

Toby Craig Jones

After the Pipelines:
Energy and the Flow of War in the Persian Gulf

Energy's mobility within and out of the Persian Gulf has been a structural feature of war over the last four decades in the Middle East. Since the 1970s, the region has been the epicenter of energy "crises" and struggles by various powers to control oil's availability, its extraction, and how (or whether) it moves. American political-economic and military interests have been at the center of much of this so-called crisis. The convergence of Cold War anxieties, the uneven American approach to Israel's occupation of Palestine, a surge of resource nationalism, revolution, and a commitment in Washington, DC, to militarizing access to and managing the "free flow" of oil helped produce an arc of almost constant war. Much of the region's contemporary conflict is rooted in the rise of the supertanker and the post-pipeline flow of oil. In the last half of the twentieth century, ensuring the movement of energy in networks beyond the pipeline produced often unseen connections between oil and war. It is a history that began with the massive militarization of regional oil producers, including selling more than \$25 billion in weapons to Iran and Saudi Arabia in the 1970s. Perceived failures in this period—revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979—led to permanent, ongoing interventions (Jones 2012). Although claims about American militarism in the Middle East are often attributed to terrorism, rogue states, weapons of mass destruction, and geopolitical anxieties, the mostly unseen movements of energy, and efforts to secure them, are at the heart of war in the region.

For critics (and even some supporters) of America's wars in the Middle East, it is hardly controversial to assert that there is a relationship between

energy and war. Since at least 1991, when the United States led a campaign to dislodge the Iraqi army from Kuwait, criticisms that leaders in Washington were leading a war for oil resonated across the global political spectrum. Well before then, officials and observers began expressing their concern about oil's scarcity, the uncertainty of access, and the possibility of the disruption of its movement from the Persian Gulf as some of the main reasons for maintaining a strong US military presence aimed at securing the region. In the contentious 1970s, when oil politics fueled anxieties about "energy security," American leaders made a clear strategic choice to protect oil in the Gulf. Late in his presidency, President Jimmy Carter prioritized the use of military force to protect and secure what he called "strategic resources" in the Middle East. Protecting oil proved difficult, however, because oil-producing countries nationalized their oil industries and drove out foreign companies, which had historically managed the extraction and distribution of the region's resources. Reconciling the absence of direct control over oil with the political desire to assert power over Middle East energy emerged as a central dilemma for American strategists in the late twentieth century. Why and how were energy and war connected in the region at the end of the last century? If the American struggle to secure oil has been not so much about controlling this valuable resource and its pricing then how should we understand the relationship between the United States, oil, and war in the Middle East? The answer lies in the expansion of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, the threats to energy that the war's spread seemed to represent, and the terms according to which the United States entered the conflict and sought to protect oil's "flow."

Ensuring the flow of oil and providing security for oil producers like Saudi Arabia are central to American interests in the Gulf. But the security-for-oil argument is a formulation that obscures more than it reveals. Neatly dividing energy and security into separate though related concerns misses the more important ways in which the two have become physically and technologically built into one another. The distinction between energy and war and the systems, networks, means, and infrastructures in and through which they move has been erased.

Since the mid-1980s when the United States entered the Iran-Iraq war as a belligerent military power, American policy makers and military leaders created a militarized system to coordinate the material means of distributing and moving both energy and the machines of war. The United States and its allies in the Gulf, a group that included the governments of Kuwait, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, as well as the governments of other countries,

understood that protecting (not controlling) the flow of oil required the creation of a physical network—a system on the waters of the Persian Gulf, that enabled their own movement, assured their primacy, and simultaneously limited the mobility of Iran. Naval and political leaders directly connected the movement of oil—its flow—to the movement of the American military. The arrangement and passage of US ships, including the rules and terms by which they acted, violently created new patterns of spatial politics, war, and security on the waters of the Gulf in the 1980s. The terms by which they did so were made in relation to the movements of oil supertankers and energy’s infrastructure. The alliance of the United States and Arab oil producers helped build an order in which existing objects in motion, most importantly the giant supertankers that transported Arab oil, were linked to new ones, including US military warships as well as new kinds of militarized technologies. The result was a system in which energy was not just protected. Rather, it was a system in which energy, the “military,” and war became constituent components.

