energy justice in order to realise universal human rights and combat violation of civil liberties—in extreme cases through death and civil war undertaken in pursuit of energy fuels and technology as well as the contribution of energy production to military conflict (Sovacool and Dworkin 2015). A potential solution using the energy justice framework would be developing “extractive industries transparency initiatives, energy truth commissions and inspection panels, improved social/ environmental impact assessments for energy projects, availability of legal aid to vulnerable groups” (Sovacool and Dworkin 2015).

Practically speaking, energy justice acknowledges three main tenets of justice—distributional, procedural and justice as recognition—in the production and consumption of energy. Distributional justice is concerned with a fair distribution of the benefits and ills of environmental resources as well as ensuring a fair allocation of the associated responsibilities such as the anticipated risk involved in installing certain technologies. Procedural justice manifests as a call for equitable procedures that engage all stakeholders in a non-discriminatory way. It states that all groups should be able to participate in decision-making, and that their decisions should be taken seriously throughout. It also requires participation, impartiality and full information disclosure by government and industry and appropriate and sympathetic engagement mechanisms (Sovacool and Dworkin 2015).

Finally, justice as recognition is: “[M]ore than tolerance, and requires that individuals must be fairly represented, that they must be free from physical threats and that they must be offered complete and equal political rights. It may also appear not only as a failure to recognise, but as a

misrecognising—a distortion of people’s views that may appear demeaning or contemptible” (Sovacool and Dworkin 2015).

3. US foreign policy

The relationship between the Middle East and the West has always been characterised by a complex network of not only mutual benefits but also hostilities, war and, in many instances throughout history, proxy wars. Grouping all countries with their different governments, political systems, histories and cultures in this region under the term “Middle East” fails to acknowledge significant nuances between countries within the region as well as variation in their energy source management regulation. However, it is safe to assume that the politics of oil, whether imported or exported, is a crucial element in understanding the dynamics between the West and the Middle East and the many human rights abuses which take place in the latter region. For example, Europe relies heavily on oil from the Middle East, Russia and the US in order to secure its energy supply (Ispi 2022). Given Europe’s depleting oil reserves, the foreign policy of the European Union (EU) towards oil-exporting countries is highly influenced by this dynamic. Meanwhile, the US and Russia have used Middle Eastern countries like Iraq and Syria as proxy economic battlefields by investing in energy infrastructure and securing different gas pipelines for their own benefits (Maher and Pieper 2020).

While tension between the West and the Middle East has always been dressed in an ideological gown, for the most part, oil is one of the major underlying causes of many conflicts in the region. This also holds true for inter-regional conflicts in the Middle East such as the framing of the Iraq-Iran war as a Sunni versus Shi’i conflict when in fact it was an invasion of the oil-rich province of Khuzestan (Mills 2021). Ethnic tensions, sectarian divisions, religious wars and colonial history certainly contribute to the never-ending instability and insecurity within the region. However, the geopolitics of securing fossil fuels since the 1973 oil crisis is believed to be a major contributor to the heightened inter and intrastate tensions over the past few decades.

Since the 1973 oil crisis, US obsession with energy security and independence has led its foreign policy towards the Middle East to further destabilise the region (Mundy 2020). By supporting authoritarian regimes, coups and creating different alliances in civil wars, US fears have dragged the region in a violent vicious cycle: America’s war on terror inversely created so much unrest in the Middle East that in the first decade of the millennium the region rose from being responsible for 30 percent to 50 percent of global armed conflicts (Mundy 2020). A global terrorism database also reports that the Middle East now accounts for half the terrorist incidents worldwide—a massive increase from 10 percent since 2010 (Mundy 2020).

On the other hand, US attempts to avoid direct military intervention in the region while maintaining its geopolitical hegemony made it outsource the task of “securitizing” the Middle East to local nation states, ironically maintaining a constant state of “insecurity” by supporting neoliberal authoritarian regimes (Mundy 2020).

Single lens analysis of Middle Eastern instability, be it in the form of wars, revolutions or civil conflicts, could be construed as reductive. Yet acknowledging the scale of injustice and human rights abuses resulting from US oil politics using the energy justice framework could potentially improve the human rights situation in the Middle East, especially in war zones. The application of energy justice in this context means acknowledging the violence that comes with US oil politics. This means acknowledging the injustices that occur in the extraction of oil by North Atlantic oil companies from lands in the region and holding these companies accountable, not only for existing but also potential future harms. Moreover, it involves recognising that indigenous communities bear the true cost of securing energy sources and considering compensation for their losses.

