

Sentiment Grows In Oil-Hungry U.S. For Extended Middle East Presence

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Global Research, October 30, 2007
30 October 2007

Theme: [Oil and Energy](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Sentiment is growing in both political parties for extending the U.S. military presence in Iraq in order “to ensure the safe flow of petroleum,” according to the Nov. 12th issue of *The Nation* magazine.

Not only is President Bush protracting U.S. engagement in Iraq but the two leading Democratic contenders for his job, Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, don’t appear eager to quit Iraq, either.

Clinton told *The New York Times* Iraq is “right in the heart of the oil region” and thus “it is directly in opposition to our interests” for it to become a pawn of Iran or failed state. Obama has also spoken of the need to maintain a robust US military presence in Iraq and the surrounding area, writes Michael Klare, the magazine’s defense correspondent and professor of peace and world security studies at Hampshire College.

Senior officials in both parties, he notes, “are calling for a reinvigorated U.S. military role in the protection of foreign energy deliveries.”

Klare writes no dramatic change in U.S. policy in the Gulf region should be expected from the next administration, whether Republican or Democratic. “If anything,” he says, “we should expect an increase in the use of military force to protect the overseas flow of oil, as the threat level rises along with the need for new investment to avert even further reductions in global supplies.”

The likelihood of a continuing U.S. presence in the Middle East is framed against a backdrop of growing demand for oil. The global output of “liquids,” the U.S. Energy Department says, using its new term for oil, is expected to rise from 84 million barrels of oil equivalent(mboe) per day in 2005 to about 117.6 mboe in 2030. And that’s virtually the same as anticipated demand, Klare reports.

The International Energy Agency has predicted world economic activity will grow on average by 4.5 percent per year by 2012 and world oil demand will grow by 2.2 percent annually, pushing consumption up from 86- to 96-million barrels per day.

Almost all of the increase, Klare writes, will have to come from Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Angola, Libya, Nigeria, Sudan, Kazakhstan and Venezuela, “countries that do not inspire the sort of investor confidence that will be needed to pour hundreds of billions of dollars into new drilling rigs, pipelines and other essential infrastructure.”

Not surprisingly, oil’s price has jumped spectacularly, crossing the \$80 per barrel “psychological barrier” on the New York Mercantile Exchange in September and then upwards to as high as \$90. Many reasons have been cited for this but “the underlying reality is that most oil-producing countries are pumping at maximum capacity and finding it increasingly difficult to boost production in the face of rising international demand,” Klare writes. He quotes Peter Hitchens of the New York brokerage Teather & Greenwood as saying, “It’s becoming more and more difficult to bring (oil) projects in on time and on

budget.”

The result is liable to be the peaking of oil production, triggering an intensified scramble for conventional petroleum resources “with troops being rushed from one oil-producing hot spot to another,” Klare predicts.

This gloomy forecast is causing the world’s oil majors, notably Chevron, to turn their attention to Canada’s Alberta province, with its bountiful tar sands, a gooey substance that can be converted into synthetic petroleum. The rub here, though, Klare says, is this can be done “only with enormous effort and expense.”

What’s more, extracting Alberta’s tar sands is environmentally destructive, as it takes vast quantities of energy to recover the bitumen and convert it into a usable liquid. This process releases three times as much greenhouse gas as in conventional oil production, leaving in its wake toxic water supplies and empty moonscapes.

Klare concludes, “The safest and most morally defensible course is to repudiate any ‘consensus’ calling for the use of force to protect overseas petroleum supplies and to strive to conserve what remains of the world’s oil by using less of it.”

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