Understanding the connection between energy and war, then, does not mean looking for evidence that American leaders sought to control oil in the ground or to assert a kind of nineteenth-century imperial position along littoral pathways; it means seeing the importance of militarized networks on water. Moving oil was critical, of course. But equally important was the creation and protection of the militarized network of transportation and distribution itself. This mobile network was a waterborne infrastructure that was both elastic and productively endangered.¹ The system itself was the “thing” in constant motion. Incapable of and uninterested in controlling the oil in the ground, American militarism in the Gulf aimed to control the ways that oil was transported—sea lanes, transit routes, waterways, and the maneuvering of the supertankers that moved energy. Of course, thereafter in the late 1980s and ever since, the United States and its partners in the region, especially Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, expanded the building of military bases and other facilities on land, creating an elaborate militarized network around the Gulf and Arabia. The origins of the regional militarized complex, however, were on the sea.

In particular, it was the spread of the Iran-Iraq war into and above the Gulf, as well as subsequent attacks on oil facilities and pipelines, that would eventually draw the United States in and lead to the permanent militarization of Gulf energy. Beginning in 1983, Iraq, followed by Iran, intensified its efforts in the Gulf, spreading the war from land to water. The war, which started with Iraq’s invasion of Iran in 1980, stalled after several years, with

both sides struggling to assert primacy and control the course of violence. The United States, which had become increasingly hostile to Iran following the fall of the Shah in 1979 and the holding of American hostages in Tehran and Lebanon, backed Iraq during the war.

By late 1983, the Iranian and Iraqi militaries had made few gains on the ground. While both sides had periodically targeted one another's shipping in the early stages of the war, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, who figured that spreading the war geographically would perhaps facilitate a breakthrough, intensified what would become known as the "Tanker War," an aptly named new phase in the war that would last until 1988. Iran had anticipated that Iraq might target its extensive Gulf shoreline early on. In 1980, the country's military command declared "all waterways near the Iranian shores" to be "war-zones" (Defense Mapping Agency and Hydrographic Centre, quoted in De Guttry and Ronzitti, 1993: 133). Midway through the war, both sides committed in earnest to attacking one another's shipping as well as merchant vessels from other countries carrying materials to ports and, eventually, energy infrastructure—oil platforms, refineries, and supertankers—belonging to one another and their opponents.

Iraq's strategic aim in expanding the war in the Gulf was to damage the Iranian economy by eroding Tehran's ability to generate the revenue necessary to sustain its war machine. Iran followed through in striking tankers and shipping from countries that were supporting the Iraqi war effort. Between 1984 and 1987, the two countries combined for 408 attacks on shipping. Iraqi forces carried out 240 (nearly 60 percent) of these. Iran responded between 1986 and 1988 not only by targeting Iraqi ports and facilities but also by striking at the shipping of Iraq's allies, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, mining the Gulf, and harassing international merchant shipping. The targeting of infrastructure, including oil supertankers, set the stage for the further entanglements between war and energy. American officials almost universally understated Iraqi aggression. This was partly, as ranking members of the House Committee on Armed Services remarked, because "the Iraqis were virtually allies" (Aspin, Dickinson, and Nichols, quoted in De Guttry and Ronzitti, 1993: 152). In understating Iraq's provocations, Iran was cast as singularly belligerent. While its attacks did accelerate, the terms of policy talk tipped the scales against Iran in a manner that made further escalation likely.

The Tanker War produced several critical effects, the most important of which was the legacy of turning the flow and movement of the Gulf's oil into a militarized enterprise. While energy facilities and the networks of its distri-

bution had been targeted at various times earlier in the war, oil and the systems of its production and transportation were made systematically more central to the patterns of violence that unfolded from 1984 going forward. For both Iran and Iraq, the political objective of surveilling and policing one another's movements was to make movement—enabling or interrupting it—the new strategic imperative. Indeed, it was the damage potentially done by interrupting various kinds of flow that was prioritized, although this proved difficult to achieve in practice. Timothy Young (1992: 7), a former US Navy commander, captured this strategic imperative by arguing that “interrupting logistics was . . . the primary purpose behind the exclusion zones declared by both sides.” Because most ships that traveled into the Gulf were never targeted at all, it meant that Iraqi and Iranian targeting was unpredictable, constrained by the availability of resources and opportunity. While the system of movement and transit continued to function, mariners piloting their ships through the Gulf did so with considerably more anxiety and fear, weighed down with constant worry that attacks from above or below were imminent.

