

US, British and Australian forces build oil-protection base in Iraq

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The US Navy, with the assistance of British and Australian commandos, is building a permanent base to guard two oil-export platforms in Iraqi waters at the northern end of the Persian Gulf, according to a report Monday in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Troops from all three occupying countries are now stationed at the Khawr al Amaya oil terminal, protecting it and the neighboring Al Basrah oil terminal, facilities critical for any significant expansion of tanker shipments of Iraqi oil to the world market..

The *Journal* reported, “While presidential candidates debate whether to start bringing ground troops home from Iraq, the new construction suggests that one footprint of U.S. military power in Iraq isn’t shrinking anytime soon: American officials are girding for an open-ended commitment to protect the country’s oil industry.”

The military mission goes far beyond the patrols which US warships have conducted in the Persian Gulf for the past 30 years, in the name of keeping oil shipping lanes open. The *Journal* noted, “the Navy finds itself with an additional, much more specific role: playing security guard to Iraq’s offshore oil infrastructure.”

The current focus of military construction is a command-and-control facility located on top of the Khawr facility, the smaller of the two.

While the Pentagon claims that the new oil-terminal base is not a permanent US facility and that it will be turned over to Iraqi forces eventually, the *Journal* explains, “Iraqi forces are a long way from being able to take over the mission.” Vice Admiral Kevin Cosgriff, commander of US naval forces in the Gulf, told the newspaper, “They are going to need help for years to come.”

US, British and Australian military officers will control Iraq’s oil export shipping for the indefinite future. US sailors live on both the Khawr and Al Basrah terminals behind chain-link fences that keep out all Iraqis except the

oil workers who actually operate the facilities, and a handful of Iraqi Marines who work as guards under the direction of an Australian commodore, the overall commander of the facility.

The *Journal* account also notes that the oil-export installation could play a role in forthcoming US moves against Iran: “The new outpost also offers a convenient perch from which to monitor Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps... The naval component of the Revolutionary Guards Corps operates from a partially submerged barge and crane visible on clear days.”

The British sailors captured earlier this year by Iranian forces were among those participating in the oil-protection mission—a fact that was suppressed in the media accounts at the time. That incident ended when the British prisoners made statements admitting they had crossed into Iranian waters and then were sent home. A similar episode involving American soldiers could well provide a pretext for a full-scale US military strike against Iran.

The oil-terminal operation is only one part of a much larger program, costing an estimated \$277 million, in which US forces are deployed to protect Iraqi oilfields. The terminal facilities are the only ones where US military personnel are actually stationed inside production or shipping installations.

The Khawr and Al Basrah facilities combined, if working at their capacity, could load nearly two million barrels a day, about 2.4 percent of current world requirements.

Vice Admiral Cosgriff told the *Journal*, “As a contributor to an increasingly inelastic supply, that is a significant percentage. That isn’t just an Iraq issue, that’s a global economic-stability issue.”

This comment underscores the geopolitical economic interests at the heart of the US conquest of Iraq. US policymakers, from the military leaders on the spot right

up to the White House, are acutely aware that, as former Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan said last month, the war in Iraq is “all about oil.”

Nonetheless, the White House, the congressional Democrats and the American news media alike seek to downplay or suppress the role of oil, claiming that the war is being waged to fight “terrorism” and establish democracy in Iraq, when its major purpose is to rob the Iraqi people of their country’s principal natural resource, and give US and British multinationals first crack at the world’s third largest oil reserves.

The struggle for control and development of these resources is becoming increasingly public, despite the official effort to deny the predatory character of the American military occupation.

Iraq’s former oil minister, Thamir Ghadhban, who still advises the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki on energy issues, told a US audience Friday that Iraq planned to nearly triple oil production over the next eight years, from the present 2.2 million barrels a day to six million barrels per day.

Speaking at Stanford University, Ghadhban said, “Iraq is one of the least-explored countries among the major oil producers,” citing plans to explore for oil in the western desert (Anbar province) as well as the traditional oil-producing regions in the north and south. Iraq has 112 billion barrels in proven oil reserves, but UN estimates have placed its probable but as yet unproven reserves at 214 billion barrels, perhaps the world’s largest pool of untapped oil.

The oil ministry reported last week that daily crude oil production in October hit a three-year high of 2.7 million barrels a day, of which 1.8 million barrels were exported. Hussein al-Shahristani, the oil minister, said that crude production should reach 3 million barrels daily by the end of the year.

The carve-up of oil territory continues within the country. The national government signed a short-term contract November 8 with the Turkish refiner Tupras to take 60,000 barrels a day from the Kirkuk oil fields, shipped by pipeline through the Turkish port of Ceyhan. It was the first new contract for Kirkuk crude in more than three years. The state oil ministry has invited 16 European and American oil companies to bid for three-month contracts to lift crude from Kirkuk, and some bids have already been received.

The Kurdistan regional government announced another round of production-sharing contracts, including one with Reliance Industries, an Indian firm, which paid a signing

bonus of \$15.5 million to \$17.5 million for exploration contracts for two sites in the Kurdish-ruled provinces in the north of Iraq.

The federal Iraqi government has denounced the Kurdish deals as violations of national sovereignty. The mounting conflict between Baghdad and the Kurdistan regional government is facing multiple flashpoints, including a referendum, due to be held by the end of 2007, to decide whether the city of Kirkuk, at the center of one of the world’s largest oilfields, should be attached to the Kurdish-controlled region.

The city and province of Kirkuk have a mixed population of Kurds, Sunni and Shiite Arabs and Turkomen, but the Kurdish parties have been resettling Kurds there in an effort to create a majority, a mirror reversal of the policy pursued by Saddam Hussein, who pushed Kurds out and sought “Arabization” of the province.

Perhaps the most provocative action taken in the tense region came in September, when Ray Hunt, CEO of Hunt Oil and a longtime Texas confidant of the Bush family, flew into Kurdistan and signed an oil exploration agreement with the regional government, without informing Baghdad.

According to a report in the *Dallas Morning News*, the hill of Jebel Semroot, near the village of Assyan, where Hunt Oil expects to begin drilling next year, is not even in the territory of the three Kurdish provinces ruled by the regional government. It lies across the border in Nineveh, another province with a mixed population of Kurds, Turkomen and Arabs, in which the Kurds are a distinct minority.

“Trouble is, Jebel Semroot isn’t in Kurdish territory,” the *News* reported. “If Hunt Oil drills in these rocks, the company will be helping the Kurds absorb lands in Nineveh province that were historically Kurdish but are still claimed by Iraq’s Arab Sunnis.”



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