



Memorandum from the Oxford Research Group

MOTIVES FOR WAR

1. Two anomalies exist in relation to the argument that the primary motive for the war with Iraq was the regime's holdings of weapons of mass destruction and that these presented an immediate threat to US and UK interests, with weapons available for launch within 45 minutes.

2. The lesser of the anomalies is that the Iraqi regime indicated that it would give access to disputed sites to the Central Intelligence Agency some months prior to the war (December 2002). This offer was ignored by the Bush administration, although even small-scale on-the-ground assessments would have indicated the scale and nature of the threat.

3. The much more significant anomaly stems from the recent statement from Mr Hans Blix, Head of UNMOVIC, that, prior to the war, his organisation was receiving high quality intelligence data from western sources, principally from the United States, yet this data did not result in any significant discoveries concerning the Iraqi WMD programme.

4. Immediately prior to the war, UNMOVIC had assembled a very large team of inspectors and had its own helicopters operational. It was working at a tempo that was far greater than that of its predecessor, UNSCOM, in the mid-1990s, and had the ability to send teams to several different sites in any one day.

5. It was therefore possible for US agencies and others to check their WMD presumptions with these very active UN inspection teams on the ground. In spite of this, there were no indications that a threatening WMD programme existed. It follows that statements indicating the existence of such a programme could not be substantiated, and that this motive for immediate recourse to war was not therefore tenable.

6. It could be argued that to be certain of such a circumstance, a substantial programme of further inspections would be required. UNMOVIC was in a position to do this, and could have been provided with the additional intelligence data, but was not given an opportunity

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to do so.

7. Since the war, a further motive has been rationalised—the necessity of destroying an abhorrent regime, whatever the threat from WMD. While there has been a huge welcome for the termination of the regime, there are two problems with this in the context of motives for, and the legality of, the war.

8. One is that there was no UN authorisation for such action. The other is that the regime had enjoyed substantial support from the United States and other western countries at times of particular human rights abuses. In April 1988, for example, one month after the regime had killed 5,000 civilians in a chemical attack on the Kurdish town of Hallabjah, the United States was actually fighting alongside the regime in a series of naval actions that destroyed significant components of the operational Iranian Navy in the Persian Gulf.

9. Three years later there was no intervention against the regime at a time when there was severe repression of Shi'ites in the South and Kurds in the North, in the immediate aftermath of the 1991 war, even though there were substantial US forces readily available in the region.

10. A development of the "regime termination" motive is that it allows the United States and its partners the opportunity to facilitate the emergence of a full independent democracy in Iraq. This is also a dubious motive—it would not be in US security interests to have Iraq acting in a manner similar to that of the parliamentary democracy in Turkey, and full independence does not readily equate with the establishment of permanent US military bases in Iraq that appears currently to be in progress.

11. It is therefore difficult to argue for WMD destruction or regime termination as tenable reasons for the 2003 war, and it is appropriate to examine other factors. This note looks at one other factor, the strategic significance of Iraq's oil reserves.

12. There are two time-scales involved here—one of perhaps one-two years and the other of a one-three decades. Concerning the former, prior to the war, there was an argument that US control of Iraqi oil fields would diminish the immediate importance of a potentially unstable Saudi Arabia and would also present a remarkable investment opportunity for US oil majors. A counter-argument was that any war raised the risk of a disruption to the oil markets, this being presumed to be bad news for the oil majors.

13. This is rarely the case in practice. During previous periods of rapidly rising oil prices, such as 1974 and 1979, many of the oil majors were able to return record profits. This was mostly due to their ability to put retail prices up almost immediately after they rose at the point of production, even though there could be a 100-day supply chain. For

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example, oil at source might rise 20% in price. This price rise is then passed on to the consumer within 15 days, leaving 85 days worth of oil in the supply chain which has been bought at the old price but sold at the new.

14. In most circumstances, primary energy companies tend to benefit from "bull" markets, so if the war had resulted in a sudden oil price surge, one could have expected very good oil company returns within a year.

15. An alternative view relates to short-term political rather than economic gains. The argument here is that the US occupation of Iraq would be followed by Iraqi withdrawal from OPEC, substantially increased oil production and falling gasoline prices in the immediate run-up to the 2003 US Presidential Election. This view gets some support from the recent statement from the US appointee who is overseeing the Iraqi oil industry, Phillip Carroll, that withdrawal from OPEC might be appropriate (May 2003).

