

The Geopolitics of War

The current war against terrorism is firmly rooted in geopolitical issues. Oil and Saudi Arabia are the true center of the conflict.

BY MICHAEL T. KLARE

There are many ways to view the conflict between the United States and Osama bin Laden's terror network: as a contest between Western liberalism and Eastern fanaticism, as suggested by many pundits in the United States; as a struggle between the defenders and the enemies of authentic Islam, as suggested by many in the Muslim world; and as a predictable backlash against American villainy abroad, as suggested by some on the left. But while useful in assessing some dimensions of the conflict, these cultural and political analyses obscure a fundamental reality: that this war, like most of the wars that preceded it, is firmly rooted in geopolitical competition.

The geopolitical dimensions of the war are somewhat hard to discern because the initial fighting is taking place in Afghanistan, and because our principal adversary, bin Laden, has no apparent interest in material concerns. But this is deceptive, because the true center of the conflict is Saudi Arabia, not Afghanistan (or Palestine), and because bin Laden's ultimate objectives include the imposition of a new Saudi government, which in turn would control the single most valuable geopolitical prize on the face of the earth: Saudi Arabia's vast oil deposits, representing one-fourth of the world's known petroleum reserves.

To fully appreciate the roots of the current conflict, it is necessary to travel back in time—specifically, to the final years of World War II, when the U.S. government began to formulate plans for the world it would dominate in the postwar era. As the war drew to a close, the State Department was enjoined by President Roosevelt to devise the policies and institutions that would guarantee US security and prosperity in the coming epoch. This entailed the design and formation of the United Nations, the construction of the Bretton Woods world financial institutions and, most significant in the current context, the procurement of adequate oil supplies.

American strategists considered access to oil to be especially important because it

was an essential factor in the Allied victory over the Axis powers. Although the nuclear strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended the war, it was oil that fueled the armies that brought Germany and Japan to their knees. Oil powered the vast numbers of ships, tanks, and aircraft that endowed Allied forces with a decisive edge over their adversaries, which lacked access to reliable sources of petroleum. It was widely assumed, therefore, that access to large supplies of oil would be critical to U.S. success in any future conflicts.

OIL AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Where would this oil come from? During World Wars I and II, the United States was able to obtain sufficient oil for its own and its allies' needs from deposits in the American Southwest and from Mexico and Venezuela. But most U.S. analysts believed that these supplies would be insufficient to meet American and European requirements in the postwar era. As a result, the State Department initiated an intensive study to identify other sources of petroleum. This effort, led by the department's economic adviser, Herbert Feis, concluded that only one location could provide the needed petroleum. "In all surveys of the situation," Feis noted (in a statement quoted by Daniel Yergin in *The Prize*), "the pencil came to an awed pause at one point and place — the Middle East."

To be more specific, Feis and his associates concluded that the world's most prolific supply of untapped oil was to be found in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. But how to get at this oil? At first, the State Department proposed the formation of a government-owned oil firm to acquire concessions in Saudi Arabia and extract the kingdom's reserves. This plan was considered too unwieldy, however, and instead U.S. officials turned this task over to the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO), an alliance of major U.S. oil corporations. But these officials were also worried about the kingdom's long-term stability, so they concluded that the United States would have to assume responsibility for the defense of Saudi Arabia. In one of the most extraordinary occurrences in

modern American history, President Roosevelt met with King Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud, the founder of the modern Saudi regime, on a U.S. warship in the Suez Canal following the February 1945 conference in Yalta. Although details of the meeting have never been made public, it is widely believed that Roosevelt gave the King a promise of U.S. protection in return for privileged American access to Saudi oil—an arrangement that remains in full effect today and constitutes the essential core of the United States-Saudi relationship.

This relationship has provided enormous benefits to both sides. The United States has enjoyed preferred access to Saudi petroleum reserves, obtaining about one-sixth of its crude-oil imports from the kingdom. ARAMCO and its U.S. partners have reaped immense profits from their operations in Saudi Arabia and from the distribution of Saudi oil worldwide. (Although ARAMCO's Saudi holdings were nationalized by the Saudi government in 1976, the company continues to manage Saudi oil production and to market its petroleum products abroad.) Saudi Arabia also buys about \$6-10 billion worth of goods per year from US companies. The Saudi royal family, for its part, has become immensely wealthy and, because of continued U.S. protection, has remained safe from external and internal attack. ■

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Teaching Ideas

Michael Klare asserts that the "true center of the conflict is Saudi Arabia." What evidence does he offer to support this claim?

Klare writes that the "special" relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia "has provided enormous benefits to both sides." Who has benefited from the relationship? Who has not benefited? How has the gap between the rich and poor in Saudi Arabia contributed to resentment toward the United States and the regimes it supports in the Middle East?

Ask students to investigate the energy connections of the Bush administration. Might these connections influence U.S. foreign policy? How has oil influenced previous U.S. foreign policy?

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