

# A critical analysis of the role of oil in hindering transition towards democracy in the Middle East

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## **Abstract**

This article interrogates the role of resource wealth in hindering democracy and democratization in the Middle East. It questions the familiar argument that oil wealth is a catalyst for democracy and development, and argues that in the context of the Middle East, oil wealth appears to hamper transition towards democratization. This is because oil revenues are used by the states to maintain the authoritarian monarchies through the allocation of large portions of state budget to defense expenditure and state security apparatuses that are ostensibly used to quell clamors for democratization and resist external pressures. The article also underlines the importance of hydrocarbon energy for the economies of Western superpowers and the way these powers cope with meeting their energy needs by all means possible. It is argued that Western countries face a moral predicament in meeting their strategic oil needs from a region seen as predominantly undemocratic and undemocratizing.

## **Keywords**

Democracy, democratization, oil, hydrocarbon, state security, Middle East

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## **Introduction**

Democratic systems are almost universally accepted as important for achieving economic development, and eventually world peace and security. There are also assumptions that economic progress could play an influential role in breeding democratization. Nevertheless, in some cases when the source of the economic development is originated from natural resources such as oil, the story might take another route. This argument has no doubt been inspired by the presence of many states with substantial economic wealth and authoritarian regimes that have been in place for many decades such as the Middle Eastern states which are rich with natural hydrocarbon energy (Gas and Oil) sources.

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Hydrocarbon energy has become a key component in our modern world and way of life. It is crucial for the progress and development of nations and industries around the world. Everyone from ordinary citizens to governments needs or uses fossil energy on daily basis in a way or another. Access to resources can boost or hamper economic progress. It can spur or thwart armed conflicts<sup>2</sup>. It is an essential contributor to military power and prosperity and governments will resort to great measures to ensure sufficient energy supplies and secure multiple resources. Hence, there is no doubt that hydrocarbon energy is an important issue for the international system and global security.

This article investigates the role of oil as a hindrance to democratization in oil-rich states of the Middle East and the role of international superpowers in the process of spreading democracy and how oil could shape the relationship of these superpowers with the oil-wealthy states.

## **Democracy: conceptual issues**

The capitalist liberal view of democracy and international peace and security has become the most influential perspective in the international arena gradually after the Second World War (WWII). This is especially true after the Cold War and the dissolution of the USSR, since the United States (U.S.), as was expected from her, declared herself the winner of the Cold War rivalry as it did after the defeat of the Nazi Germany in WWII. The U.S. also marketed this "victory" to the world as a triumph of her values of liberal democracy and capitalism and a sign of their superiority over the other rival values. Naturally, the disappearance of USSR in the international system as the only rival superpower, has given the U.S. a sense of self-entitlement to go anywhere around the world with her carriers, frigates and troops to remove any government it would view as "rouge" or threat to peace, democracy or the universal values that she claims to protect and at any cost.

Thus, American democratic principles have indeed become the most acceptable trend in the international political arena and the popular media. Democrats are now the "good guys" and those who are not, are the "villains". Whether it is for the sake of practicality and economic benefits or lack of an alternative, many countries around the world are attempting to align themselves or "band their wagons" with the "good guys" by adopting democratic systems of governing, or pretend to be doing so for external consumption to avert the wrath of the U.S., external pressure and isolation by the international system.

Few decades ago, between 1970s and 1990s some thirty countries have adopted democracy in a trend known as "Democracy's third wave" or "global democratic revolution" (Huntington, 1996, p. 4). Many former Soviet republics have embraced principles of open economy for political and economic benefits. Also Russia has changed her stance and opened the doors of her economy in the face of foreign investments with a relative free market.

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the most ferocious battles in the Second World War were fought north of Azerbaijan. The German army during that time was believed to be short of fuel and sought to occupy the Baku region in Azerbaijan, but it failed. Germany's unsuccessful attempt to capture the Caspian oil resources is considered a major reason for its defeat in 1918 and 1945 (Bahgat, 2002, p. 310).