4. European foreign policy

Geographical proximity coupled with the interdependence between Europe and the Middle East always informed EU foreign policy towards the region (Colombo and Soler i Lecha 2021). Unlike the US, the EU was neither an ally nor a rival in any of the post Arab-Spring inter and intrastate conflicts in the Middle East. Instead, the EU played the role of partner or donor. Even when the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia became more explicit after 2011 and when Qatar’s supportive stance toward the political Islam project differed from its regional counterparts, namely Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, European foreign policy managed to maintain a fair level of neutrality. In 2016, the EU Global Strategy vowed to pursue balanced engagement in the Gulf through ongoing cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and individual Gulf countries (EU 2016). Building on the Iran nuclear deal and its implementation, the EU also aims to gradually engage Iran in areas such as trade, research, environment, energy, anti-trafficking, migration and societal exchanges.

After the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, the need for further cooperation between the Gulf and EU was exacerbated. Given the fact that Europe imported an estimated 46.8 percent of its natural gas from Russia alone by the first quarter in 2021, the continent would be forced to find an immediate alternative if it was to maintain sanctions on oil and natural gas exports from Russia. Both long and short-term European energy strategies include heavy reliance on co-operation between the EU and countries in the Gulf and North Africa (EU 2022). One way of reducing reliance on Russian oil and gas imports is to shift to hydrogen-based renewable energy sources in the medium-term. In the short-term, European energy policy aims to diversify its oil and natural gas sources by importing from other countries such as the US, Egypt and Israel.

5. Interstate energy politics

The effect of US foreign policy in respect of oil on human rights in the Middle East is only one aspect of the multifaceted issue of energy politics in the region. Major differences between oil-exporting and oil-importing countries are at the heart of regional dominance as well as domestic energy politics in single states.

Countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which include Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain, possess approximately 30 percent of the world's proven oil reserves. Oil revenue in these countries has created a rentier economy, where oil revenue is allocated to citizens in return for their loyalty to the ruling monarchies. For years, GCC countries maintained their stability using this model. However, the shift to renewables coupled with an increase in national spending in order to maintain this model is currently pushing the Gulf towards a more sustainable economy. One example is massive UAE investment in green energy technologies in order to ensure an alternative revenue stream.

On a regional level, oil wealth has changed the balance of power between countries in the Middle East itself over the past few decades. For instance, international attention has shifted from Egypt and Iraq to the Gulf, especially Saudi and the UAE. The political stances of these two countries in particular started to gain importance after the Arab Spring. Up until 2022, Saudi Arabia and UAE support for the Egyptian army not only aided the 2013 coup in Egypt but also helped entrench the military's growing economic power by directing massive foreign currency investments into newly established state institutions. Similarly, recent UAE support for Israel totally changed the dynamics of the so-called "Arab-Israeli" conflict, narrowing it from an Arab-wide to a Palestinian-only issue. This, in turn, changed the narrative of constant human rights abuses in Gaza and the West Bank, reframing Israeli occupation as a local matter. Gulf power is also clear in the case of Yemen, where Saudi Arabia's war on the Houthis has displaced 100,000 civilians and put over 2m at risk since 2015 (BBC 2022).

For oil-importing countries like Egypt and Jordan, securing energy sources makes up a large portion of the overall national budget. Unlike wealthy oil-rich countries, oil-importing countries have long subsidised energy prices in order to protect poor households from economic shocks while maintaining public order and controlling dissent. Post-Arab Spring, this strategy served neither governments nor the people. Energy subsidies are not customised for those who need them the most. Instead, big business, especially in the transportation and tourism sectors, benefits most. Moreover, the harsh transition into neoliberal economies over the

past two decades has made it almost impossible to keep subsidising energy sources, especially fossil fuels.

Given the above domestic and regional energy politics in the Middle East, energy justice and human rights overlap in several areas. As with US foreign policy, the GCC, particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia, has likewise fuelled human rights violations in countries like Yemen, Palestine, and Egypt, either through supporting oppressive regimes or by creating new alliances in the region. Oil wealth in these countries has also managed to keep public dissent in check despite the obvious crackdown on freedom of expression and women's rights.

6. Way forward

The adoption of an energy justice framework by international organisations like the United Nations and the International Criminal Court could contribute to improving the human rights situation in many ways. International recognition of atrocities attributable to the violent oil politics of the region would put pressure on local governments which are either dependent on oil revenues or oil importers themselves. This could pave the way for harmed communities to ask for compensation and retribution. Furthermore, human rights law and international criminal law could develop the legal framework to further define and criminalise both past and potential future injustices committed by oil industry giants.

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