

## **Analysis: A War for Oil**

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US and UK politicians seek to deny the obvious strategic importance of oil underlying America's commitment to the Gulf.

Attempts to relate the coming war with Iraq to control of oil resources are routinely dismissed by politicians in the United States and in Britain. But the longer-term history of the region leaves little doubt of the crucial importance of oil. The Persian Gulf is where the oil is, and what has to be done, in US thinking, is to make absolutely sure that the Gulf is securely controlled for many years to come.

Until 1970, the United States produced just about all the oil it needed from its own oilfields, but by the early 1970s it was beginning to have to import substantial quantities from abroad. This was one reason the US was affected by the October 1973 embargo by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). The subsequent 400 per cent surge in oil prices greatly increased appreciation of the strategic importance of Gulf oil.

Concern over the OPEC embargo was exacerbated by concern over Soviet intentions in the region. There was an assumption that any major East-West conflict would involve an immediate attempt by the Soviet Union to take control of much of the Gulf, aided by its regional allies. But the Iran of the Shah, with its sizeable army, was seen as a counter to the supposed Soviet threat to Gulf oil supplies and a stabilising partner in relation to regional threats.

All that changed with the Iranian revolution. With a hostile regime now in power in Tehran, President Carter established the Rapid Deployment Force, which gave the US the ability to intervene rapidly in the region and thereby ensure the security of oil supplies. When Ronald Reagan replaced Carter in 1981, the Rapid Deployment Force was expanded into Central Command (CENTCOM) - covering the whole of the Middle East, North East Africa and South West Asia - and was built up into a force that could call on 400,000 troops, scores of warships and hundreds of planes.

During the 1980s, major bases for the Saudi Air Force were built, far larger than the Saudis required. These formed the springboard for the war to get Saddam out of Kuwait in 1991.

By the late 1990s, the US had gone as far as re-establishing the Fifth Fleet in the Gulf and had the capability for very high levels of military action if required.

The obvious question is, "Why go to all this trouble?". The answer is oil. Today the Gulf states possess two-thirds of all the world's oil. It is of a high quality and is easy to access - far more so than North Sea or Alaskan oil. The United States, meanwhile, is rapidly running down its easily extractable oil reserves and now imports 60 per cent of all its needs, including some from Iraq.

Those who deny the importance of oil in the current conflict point to the Caspian Basin and elsewhere. But if adding the Caspian Basin reserves to those of Siberia, then to US reserves including Alaska, and to the North Sea and West Shetland reserves, still amounts to less than that of Iraq on its own.

Put another way, Iraq has about four times the oil reserves of the United States, with much more thought remaining to be discovered under its western desert region.

Saddam Hussein's regime has been much weakened by the 1991 war and subsequent sanctions. But it is

still seen to have regional ambitions and to be endeavouring to develop chemical and biological weapons that could limit US actions in the region, one that is of crucial geopolitical importance to the United States. This is unacceptable to the Bush administration with its oil connections and its belief in the need for long-term supplies of cheap oil.

Replacing the Iraqi regime with a client regime, and establishing a series of large US bases in Iraq, is seen as helping to ensure just such a supply, as well as limiting dependence on Saudi oil, with all the uncertainties that Saudi Arabia now demonstrates. After the war, the United States will have a string of bases from Oman to the Turkish border in northern Iraq. The Fifth Fleet will be patrolling the Gulf itself. Long-term stability and control will be guaranteed.

This, at least, is the view from Washington. There is no recognition that such a situation will be an absolute gift to al-Qaeda and other groups, confirming all they have been telling their supporters about foreign control. Nor will it do anything but encourage the Iranians to work as hard and fast as they can to develop some kind of deterrent - quite possibly a nuclear deterrent - to ward off US action against another part of the "axis of evil".

In the very short term, a victory in Iraq will be lauded across the United States. In the longer term, it could be the most dangerous foreign adventure the United States has ever undertaken.

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