Democracy is seen as a key to economic development and the improvement of socioeconomic standards of people. There is almost a general agreement in the international system on the significance of adopting universally accepted democratic principles in order to achieve peace, stability, and prosperity of the nations. A safe and secure international system requires stable states, and stability of states and nations is reliant on prosperity and the well-being of individuals which can be achieved via economic development, democracy and transparency (Morgan, 2007. p. 28). This liberal view of world order is contingent to the "Democratic Peace Theory" which assumes that democratic states do not go to war with each other (Snow, 1998. p, 12). As we may notice, economic goals of capitalism and open economies are key components of the liberal view of democracy which they claim it would be essential for the prosperity of the individuals on which internal state stability and eventually world peace are dependent.

However, despite the damages that has been inflicted to the reputation of democracy over the course of time by the faulty foreign policies and practices of the U.S. such as disregard of the international laws, invasions, interventions, and unilateral use of force in the name of democracy, democracy still remains undoubtedly very appealing internationally as a system of governance. This is because the notion of democracy and its practices have existed long before the creation of the U.S. This fact becomes evident if we take a further look, back at human history, and see that what the modern political philosophers borrowed from the ancient civilizations about the notion of democracy is very similar to Athenian democracy, nevertheless democracy existed long before that when Egyptian and Mesopotamian politics was based on public debate and thorough voting processes where disputed trials were brought to superior courts (Schemeil, 2000, p. 99). However, the concept of democracy has greatly evolved since those ancient times and the notion of democracy has many connotations and perceived differently by contemporary scholars.

Now the most widely embraced indications required from a regime to display in order to be labeled as a democracy has been crafted by Robert Dahl, which he calls as "polyarchy" that incorporate "*civil and political rights with fair, comprehensive, and inclusive elections*" which are also known as liberal democratic standards (Schedler, 2001, p. 150). However, in this paper we will adopt the definition of Schmitter and Karl (1996), in which modern political democracy is defined as:

... a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through competition and cooperation of their elected representatives (Karl & Schmitter, 1996, p. 50).

This definition is important in analyzing the relationship of oil-rich state leaders with their populations as we will see later in this paper, because it emphasizes the importance of the accountability of leaders towards their citizens and illustrates the mechanism through which the leaders are chosen to become indirect representatives of their people.

## Oil as a hindrance to democracy in the Middle East

As we highlighted earlier, economic development in the liberal view of democracy and world peace is significant and many scholars believe that economic development raises the life standards, education, and free poor people from certain fears and manipulation. For example it is argued that the essence of postwar modernization theory which emphasizes the role of economic development in political liberalization is valid and such cases like *Japan*, *South Korea*, and *Taiwan* are examples of that validity (Fukuyama, 2001, p. 25). Also a panel study of more than one hundred states from 1960 to 1995 discovered that improvements in the standard of living predict increases in democracy, as assessed by a "subjective indicator of electoral rights" and that the inclination for democracy rises with per capita GDP (Barro, 1999, p. s158). Others argue that even after becoming a democracy, affluence is very important in determining the survival of that democracy and poor democracies are considered fragile since studies have shown that poor democracies can survive if they sustain economic growth with a reasonable rate of inflation, but when the economy stagnates, democracy's death will become more probable (Alvarez et al, 2001, p 168). Hence, affluence and economic performance are greatly significant for transition towards democracy and also for the survival of that democracy after transition. Nevertheless, if that economic development and affluence is coming from oil or other natural resources, the story might be different.

Many scholars such as Michael Ross (2001) argue that oil-dependent countries tend to be infertile environment for democracy and their governmental systems tend to be authoritarian and undemocratic. The huge amount of wealth generated by oil regrettably became a source of greed and corruption for the governments and their circles of elites, instead of being a source of improvement in the socioeconomic standards of the people and a catalyst that enhances transition to democracy. The rulers use this amount of wealth to further strengthen their authoritarian regimes and the oppressive state institutions such as the military and internal security apparatuses. A closer look at what oil brings along beside the substantial amounts of cash in some oil-rich Middle Eastern states and other similar states around the world will further strengthen and support this argument.

