

AMERICA'S DEPENDENCY ON MIDDLE EAST OIL

PART II

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Currently, approximately 35% of the world's seaborne crude oil extracted from the Earth in the countries of the Middle East is brought to global markets through the Strait of Hormuz between Iran on the Northeastern side of the Strait and the United Arab Emirates with the Omani enclave of Musandam on the Southwestern side of the Strait, representing about 20% of oil traded worldwide ("Strait of Hormuz," January 16, 2012). Under pressure from economic sanctions by the U.S. and the European Union, Iran's government has vowed to block the Strait of Hormuz if the West places additional economic sanctions on their government.

North America is the largest consumer of oil regionally, followed by Asia (primarily Japan), Europe, and then other world regions. Importing over 13.5 million barrels of oil per day, the U.S. is easily the world's largest oil importer, accounting for over 63% of total U.S. daily consumption. "Oil from the Middle East (specifically, the Persian Gulf) accounts for 17 percent of U.S. oil imports, and this dependence is growing," wrote Heritage Foundation researcher Ariel Cohen in April of 2006.

Though the U.S. is a top producer of crude oil, its current rate of petroleum consumption is between 18 and 19 million barrels of oil per day, and its domestic production cannot handle the demand, hence its reliance on imported oil. As President George W. Bush stated in his 2006 State of the Union Address to the nation: "Keeping America competitive requires affordable energy. And here we have a serious problem: America is addicted to oil, which is often imported from unstable parts of the world" (January 31, 2006). From the mouth of the nation's top leader, the U.S. suffers from an *addiction*. Most modern machinery runs on oil and its utility is seen in everyday products from plastics to cosmetics, from paint to lubricants, and, most especially, as a source of fuel for the modern combustion engine. Over time, to feel "normal", the addict develops an abnormal psychological dependency on the addictive substance and will utilize any means to obtain the drug in spite of cultural or moral restraints. In the case of oil, this abnormal dependency has led the United States to engage in bribery and corruption to obtain oil, from control of markets to the exclusion of countries from such commerce, from the overthrow of regimes deemed belligerent because of their attempts to take control of their own oil resources to outright murder, assassination, and war. Indeed, few Americans today doubt that the recent eight-year war on Iraq (2003-2011) was conducted primarily to obtain oil. And this is why veteran scholar on the politics of oil, Dr. Michael Klare, concludes in a recent article that: "the Strait of Hormuz will undoubtedly remain the ground zero of potential global conflict in the months ahead" (January 31, 2012).

When a U.S. President refers to the necessity to import oil from "unstable parts of the

world,” what he means is that some regions of the world are asserting their sovereign right to control their natural resources, e.g. oil, and they are neither subordinate nor answerable to the U.S. government, especially as regards how much oil is produced and available for purchase on world markets and how much they wish to charge for this oil—hence, the nomenclature of “instability”.

The world’s top oil producers are depicted in the table below [Table I], and it is not coincidental that major areas of U.S. foreign intervention over the past 50 years are focused on these countries.

Table I

RANK

COUNTRY

PRODUCTION (thousands of barrels per day)

1

Saudi Arabia

10,521

2

Russia

10,146

3

United States

9,688

4

China

4,273

5

Iran

4,252

6

Canada

3,483

7

Mexico

2,983

8

United Arab Emirates

2,719

9

Brazil

2,719

10

Nigeria

2,458

11

Kuwait

2,450

12

Iraq

2,408

13

Venezuela

2,375

14

Norway

2,134

15

Algeria

2,078

["Top World Oil Producers, 2010 (*Thousand Barrels per Day*)."] U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Information Administration]

As well, the following countries [Table II], listed by rank, are estimated by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to possess the most proven oil resources still remaining in the ground. These areas are likewise regions of heightened U.S. foreign policy interests and will continue to be so as long as the world economy is carbon-based.