16. Even so, the idea of short-term commercial or political gain seems somewhat far-fetched as any kind of motive for a war of this intensity and uncertainty, and there is a much sounder argument that the Iraq crisis and war did not relate primarily to possible short-term gains for oil companies or the US Presidency. Any possible oil motive may actually have been much more concerned with long-term trends.

17. To get an idea of the importance of Iraqi oil in the coming decades, one can look at it in the following way. First, take the total known oil reserves for the Caspian Basin outside of Iran, then add the oil reserves of Siberia. Add to these the remaining North Sea oil reserves and then include the West Shetland fields. Finally, put in the entire oil reserves of the United States, including the Alaska fields that still have to be developed.

18. If we put all of these together, we get fairly close to 10% of all the oil reserves in the world. Iraq alone has more than this, and adding the other Gulf States we get close to 70% of world reserves. During the 1990s, Iraq increased its oil reserves by a figure close to half of total current US reserves.

19. This does give us some sense of perspective but only in the form of a snapshot. What is much more significant is the nature of the long-term trends in reserves, production and consumption. When we include this, we get a clear indication of the steadily increasing significance of Persian Gulf oil relative to every other part of the world. Thirty years ago, the United States was virtually self-sufficient in oil supplies but it now imports over 60% of its needs, with oil imports from the Middle East increasing steadily.

20. The recognition of this is nothing new—it was one of the deciding

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factors behind the development of the original US Joint Rapid Deployment Task Force nearly 25 years ago and its later growth into US Central Command. Moreover, it was a situation that was clearly recognised by the Republicans who came to power with Ronald Reagan, 20 years before George W Bush, and was amply demonstrated by one of the first pronouncements of the Reagan era.

21. Each year the committee of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff issues a Military Posture Statement (MPS) for the forthcoming financial year. In 1991, immediately after Ronald Reagan had been elected, the 1992 MPS was eagerly awaited as a clear statement of the "re-arming of America" in the face of the perceived Soviet threat that had helped President Reagan into office.

22. The MPS certainly had much to say about East-West relations but its opening chapter was, to the surprise of many, much more concerned with the increasing vulnerability of the United States to resource conflict. Map after map portrayed a world in which the US was increasingly dependent on imported resources—93% for bauxite, 95% for cobalt, 97% for manganese and 98% for columbium and tantalum. Most of these meant little to the non-expert but they underpinned the workings of a major industrial economy, and the Reagan administration was concerned with the potential for Soviet interference in Africa, Asia and other areas of the world providing sources of supply.

23. Much more significant, and subject to more detailed analysis, was the concern over oil supplies. Interestingly, this was over 20 years ago when US dependence on imported oil was much less than now, yet the MPS went into substantial detail about US vulnerabilities and the need to ensure Gulf security.

24. It is fair to say that much of this was in the context of the perceived Soviet threat to Persian Gulf oil supplies, but it was also in the immediate aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, and the Reagan security advisers were already becoming concerned over regional "threats" to Gulf oil, supplies.

25. Over 20 years later we see the trend towards increasing dependence on Gulf oil as a long-term phenomenon, stretching well into the future, but this was already recognised in the early 1980s. Moreover, many of the security advisers in the Reagan era of the 1980s are back in positions within the Bush administration, often in positions of greater influence.

26. What this all means is that there is a deep and pervading recognition at the heart of the administration in Washington that the most significant future vulnerability for the United States is its steadily growing dependence on Gulf oil. Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela may be useful sources of supply, albeit of a poorer quality, and the Caspian

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Basin and Siberia may help out somewhat. These, though, are essentially short-term answers to a persistent problem.

27. The Persian Gulf is where the oil is, and it can be argued that what has to be done is to make absolutely sure that the Gulf is securely controlled for many years to come. In the context of uncertainty over Saudi stability, Iraq is particularly significant as the holder of the second largest oil reserves in the world. Overall, this outlook is an unusual example of strategic thinking, not a common phenomenon in many political circles, and permeates the Bush administration to an extent that is rarely acknowledged.

28. In the three weeks of the Iraq War, and in its immediate aftermath, three things happened. The first is that the regime of Saddam Hussein was terminated, the second is that useable weapons of mass destruction were not subsequently found and the third is that the United States increased its control of oil reserves by 400%.

29. This may have no connection with UK government motives for the war with Iraq, but, in the light of problems with the other principle motives, it might be wise to consider this as the primary motivation for the Bush administration.

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June 2003

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