According to Michael Ross (2001), oil wealth has many effects that could be counter productive to democracy such as "rentier effect", "repression effect", and "modernization effect". Rentier effect indicates that resource-wealthy regimes impose very low tax rates and patronage to escape from accountability. Repression effect suggests that the wealth obtained from natural resources holds back democratization through facilitating the governments to increase their financing of internal security, while modernization effect means that growth dependent on exporting hydrocarbon and mineral resources fall short to produce the social and cultural reforms that are required to bring about democratic governments (Ross, 2001, p. 328). For example, it is argued that dependence on oil wealth enabled the Pahlavi regime in Iran to maintain a large degree of autonomy from society (Smith, 2004, p. 233). This is because abolishing or dramatically lowering taxes break the very dependency bridge between the government and the constituents by turning governments into self-supporting regimes that have no incentive to yield to the pressure of the public demands or have a sense of accountability.

Since accountability to the citizens and responsiveness to public demand and human development are among the basic democratic principles (Teune, 2002, p. 29), accordingly, the financial independence that oil revenues provide to governments enhances evasion from accountability which is perceived as a direct clash with democracy. Also the logic of taxation and its link to creating accountability and representative institutions has solid historical precedents. For example between fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, due to the expensive cost of war and conflicts in the territories ruled by Austrian princes, the princes fell into the burden of debts, which made them beseech the estates for new taxes and these new taxes made the princes become more accountable towards the estates and the estates gained more pressuring power over the way their money was spent (Shumpeter, 1918, quoted in Ross, 2004, p. 230). Also it is argued that in the occurrence of the Glorious Revolution in 1688, the Crown handed over some of her authority to the parliament in return of raising new taxes and this is considered as the reason of the military and economic success of England and making the parliament more representative and accountable to the public (North & Weingast, 1989, quoted in Ross, 2004, p231). Unfortunately, this is not the case in many oil producing developing countries where rulers are used to oil revenues and have no need to the population and also where catering to the public welfare has transformed from a question of obligation and accountability to a matter of demobilizing opposition as in Saudi Arabia and Venezuela (Schubert, 2006, p. 8). Hence, the oil revenues become a tool in the hand of the authoritarian rulers who refuse to become accountable by co-opting the opposition.

Potential oil revenues as a multiple anti-democratic tool become more evident as we look into oil-rich developing countries. For example in some of these countries, oil revenues are used to “buy off political consensus” (Smith, 1999, p. 233). This can be seen in Saudi Arabia where there are around ten thousand royal family members who get paid monthly allowances of \$800 to \$270, 000 (Schubert, 2006, p. 9). They get paid all that money just for being born into a royal family in an oil-rich country and without doing any labor for earning it. These examples of rentier effect and patronage embody the cases of inequality, co-optation, and corruption that are against any values of democracy and make any chances for democracy to emerge extremely limited. The rentier state and its consequences are well explained by Lenin in his words where he said:

The rentier state is a state of parasitic, decaying capitalism, and this circumstance cannot fail to influence all the socio-political conditions of the countries concerned (Quoted in Ross, 2001, p. 329)

Among other known problems associated with resource wealth is what is known as the “Dutch Disease”. In the case of Dutch disease, when oil business thrives it raises the national currency’s value of the oil producing country which in return will hamper the exportation of local products of agricultural sector and other non-oil industries by raising their prices in the international markets (Smith, 1999, p. 334). This will lead to the collapse of the local industries and make the state rely more on importing cheaper products from outside ensued by slower rates of economic growth. This is the reason why economic growth has been relatively slower in most resource-reliant states from the time of the 1970s (Le Billon, 2005, p. 689). This slow growth could also be attributed to the amount of money these oil-rich states spend on arms deals to support their authoritarian regimes. For example in the years between 1994 to 1999, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates alone spent a total of \$67 billion worth of conventional weapons which is a quarter of the global

supply of conventional arms that could be translated in terms of arms-expenditure into \$2,500 per capita in that short period (Capman & Khanna, 2006, pp. 511-512). Economic growth is very important for producing the proper conditions for democracy to emerge as we mentioned earlier. Increased budget deficits plus the collapse or weakened local industries make people more dependent on the authoritarian regimes and the corrupt state institutions giving them more leverage.

## International dimensions

Besides the internal corruption and slow economic growth that are facilitated by oil revenues, natural resources have also the potential of attracting problems from across the oceans. Energy security <sup>3</sup>has long been one of the primary concerns of national security interest for the U.S. and other superpowers. Many Presidents of the U.S. have tried in various ways to secure and alleviate the energy need of their country through various policies and projects. For example, during the Arab embargo of 1973, President Richard Nixon initiated Project Independence; President Gerald Ford signed the Energy Policy of Conservation Act in 1975; In 1977 President Jimmy Carter acknowledged that energy independence was so critical for national security of the U.S. and a “moral equivalent of war” (Kraemer, 2006, p. 1). Energy or oil was also the same reason for the President Bush Administration to invade Iraq with the pretext of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and later the excuse of spreading democracy.