Table II

Rank

COUNTRY

BILLIONS OF BARRELS OF OIL (BBL)

DATE OF INFORMATION

1

Saudi Arabia

262,600,000,000

1 January 2011 est.

2

Venezuela

211,200,000,000

1 January 2011 est.

3

Canada

175,200,000,000

1 January 2011 est.

4

Iran

137,000,000,000

1 January 2011 est.

5

Iraq

115,000,000,000

1 January 2011 est.

6

Kuwait

104,000,000,000

1 January 2011 est.

7

United Arab Emirates

97,800,000,000

1 January 2011 est.

8

Russia

60,000,000,000

1 January 2011 est.

9

Libya

46,420,000,000

1 January 2011 est.

10

Nigeria

37,200,000,000

1 January 2011 est.

11

Kazakhstan

30,000,000,000

1 January 2011 est.

12

Qatar

25,380,000,000

1 January 2011 est.

13

United States

20,680,000,000

1 January 2011 est.

14

China

20,350,000,000

1 January 2011 est.

15

Brasil

12,860,000,000

1 January 2011 est.

[“Country Comparison: Oil - Proved Reserves.” *The World Factbook*. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency]

With the recent American military “departure” from Iraq, it is becoming evident that the days of kowtowing to U.S. military dictate are over. Hence, there will be many “unstable” areas in the world in the years to come.

Given an ever-increasing demand for oil, because of its “addiction”, and given its limited domestic sources of crude oil, the U.S. will remain dependent on imported oil well into the future. U.S. policymakers, by their past and present actions since the end of WWII in pursuing this addiction, have apparently concluded that the nation’s interest in oil and other ‘strategic’ resources outweighs the nation’s avowed values to support democracy.

This strategic policy is not new, though we refer to it today by the name of ‘neoliberalism’. As Diaz notes in his documentary film *The End of Poverty?*: “Neoliberalism managed to bankrupt many economies of the [global] south which allowed international capital to take over. This was achieved by imposing a new form of structural violence that was used for decades to maintain these countries in a state of underdevelopment. Such violence was implemented by the dictators of the south and their repressive apparatus which finally

brought social unrest that was unkind to the free market economies. The special agents and economic hitmen were born and became the new, less visible means, to maintain such control over the globe's resources" (2009).

But it is not considered good etiquette to discuss such nasty policies of inflicting structural violence on other peoples within the confines of America's major media outlets; as a consequence, self-censorship plays a large role in silencing the mainstream U.S. media. As Herman and Chomsky explained in their work *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988), the corporate-owned mass communications media are in the business to make money. Hence, it is the profit motive which dictates all successful forms of media in the U.S.—print, radio, television, etc.—to opt for stability, which distorts their editorial bias. As a consequence, the public interest is often subordinated to the interest of the profit motive. Likewise, reporters and the companies they work for will often actively avoid contending with governmental and corporate sources so as to maintain access to news developments and a steady stream of advertisers. Similarly, academics will oftentimes tow or parrot the government line in order to attain jobs, receive funding, promotions, and media relevance.

In the case of Bahrain, mainstream American media sources are well aware of U.S. government support of the embattled regime, as the Al-Khalifas allow the U.S. to park its ships in its harbors, maintain a large naval base in the Juffair section of the country, and utilize its Shaihk Isa Airbase in Sitra. This awareness by reporters and major media conglomerates of Bahrain as a strategic asset of the U.S. acts to restrict open discussion of Bahrain's undemocratic and repressive government within American society. Moreover, when self-censorship is not sufficient, there are a host of public relations firms hired by the Bahraini royal regime which propagate a sanitized history of the Kingdom while countering any negative voices concerning Bahrain. For example, Bahrain currently has on retainer the Washington, DC-based public relations firm of Qorvis Communications at the tune of \$40,000 per month whose first statement to the press was an angry denunciation of Doctors Without Borders for assisting in the treatment of injured protesters in Bahrain (Ditz, August 9, 2011). Other major PR firms on regime retainer include the Washington, DC-based Potomac Square Group, the Washington, DC-based firm of Sorini, Samet & Associates, the DC-based firm of Joe Trippi & Associates, the DC-based firm of Sanitas International, the London, UK-based firm of Bell Pottinger, the London-based firm of Gardant Communications, the Connecticut-based BCB Group, the UK-based intelligence firm Olton, and the Washington, DC-based firm run by former *USA Today* reporter Tom Squitieri known as TS Navigations LLC (Chan'ad Bahraini, October 2, 2011).