Since neither country possessed particularly valuable military assets in the northern Gulf, the targeting was almost always commercial and, most importantly, almost always involved oil. Once oil facilities and transport were linked to military maneuvering and attack, the American concern over energy security took on additional layers, coming increasingly to include oil's connection to infrastructure, to the objects through which it was transported (ships in this case), and to the space in and on which it flowed, as well as to the “natural” environment of the network. Indeed, it was this expansive view of energy that would make it central to the emerging militarized order. In intensifying their assault on each another's and neighboring countries' oil and natural gas infrastructure and shipping, Iran and Iraq facilitated the most rapid militarization of the Gulf since the departure of the British. The terms of this escalation were unprecedented in the scale of its violence. The two countries ushered in what would become an era of almost permanent war in the Gulf.

After having three of their tankers attacked in the preceding ten months, Kuwaiti officials appealed to both the Soviet Union and the United States to protect their country's vessels from further Iranian aggression in November 1986. Although the Soviet Union had very little influence in the region, Moscow immediately agreed to charter three of its tankers to the Kuwaiti national oil company beginning in early 1987. The United States, alarmed by the specter of potential Soviet gains in the region, went further.

The United States intensified its military presence in the mid-1980s in response to escalating tensions. Secretary of State George Shultz captured

US concerns about the expansion of the war spatially, although he downplayed Iraq's role when he wrote to Congress in 1987 that it was "Iranian threat to the free flow of oil and to the basic freedom of navigation which is unacceptable. The frequent and accelerating Iranian attacks on shipping have spread the war geographically to the lower Gulf and have heightened the risk to all littoral states" (Shultz 1987: 308).

In February 1987, American officials informed their Kuwaiti counterparts that the United States would provide direct political and military protection for endangered Kuwaiti supertankers. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy rationalized that policy makers viewed "the reflagging of Kuwait tankers in the United States as an unusual measure to meet an extraordinary situation" and that "our response to Kuwait demonstrates our resolve to protect our interests and those of our friends. . . . Our goal is to deter, not provoke" (De Guttry and Ronzitti, 1993: 148–49). By way of protection, the United States agreed to reflag Kuwait's eleven nationally owned supertankers, re-registering them as American owned, sailing them under the American flag, and providing them the kinds of military protection and privileges that all American-owned merchants would enjoy. Shultz (1987: 308) remarked in May of that year that Washington was "prepared to defend U.S. vessels and U.S. interests when necessary. We intend . . . to provide protection for ships flying the U.S. flag in the Gulf, including certain Kuwaiti tankers which have applied for U.S. registry." The US Navy would go on to do just this. Over the next two years, the United States moved from a policy of deterrence and protection to one of direct intervention. Between the summers of 1987 and 1988, the United States became an active belligerent in the Iran-Iraq war.

Officials justified the expansion of American action as a result of Iranian provocation. The initial American effort to protect oil's flow was through the creation of a military convoy system designed to shepherd reflagged Kuwaiti tankers through the Gulf. Not surprisingly, Iran viewed the American presence as an indication of its backing of Iraq and responded by escalating its own military efforts, including mining the passageways used by convoys. During the very first convoy, American ships failed to prevent a Kuwaiti supertanker from hitting a mine. What followed was the escalation of violence, culminating in the expansion of the American presence from a handful of ships and vessels in the Gulf in 1986 to more than one hundred. It also resulted in the arrival of the US Air Force, Navy Seals, and a broad US military effort to project its power, to protect friendly oil shipping, and, arguably most importantly, to not just deter but also defeat Iran in the

Gulf. Rapidly shifting strategic priorities resulted in regular violent clashes between US and Iranian forces and intense concerns that Iran was poised to inflict even more harm in the Gulf and, in particular, that it could shut off the flow of oil and free navigation. Crucially, the possibility that Iran would close the Strait of Hormuz to shipping, which was unlikely, remains a fear that has consistently figured as a kind of “doomsday” scenario.

