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*[Comments by Bent italicized and in brackets]*

### Oil and the Middle East

The identity of the Persian Gulf in recent years has become intricately entangled with energy issues. The western world's interest in the area is derived from our heavy dependence on energy and a history of consumption, a need which is driving political and economic battles and reshaping the society of the Arab states. In order to understand the depth of the changes which are taking place, it is necessary to investigate the history and culture of this critical stretch of desert whose present international role can be summed up in one word, oil.

*[This is getting to the heart of the matter right off the bat!]*

From the rise of civilizations in the Fertile Crescent through the rise of Christianity and the Golden Age of Islam, life for the residents of the Middle East has remained relatively unchanged by time, war and empire. The Arab Bedouins are traditionally nomadic, and many retain that lifestyle to this day. These desert people lacked the raw materials for generating energy, having none of the firewood and coal which fueled the fires of industrial Europe. Oil was there, but not the means to extract it, and the only way to obtain it was through natural seepage. The people did not even have enough raw materials to make simple wheeled carts, and relied heavily upon pack animals such as donkeys and camels for their transportation and labor (Lewis 169-170).

*[Some dates would be helpful to many readers.]*

Even with the rise of the Golden Age of the Islamic Empire, production of most items remained local because they lacked the technology and energy to transport all but the most valuable of commodities. Despite their strong intellectual and military traditions, the Arabs could not produce the innovations which gave resource-rich Europeans an advantage in trade and war. Their technology became slowly but surely outdated, so that even by the time of the crusades [Dates?], the Muslim armies imported many of their weapons from Christian Europe. As the Renaissance [Dates?] bloomed in Europe, the ancient Arab empire slowly sank into a long sleep. Relying increasingly on foreign imports, its population dropped, and the traditional crafts which had once been its pride became forgotten. Its people lived in poverty, consuming little energy and surviving as they always had, through a wandering and uncertain dependence on the land (Lewis 173).

The first areas to be drilled were in Russian-controlled Azerbaijan in 1842. The first oil refinery followed in 1863, and a decade later the first oil pipeline was constructed. By the time of the Russian Revolution, oil was fueling the country, and American companies were already making contracts with the Iranian and Ottoman empires which controlled the Middle East in the nineteenth century.

*[When was oil discovered in the U.S? Was there any domestic oil production in the U.S. at this time? ]*

The flow of oil gradually increased, not gaining international importance until well into the twentieth century. In fact, British and French occupation of Muslim territories was motivated almost entirely by military and strategic interests, rather than greed for the fledgling oil industry. The infrastructure that their presence left, however, did provide the connections necessary to push the Arab world onto the international stage. Slowly the sleeping desert states, largely

ignored by the West, began to stir, for the first time in many years confronted with the interest of the outside world (Lewis 352).

The money started moving. The discovery of oil necessitated the means to extract it, and before long the land was teeming with construction of roads, pipelines, ports, and housing for the workers that run the oil companies. What used to be small fishing villages became major centers of industry, converted by this century into glittering seafront metropolises. Workers were drawn to the newly created jobs, triggering a massive migration of the Bedouins from their desert homes, which sustained them for thousands of years, to the uncertainty of city life. Foreigners likewise were attracted by the money. The major oil centers of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Iraq are filled with merchants, contractors and teachers from all over the Arab world, as well as the Americans and British who run the oil rigs and companies (Putman 149-150).

As cities have prospered, springing up out of the sand over the course of the past few decades, the disparity between the developed areas and the surrounding country has become highly visible. As in most countries, cities in the Arab world are centers for development and consumerism, but they are also isolated (Wilk 115). They are surrounded by subsistence economies, poverty, and the traditionally self-sufficient Bedouin community. When the country people move to the cities, they do not leave their poverty behind them, but live in government-built concrete hovels, pitching their tents outside the door in memory of the nomadic life they left behind (Putman 150).

Petroleum and has made the Arab states exceptions to economic indicators; as their annual income does not reflect the standard of living for their people (Sheffield 40).

*[Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Kuwait are also exceptions to the general correlation between energy use per capita and fertility rates (see Fig. 2.2 of Sheffield).]*

The money has been used to give rulers everything they've dreamed of for their cities while leaving other societal problems largely unattended to. Skyscrapers, stadiums, zoos, museums, and universities have sprung up in the midst of an area which lacks the infrastructure necessary to support a developed society (Putman 149). The rich, more in touch with western culture in general, now wear different clothes, eat different food, and follow different social rules than the lower class, and because of the spreading availability of television, the masses are well aware of the ways in which their lives differ from those they see in the upper classes (Lewis 384).

In fact, it is this dichotomy of old versus new, poor versus rich, that now dominates the Middle Eastern social landscape. The result of fast flowing oil revenues has been the modernization in half a century of a society based on religious and societal principles thousands of years old.

