

The Middle East Connection

"The first war of the 21st Century" was how Bush has described the events sparked off by the suicide—and murderous—attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington on 11 September. A chilling reminder that, under capitalism, things are going to be no different this century than they were in the last. But not entirely accurate, since the attack on America that Tuesday was the continuation of a conflict that has been going on for half-a-century, irrupting from time to time in open warfare: the struggle for the control of the oil resources of the Middle East.

It all started with Western acceptance of the state of Israel in 1949 as a colonial outpost, a puppet state peopled and run mainly by European immigrants to serve as their proxy gendarme in the region. Then there was the Western-engineered overthrow of the Mossadeq government in Iran in 1951 for daring to nationalise the oil industry. Then the Anglo-French-Israeli attack on Egypt in 1956 for nationalising the Suez canal, at the time the main trade route for bringing Middle East oil to western Europe. Then the Yon Kippur war of 1973 at a time the post-war boom was coming to an end and which helped accelerate this. Then the Gulf War, ten years ago, to take back the Kuwaiti oilfields which Iraq had grabbed from the West, a war which has continued ever since at a lower level of intensity with regular bombings of Iraq by US and British warplanes.

The conflict in Chechnya too had an oil dimension, since a planned pipeline to get Caspian Sea oil out westwards made control of Chechnya of strategic importance to Russia. In fact, the collapse of the Russian state capitalist empire re-opened the Caspian oilfields to Western penetration and control, bringing Afghanistan into the equation as a possible alternative route via Turkmenistan for a pipeline to get Caspian oil out without having to pass through Iran.

The West's rivals for the control of the Middle East oilfields and the trade routes to get the oil out, as well as of the strategic areas and points to protect these, have been sections of the local capitalist class in the region. The ideology they used, to begin with, to get a mass following was an anti-imperialist nationalism which had a leftwing tinge and even employed a "socialist" terminology. This was the ideology of Mossadeq in Iran, Nasser in Egypt, of the Baathist regimes in Syria and Iraq and of the PLO in the 1970s.

It is still a significant political force but, since the 1980s, has more and more been challenged by Islamic fundamentalism as the ideology of those who want local capitalist, rather than Western imperialist, control of the oil resources of the Middle East. A key factor in this change was the triumph of the "Islamic revolution" in Iran in 1979. But not to be neglected is the influence of the long-established fundamentalist regime in Saudi Arabia which, while not anti-Western, used a part of its oil rents to wean Arab militants away from leftwing nationalism. This had been encouraged by America as part of its struggle with Russia for world hegemony. It is now a notorious fact that Osama Bin Laden—a billionaire member of the extended Saudi royal family—was armed by America and sent into Afghanistan to fight against this country falling under Russian control.

That those who attacked America on 11 September should have been Islamic fundamentalists was therefore no surprise. This has become the ideology of many of

those in the predominantly Muslim countries of the Middle East who want to wrest control of the oil resources of the region from the West for the benefit of local capitalists.

The West's reaction has been revealing. A grand coalition is being organised to combat "terrorism". But not terrorism in general. The Western powers are not concerned about the Tamil Tigers or ETA or the IRA or the various South American guerrilla groups. They are out to get Islamic fundamentalist terrorism because this is the rising ideology of their rivals for control of the Middle East oilfields. This, not terrorism in general, is the threat to the supply of this key resource. Russia has no problem in joining this coalition since its oil supplies too have been challenged by the same movement, as in Chechnya.

The one accurate thing Bush, Colin Powell and the US media have said about the attacks on the WTC and the Pentagon was that it was an "act of war". It was. The latest act in the 50-year struggle for the control of Middle East oil. This of course is not how they see it, or rather, how they present it. For them it is an attack on "civilisation" and "freedom-loving people everywhere" and (Blair's favourite) "democracy". It is appalling, virtually unbelievable, that any human being would hijack an airliner full of people and deliberately fly it into a tower block where thousands more worked. It is also true that the establishment of Islamic States everywhere would undo the Enlightenment and plunge the world back a thousand years (and has done so in Afghanistan). But this is not the issue.

The Islamic fundamentalists who flew those planes would indeed completely suppress freedom of thought and speech and replace ruled by elected politicians by the rule of ignorant and obscurantist priests, but those who trained and sent them weren't attacking America because it was "democratic". They would still have attacked America even if it had been a fascist dictatorship or a Christian theocracy.

Socialists of course appreciate the existence of secular, political democratic forms, limited as we know they are, and wouldn't want to see these replaced by an Islamic State. But "democracy" as an ideology is something different. It is based on the idea that everybody living under a democratic state (as a state allowing the election of certain state officials) share a common interest. This is a lie that socialists challenge.

Under capitalism, whatever the political form, society is divided into two classes with conflicting interests: those who own and control the means of production and the rest of us who have to work for them. This is not changed if the excluded majority are allowed to vote for those who run the political side of capitalism—and who define the "common interest", inevitably since they are governing on behalf of the capitalist class, as in fact the interest of that class.

What Blair and the other call "democracy" is by no means democracy in the full sense of the term, which can only exist in the classless context of a society based on the common ownership and democratic control of the means of production. Their democracy is the inevitably limited and narrowly political democracy that is the most that can exist under capitalism. But, in any event, it is not even this stunted, political democracy that is at stake. It is oil.

So, the line-up in the next—military—episode in the continuing struggle for control of the oil resources of the Middle East is, on the one side, a section of the local capitalist class using Islam to rally mass support and, on the other, the Western capitalist powers using "democracy" as their ideology to win mass support for war.

But "Islamic State" versus "Democracy" is only the ideological smokescreen disguising the real issue at stake: control of oil resources and trade routes. It is not an issue worth the shedding of a single drop of working-class blood.

As Socialists we declare our opposition to both sides in this war and call on the working class of the world to unite to bring capitalism to a rapid end so that no more lives are sacrificed to further the economic interests of rival sections of the world capitalist class.

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