With the mainstream media structurally motivated to echo and support U.S. government and corporate policies as they facilitate America's addiction to oil, one should note that its reticence to report negatively on the Gulf monarchs has a long history. In fact, if we trace the modern history of U.S. involvement in the Middle East in particular, we find that this fatal decision to embrace the Gulf monarchs is the result of a deal forged between FDR and Ibn Saud back in 1945.

The Fateful 1945 Deal Struck by FDR & Ibn Saud

In the closing days of World War II, U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt met Saudi King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud on board the USS Quincy in the Great Bitter Lake in Egypt, north of the Suez Canal and the Red Sea, on February 14, 1945. For Ibn Saud, the founder of Saudi Arabia, the meeting was an opportunity to secure military and technical support in order to

consolidate his rule over the Arabian Peninsula. For the tiring Roosevelt, who would soon die two months later and who had guided the nation through the tough battles and harsh lessons of WWII, it was a chance to strike a long-term deal for secure oil resources with an inferior and fledgling state. As Saudi Ambassador to the U.S., Prince Turki Al-Faisal, remarked of the famous meeting in a lecture in 2007: “Oil had been discovered two decades before in our neighboring countries of Bahrain and Kuwait [10]. Soon after, Saudi Arabia was inundated with various British and French interests, seeking concessions in the Kingdom. Ibn Saud, however, chose to deal with the Americans. He knew the United States did not have a history of colonial exploitation [11]. Also, Ibn Saud was familiar with the United States’ constitution, with its guarantees of individual liberties. This appealed to his love of freedom. So he concluded an agreement of exploration for oil with Standard Oil of California, in 1933. He also wanted to get Roosevelt involved in de-colonizing the Arab States, including Palestine, that were still under European colonial rule” (January 26, 2007).

The deal established what was referred to as a “special relationship” between Saudi Arabia and America. ‘Special’ indeed, as the soon-to-be co-victor of the second world war was establishing a position of predominance in the Middle East with access to cheap oil in perpetuity in exchange for a guarantee to maintain the rule of a single family while locking its populations into a straightjacket of undemocratic and dictatorial rule. This equation of maintaining a single family in power in exchange for cheap access to oil would become the model for a subsequent post-WWII U.S. foreign policy in dealing with countries which were naturally blessed with this crucial resource. Former bureau chief for *The Washington Post* and current scholar at the Washington, DC-based Middle East Institute, Thomas W. Lippman, writes that Ibn Saud received from FDR a promise that the U.S. president would “do nothing to assist the Jews against the Arabs and would make no move hostile to the Arab people” (2005, p. 29).

Subsequent U.S. actions have clearly aided and abetted Israeli expansion and aggression in the region, though not normally to the detriment of Arab rulers, who from Ibn Saud’s perspective constituted “the Arab people.” The masses, from Ibn Saud’s point of view, as well as that of his fellow autocratic rulers in the region, are not considered autonomous agents with free will and self-determination but rather a dangerous rabble to be ruled over with an iron fist and dictated to. FDR and subsequent U.S. administrations have concluded that when it comes to dealing with oil-rich countries, it is not only easier to placate one ruling family, as opposed to a democratic mass, but, as well, it is politically viable—at least for a certain period of time—as negative blowback [12] from dictatorial rule will primarily fall upon the indigenous ruler and not his external military backers. As John Perkins, author of *Confessions of an Economic Hitman (2004)*, describes the process: “If we don’t like what a democratically-elected leader of another country is doing, for example opposing the exploitation of oil in his country, someone who looks like me will walk into that president’s office—I had the job at one time—walks into the office and says: “And now I just want to remind you that I can make you and your family very, very rich if you play my game, our game.

Or I can see to it that you’re thrown out of office or assassinated if you decide to fulfill your campaign promises. And usually it’s still a little more subtly than that, because there may be a tape recorder listening. But they get the message, because every one of those presidents knows what happened to Arbenz of Guatemala and Allende of Chile and Roldós of Ecuador and Lumumba of The Congo and Torrijos and on and on. The list is very long of presidents that we have had thrown out or assassinated. There’s no question about that.