*[Is it generally true that social and cultural change can't keep up with technological change – that it takes generations for significant cultural change whereas major technological change (e.g., from the Wright Brother's first flight to supersonic jets; from the first electric light bulb to computers) can occur in one generation?*

*Evolutionary change of basic human nature, determined by our genes, takes a great many generations. So, how can human beings possibly keep up with the rapidly changing modern world? Keep this question in mind throughout this course. The technological problems of meeting future world energy needs in environmentally acceptable ways are daunting; but the social challenges are even greater. ]*

This social transformation has replaced animals with automobiles and spread printing, newspapers, cinema, radio, and television all over the map (Lewis 352). However, because the development effectively skipped many of the steps from the Middle Ages to the post-modern era,

these innovations can be seen side by side with the antiquated technologies and customs that they have partially replaced. Many people still rely on animals for transportation; women fully cloaked and veiled march side by side with western-style business executives; and the business of the city is still brought to a halt five times daily for the call to prayer. While in some countries women have made great progress toward equality, other regions are seeing a rise of religious extremism which often adversely affects women's rights. The result is a simultaneous rise of a new generation of Arabs, ready to take on the challenges of modernity, and a rebirth of Islam which holds them to the traditions and religious values of their ancestors. The family-centered societal structure is being disrupted by the individualistic call of western culture, with young adults torn between traditional obligations and the opportunities offered by western society (384).

All of this conflict signifies a critical time in the history of the Middle East. Arabs are well aware of the dangers and benefits of oil, as well as the importance of these decades when oil money is providing them with the international influence to get a seat higher up the table. They know of the dependence of modern nations on their energy supply, a dependence that is in sharp contrast to the usual indifference of the western world toward their apparently worthless deserts. The reliance on Middle Eastern oil is perpetuated by a cycle tying West to East. The more industrial nations wish to produce and sell, the more energy must fuel their factories, so that a large portion of the profits goes into the expensive importation of oil from the Persian Gulf (Putnam 154-155).

With so much at stake for the United States and other energy consuming countries, it is no wonder that the Middle East and its conflicts are of so much interest to us. According to historian Bernard Lewis, the outside world is concerned with three things in the area: a market

for exports, a source of energy, and retaining enough semblance of international order to secure the first two (386).

*[Nice statement of the problem in a nutshell.]*

These factors provided the impetus for the Gulf War and the recent war over Iraq. They also help to explain the modern world's interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the years, for trouble in the region can jeopardize our access to the fuel which keeps our society running. A politically stable Middle East is greatly needed for the sake of the people who live there, but it is also extremely advantageous for outside nations to secure some stability as it streamlines the flow of oil and allows them a presence in the region. What form this western intervention takes may vary, but efforts to establish democratic systems, most recently in Iraq with the removal of dictator Saddam Hussein, seem to be one preferred method for assuring a steady supply of energy while attempting to push the Middle East toward more modern forms of government.

How Arab rulers deal with their power and influence will have far reaching effects on their people and their lifestyles. Algeria has already gone through years of mismanagement, the result being summed up by one local: "Algeria was once the granary of Rome, and now it has to import cereals to make bread. It is a land of flocks and gardens, and it imports meat and fruit. It is rich in oil and gas, and it has a foreign debt of twenty-five billion dollars and two million unemployed" (Lewis 385). Such problems result not only from the inability to properly manage funds, but from inexperience on the part of everyone involved in trying to adapt a pre-industrial society to modern life in the span of a few decades.

Leaders are also painfully aware of the limited supply of oil. They must balance the present needs of their people with provisions for the nightmare that every state in the Persian Gulf fears, the day the oil dries up. To deal with this inevitable crisis, many governments are

relying heavily on foreign investments in the hopes that wise moves now will provide enough steady revenue and reserves to help them ride out the transition when the oil wells slowly start to run dry. The change could be even more disruptive than the societal adjustments which have taken place so far, as oil provides for an immense portion of the area's economy. In Saudi Arabia it is a majority of their gross domestic product and nearly 100% of their exports and government revenues (Putman 153). One day it will be gone, and countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iraq will have the most trouble adjusting to new economic situations and rules because of their immense reservoirs of petroleum.

What happens before the depletion of the oil fields is largely up to the governments that rule in the Middle East. The rise of powerful Islamic conservative groups could make adaptation to modern ways difficult unless Muslims are able to find a way to integrate their religious traditions with the new influence of western society. To what extent this is possible remains to be seen, and Islamic extremist groups in many areas are vehemently opposed to western, especially American, consumer culture, which they see as going against the basic principles that support their faith. In other nations such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco, which have smaller oil reserves and have received a large amount of contact with the outside world, the old and new cultures seem to have had less trouble adapting to life together. These nations endured many years of relatively gradual change due to colonization efforts and trade, rather than a sudden surge of wealth and attention over a few years. This suggests that as the oil dwindles and becomes less a part of economics in the Middle East, countries which now struggle with their internal conflicts may have a chance at gradual adaptation under more stable conditions.

Unfortunately, it is much more likely that oil prices will steadily rise as companies try to squeeze money from a source which will become increasingly more expensive to exploit.

Increased prices will likely widen the gap between the rich and poor in the Middle East, straining an already conflict-ridden region (Sheffield 48). This will also likely strain relations with the United States and other consuming countries. There are other sources of oil, and other sources of energy that remain to be fully developed, and these avenues will become increasingly important to a world that has already grown tired of Middle Eastern politics and uncertainty (Lewis 385). Unless they are able to establish a lasting international presence during these years of prosperity, the Middle East will probably slip back into oblivion as attention is focused on other energy sources. As one Arab minister put it, "Nobody cared about us before the oil came, nobody will care about us when it is gone" (Putman 155).

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