Although the U.S. never publicly admitted the real reason behind the invasion of Iraq, one of the architects who planned the invasion of Iraq, the Deputy Defense Secretary in the Bush administration Paul Wolfowitz, could not prevent the truth from slipping off his tongue in an address at an Asian security summit in Singapore. His confession was later reported by German newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* and *Die Welt*, in which he was asked a question about the reason why North Korea was treated differently from Iraq concerning WMD to which the Deputy Defense Minister P. Wolfowitz replied:

Let's look at it simply. The most important difference between North Korea and Iraq is that economically, we just had no choice in Iraq. The country swims on a sea of oil. (Wolfowitz quoted in Wright, 2003)

Wolfowitz also stated that WMD were “bureaucratic excuses” for the war on Iraq (ibid). Looking at examples of such confessions takes us to the latest resignation case of the German President Horst Köhler. President Köhler made a similar voluntary confession about the reason behind the presence of German troops in Afghanistan in which he said:

A country of our size, with its focus on exports and thus reliance on foreign trade, must be aware that military deployments are necessary in an emergency to protect our interests, for example, when it comes to trade routes, for example, when it comes to preventing regional instabilities that could negatively influence

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<sup>3</sup> Energy security is to guarantee sufficient and consistent supplies of energy at acceptable prices in a way that does not endanger important national principles and goals. Thus, energy insecurity would be insufficient and poorly protected supplies of energy (Andrews, 2006, p. 17)

our trade, jobs and incomes (The resigned German President Horst Köhler in a radio interview on May 22, 2010, quoted in Dempsey, 2010)

Unfortunately this honesty has caused a lot of criticism to the German President at home and made him to resign due to the immense pressure. This all happened because he did not chose to parrot what Wolfowitz called earlier as “bureaucratic” excuses of the U.S. and NATO allies which are “fighting terrorism” and maintaining “global stability” and peace, in the case of Afghanistan (Miko & Froehlich, 2004, p.7). These events very much supports the argument of Galtung (1984), which states that any developing nation that has resources prized by the superpowers or developed countries from the core, is susceptible to invasion by those states (Galtung, 1984, quoted in Borg, 1992, p. 276). Of course in the case of Afghanistan it was not because it has oil, but because it is a crucial transit state for transporting gas and oil from the oil-rich states of Central Asia and the Caspian region.

The project of transporting hydrocarbon wealth through Afghanistan was planned in 1990s by Unocal Corporation, a U.S. oil giant, that suggested building a 890-mile pipeline with the cost of \$2 billion, from Turkmenistan to Pakistan through Afghanistan and then to the Arabian Sea. This agreement was actually signed by the governments of Islamabad, Ashgabat, and the Taliban in 1998, but the attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 that was ensued by a retaliatory missile strike against Al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan, made Unocal decide that it could not build this pipeline provided that Taliban remained in power (Bahgat, 2002, p. 310). Actually it is reported that the U.S. still wanted to construct this pipeline despite the Taliban's refusal to the U.S. proposed conditions and that the U.S. representatives to the Taliban leaders told them to;

Either you accept our offer of a carpet of gold, or we bury you under a carpet of bombs (U.S. representative to the Taliban, Inter Press service Nov, 2001, quoted in Meacher, 2003)

These events lead us to remember the fact that “...the more a country is the victim of military intervention, or discipline, by the core, the less control it will have over its internal political and social systems” (Borg, 1992, p. 276). Hence, these interventions added to the already existing corruption make any hope for democracy to emerge extremely weak. Also in the process of pursuing the protection of oil-rich regions like the Middle East for energy security reasons<sup>4</sup>, the U.S. maintains the presence of large military bases in some of those states like Qatar. The U.S. government also maintains cozy relations with the authoritarian rulers of those states despite the dismay of the regional people, which increased suspicion of local populations and critics from all over the world. As Shiela Carapico (2002) argues, “Oil, the stability of Gulf monarchies, the peace process, sanctions against rogue states, and debt rescheduling all rank higher on foreign policy agendas than human rights and good governance” (Carapico, 2002, p.380). This claim can be further supported with the blunt statement of Adelman in 2005 where he said:

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<sup>4</sup> American military and oil companies' presence in the Middle East region was mainly responsible for keeping crude oil prices and production within the desired range between 1986 and 2003 (Chapman & Khanna, 2006. p. 513).