And they all know this. So we perpetuate the system that way. Here you are: From this pocket, you offer a few hundred million dollars of corruption. Or from this pocket, you offer subversives, jackals, to go in and overthrow the government or assassinate the president. And this has happened time and time and time again. Usually, the economic hitmen are successful, so we don't need to send in the jackals. But on those occasions when we're not successful—as for me, I failed with Omar Torrijos in Panama and Jaime Roldós in Ecuador—and, so, the jackals were sent in and assassinated these men” (Diaz, 2009).

Though each of these post-WWII interventions, coup d'états, and assassinations were motivated by various determinants, it has been the centrality of oil that has consistently informed U.S. foreign policy since 1945. This is because WWII highlighted to all sides the centrality of oil to modern economic and military supremacy. Dr. Keith Miller, a speaker with the Organization of American Historians Distinguished Lectureship Series since 1999, provides the following vignette about an incident involving the famous American Army General George S. Patton as he was directing a frontal tank assault across Europe in WWII: “Let me begin with a short story. The great tank commander—George S. Patton—found out the hard way how important oil was (in the form of gasoline) to the war effort. His tanks were moving so fast as they approached the Siegfried Line of Germany, they all ran out of gasoline. To get more fuel to the fiery general, as quickly as possible, it had to be airlifted from Normandy.”

Miller continues: “But, many more stories of a similar kind could be told. The truth is—oil was the indispensable product, in all its forms, to the Allied campaigns around the world. Without it World War Two could never have been won. For oil, once processed or refined in various ways, became the source or indispensable material for laying runways, making toluene (the chief component of TNT) for bombs, the manufacturing of synthetic rubber for tires, and the distilling into gasoline (particularly at 100-octane levels) for use in trucks, tanks, jeeps, and airplanes. And, that is not to mention the need for oil as a lubricant for guns and machinery” (2002).

Ready access to oil on an inexpensive and dependable basis would become the lens through which nearly all major U.S. subsequent foreign policy actions would be assessed. And neither Christian morality nor American democratic values would hinder this quest. Hence, the Faustian bargain between FDR and Ibn Saud in 1945 was truly a pact with the devil from which the U.S. may never be able to extricate itself from.

The Legacy of Iranian Independence

A third factor in restricting the voice of the mainstream American media in its reporting on the Bahraini uprising is the unforgettable legacy of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the country's success in achieving its independence which, to many in U.S. government foreign policy circles, was a catastrophe of major proportions, with primary blame attributed to former President Jimmy Carter for allowing this to happen (as if he could have prevented it).

U.S. and British efforts to overthrow democratically-elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 in order to secure access to Iranian oil resources was the primary determinant and motivational source of the successful 1979 revolution which ousted the much-hated Shah and his secret police known as the SAVAK. The success of the 1979

Iranian Revolution sent shockwaves across the western world, as it demonstrated that imperious policies cannot last forever; eventually, suppressed populations will exclaim in unison “Enough!” and rise up, overthrow their puppet rulers, and impose new guides for their future. Chastened by the 1953 overthrow of their government and enduring over 25 years of brutal rule by the U.S.-imposed Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Iranian revolutionaries retook control over the sovereignty of their country, including its much-desired oil resources. The fury and impact of the Iranian Revolution and corresponding relatively high oil prices made the average American aware for the first time of the country’s dependence on foreign sources of oil. As well, the frequent pictures broadcasts over American television of a burning U.S. flag and Iranian condemnations of “the Great Satan” incited hatred and revenge in the everyday American citizen who had little to no idea what its government had done to the Iranian people to provoke such animosity. In lockstep, the mainstream U.S. media lined up in virtual total support for whatever bellicose policies were deemed necessary to counter this cornerstone of what would soon-to-be-called the “axis of evil”. While this legacy of the success of the Iranian Revolution caused some to begin to rethink American policy, it likewise hardened the views of many others in the political and corporate establishment. Nonetheless, the naked facts of U.S. interventionary policies in Iran began to come to light, and they were not pretty.