With the purchase of anti-ship silkworm missiles from China in late 1986, Tehran seemed to possess the ability to realize America’s worst fears. Murphy warned that the Chinese anti-ship missiles presented “a potentially serious threat to U.S. and other shipping” (Murphy quoted in United States Congress House Committee on Foreign Affairs and Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East 1987: 19). With an 85-kilometer range and 100-pound warhead, “these missiles,” he argued, “can span the Strait at its narrowest point and represent for the first time a realistic Iranian capability to sink large oil tankers. Whatever Iran’s motivation for procuring such threatening missiles, their presence gives Iran the ability both to intimidate the Gulf states and Gulf shippers and to cause a real or *de facto* closure of the Strait” (19).

As American military vessels and personnel were deployed in growing numbers, and as they both encountered challenges and contributed to the war, policy makers and strategists came to associate threats to energy with threats against the navy itself. In their view, the machines and military assets that had originally been designed and dispatched to do the protecting were also increasingly vulnerable. Perhaps the most significant consequence of this alignment was that the very notion of providing security for oil was wiped away in practice, as the material and political boundaries between “energy” and “military” were blurred.

By bolstering a military presence and linking up with regional oil producers through the coordination of (what had been) the mundane task of piloting ships, policy makers hoped to both create material and infrastructural barriers—technological and physical practices in space—that would, along with deterring Iran, deny the Soviet Union a chance to seek its own foothold in the Gulf. Edward W. Gnehm, a top official at the Pentagon, outlined these hopes clearly in the summer of 1987. In June of that year, he claimed that in agreeing to reflag Kuwaiti vessels as American ships and in committing additional US naval resources to protect them, “what we have now done is to keep the Soviets from getting into the Gulf in a major way. . . . You know, if you get the right to escort and to charter and you have a lot of ships in there, the next thing you have to have is access, you’ve got to have a

port, you've got to have a dock" (Gnehm quoted in United States Congress House Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries 1987: 74). Gnehm presciently expressed a vision for precisely the kind of infrastructural development and base building that would follow the war: the long-term consolidation of American power through the creation of an increasingly militarized and permanent physical network in the Gulf.

America's actions in bolstering its military presence had the effect of creating multiple political and material layers of entanglement in the region, rendering energy's flow dependent on the practice of security, not just the promise of it. This understanding of dependency, in which the movement of oil in the region was bound to the United States' projection of its military power, marked (and continues to mark) a fundamental reconfiguration—indeed, an inversion—of how observers usually characterize American dependence on Arab oil.

The increased American military presence in the region also produced terrible results. In July 1988, an American missile cruiser, in the midst of a surface skirmish with small inflatable Iranian boats, shot down Iran Air Flight 655, killing all of the two hundred and ninety passengers and crew on board (Fisher 2013). The navy dismissed the attack as a tragic accident that was the result of the fog of war, the kind of confusion that hangs over difficult battlefield environments. However, the United States was not supposed to be at war at all. The shooting down of Flight 655 effectively ended the Iran-Iraq war, compelling Iran to sue for peace. It marked the beginning of what would be a permanent American presence in the region.

The United States' involvement in the Iran-Iraq war would shape its approach to the Gulf in the future. Keeping a permanent military presence afloat on the waters of the Gulf became a key component of American military strategy in the years that followed. Securing this military presence and shoring up the ways that energy is integrated with and ostensibly "secured" by this presence remain key points of emphasis among military and political leaders in the United States.

Despite the spread of the Iran-Iraq war to the Gulf, and before American intervention in 1986, oil production and distribution from the Persian Gulf actually increased. While policy makers claimed that oil's flow was threatened by the war's spread and used that claim to justify military action, the claim itself was never true. Anxieties about energy's security and intense efforts to do something about a perceived danger obscured what was actually happening in the Gulf. Energy's availability was never threatened. Oil prices also declined during the closing stages of the war. And yet, alarmism over

access to oil, its availability, its security, and protecting its flow became and remains today a central talking point in American policy, as though Gulf energy exists in a constant state of precarity. Protecting the flow of oil is equivalent to protecting a fiction.

Note

- 1 For more on elasticity and the frontier, see Weizman (2012: 4), who writes that “against the geography of stable, static places, and the balance across linear and fixed sovereign borders, frontiers are deep, shifting, fragmented and elastic territories. Temporary lines of engagement, marked by makeshift boundaries, are not limited to the edges of political space but exist throughout its depth. Distinctions between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ cannot be clearly marked.”

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