Perhaps the U.S. government supports the Saudis because it has always believed it had a two way relation with OPEC generally and the Persian Gulf countries particularly. We give them protection and they supply oil (Adelman, 2005 quoted in Chapman& Khanna, 2006. p. 513).

This double standard by the U.S. in maintaining smooth relations with the Middle East authoritarian regimes, while claiming that the invasion of Iraq was for spreading democracy, has increased local support for terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and lead to the emergence of more such groups. The U.S. oil interests and activities in the region also attracted the attention of Al-Qaeda which started targeting U.S. personnel who work in the region and incorporate the oil issue in their televised and taped political messages as shown below;

The occupation of Iraq is a link in the Zionist crusader chain of evil. Then comes the full occupation of the rest of the Gulf States to set the stage for controlling and dominating the world. For the big powers believe the Gulf and the *Gulf states are the key to controlling the world due to the presence of the largest oil reserves* there (Bin Laden Audio tape in 2004, quoted in Chapman& Khanna, 2006. p. 512).

Political interventions and plotting coups are also among the means that the superpowers use in their rivalry over energy sources. For example Russia has been charged with interfering in the internal affairs of the regional states and having a hand in coups and conspiracies taking place in its spheres of influence. For example, it is believed that the reason behind the coup in Azerbaijan that toppled Elchibey in 1993 was a result of the latter's plan to sign a deal with Western oil companies and these accusations were further supported by the proclamation of the Russian ambassador to Azerbaijan, Valter Shonia who said:

We have had 200 years of cooperation with Azerbaijan. Any politician denying the reality of Russian power is not going to stay long in his office. Russia is interested in cooperation with the West over Azerbaijan, but if there are attempts to unseat Russia, there will be unpleasant consequences. (Nassibli, 1999, quoted in Kaldor, 2007, p. 172).

These examples are all testimonies of how valuable natural resources such as oil that we use almost everyday in our usual activities, could be a sources of wealth as well as a source of plight that could breed corruption, strengthen the oppressive power of the authoritarian regimes, and invite military attacks and intervention from across the oceans. Nevertheless, a nation's history, economic and institutional progress before the manipulation of oil resources should also be taken into account (Le Billon, 2005, p. 689). This is because there are also oil-rich countries like Norway and Indonesia which have succeeded in protecting themselves from the negative impacts of natural resource wealth and protect their democracies (Schubert, 2006, p.2). This makes us remember that oil could be a real hindrance to democracy and a source of problems especially when it falls into the hand of authoritarian regimes who could use it to fight democracy and protect their regimes.

## Conclusion

Substantial oil or natural resource revenues could constitute a real problem and a hindrance to democratization. They provide the governments with more than enough cash to be self-supporting and capable of lowering or abolishing taxes, thus they escape from their accountability towards their citizens and use the large revenues to suppress and co-opt opposition. Oil revenues could also cause the collapse or weakening local industries by raising the national currency value and diminish exporting local products via raising their prices in the international markets. This will result in a lower economic growth and the dependency of people on their governments and exported goods.

Hydrocarbon resources could also attract the army of superpowers from across the oceans and result in military intervention or support to the cooperative authoritarian rulers against the will of their people in order to maintain an unhampered flow of oil and protect the friendly authoritarian regimes. Consequently, oil could be a real hindrance to democratization if it falls into the hands of authoritarian regimes.

Nevertheless, the history of a state and the level of its institutional development that has been achieved before the discovery or manipulation of oil could also have a great role in deciding whether this natural resource will become a curse or a blessing. However, democratic deficit of the Middle East contrasts sharply with the trend in some oil-rich countries. There are other oil-rich states elsewhere such as Norway and Indonesia that have relatively large amounts of oil and also successful at maintaining their democracies and a healthy economic development that is immune from the resource-curse.

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