As the late distinguished professor emeritus of the University of California, San Diego, Chalmers Johnson, stated, “It is fact the CIA was the private army of the president, being used for highly dubious, virtually invariably disastrous interventions in other peoples’ countries, starting with the overthrow of the Iranian government in 1953 for the sake of the British Petroleum Company. We declared that the elected Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammad Mossadegh, was a communist. The Pope would have been a better candidate. That is to say that he was simply trying to regain some control over Iranian oil assets, and the British wanted him out and talked Eisenhower into doing the dirty work” (Diaz, 2009). [13]

As heir to the so-called “Peacock Throne”, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi had inherited royal authority from his father in 1941. But the authority of the nation was heard when the Iranian parliament (the Majlis) elected Mohammad Mossadegh as Prime Minister in 1951, and Mossadegh proceeded to nationalize the British-controlled Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC). The subsequent U.S. and British coup d’état against Mossadegh put the Shah back in power until his downfall in 1979. While Shah Pahlavi attempted some domestic reforms, particularly his 1963 so-called ‘White Revolution,’ his dictatorial, imperious, and sometimes erratic manner alienated much of the nation. The Shah’s arrogance or hubris coupled with the severity of his security apparatus were the major impetuses behind the subsequent successful revolution.

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Notes

[10] Though Gulf Oil was the first American company to gain an oil concession in the Middle East, their concession lapsed in 1928 before they could act on it. Their concession was taken over by the Standard Oil Company of California (SOCAL) in 1931, and, fortuitously, their subsidiary, the Bahrain Oil Company, successfully struck oil in Bahrain on May 31, 1932. British oil firms, Burmah Oil and Anglo-Persian Oil, were the first oil companies in the Middle East following the discovery of oil in western Persia in 1908.

[11] By 1945, the U.S. had already amassed a very long history of colonial exploitation in many of the countries of Latin America. In fact, even “before the Open Door Policy was proclaimed regarding China in 1899, the U.S. had intervened over 20 times in Latin American countries as far north as Mexico in 1847 and as far south as Chile in 1891” (Cavell, 2001).

[12] Chalmers explains the etymology of the word ‘blowback’ as follows: “But as the agency [i.e. the CIA] developed over time, and as it was made clear to the president, every president since Truman, made clear to them shortly after they were inaugurated, you have at your disposal a private army. It is totally secret. There is no form of oversight. There was no form of congressional oversight until the late 1970s, and it proved to be incompetent in the face of Iran-Contra and things like that. He can do anything you want to with it. You could order assassinations. You could order governments overthrown. You could order economies subverted that seemed to get in our way. ...

No president since Truman, once told that he has this power, has ever failed to use it. That became the route of rapid advancement within the CIA, dirty tricks, clandestine activities, the carrying out of the president’s orders to overthrow somebody, starting—the first one was the overthrow of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran in 1953. It’s from that, the After Action Report, which has only recently been declassified, that the word ‘blowback’ that I used in the first of my three books on American foreign policy, that’s where the word ‘blowback’ comes from. It means retaliation for clandestine activities carried out abroad.

But these clandestine activities also have one other caveat on them: they are kept totally secret from the American public, so that when the retaliation does come, they’re unable ever to put it in context, to see it in cause-and-effect terms. They [i.e. the American public] usually lash out against the alleged perpetrators, usually simply inaugurating another cycle of blowback (Chalmer Johnson in interview with Goodman, February 27, 2007).

[13] Perkins echoes Johnson by recollecting: “We did the same thing in Iraq under Qasim who was a very popular president of Iraq and decided that he wanted to get more of the profits from Iraqi oil to go to the Iraqi people not to the foreign companies. So we decided that he had to go. He had to be assassinated. We sent in an assassination team in the early 60s. It was headed by a young man at the time who failed and got wounded in the process and had to flee the country. That was Saddam Hussein. He was our hired assassin. He failed, so the CIA went in directly and had Qasim publicly executed on Iraqi television and put Saddam’s family in power” (Diaz, 2009).

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My former colleague and supervisor at the American Studies Center at the University of Bahrain, Dr. John Hillis, recently forwarded me your excellent article: “Tour d’horizon: An Iranian Optic on the Middle East and its Prospects” which appeared in *Veterans Today: Military and Foreign Affairs Journal*

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