

## EDITORIAL

### Oil and the 9/11 Commission's Report

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Release of the *Report* of the 9/11 Commission in July highlights a generally unacknowledged link between environment and the horrible crimes of September 11, 2001. The Commission, created to "... provide the fullest possible account of the events surrounding 9/11 and to identify the lessons learned" (p. xvi), was not explicitly charged to conduct an environmental and natural resource study, and their *Report* does not frame the problem as an environmental concern. Nevertheless, through oil, the connections among environment, national security, and 9/11 are clear.

Environmental analysts know oil is a blessing and a curse. We derive great benefits from the substance. Yet dependence on it has potentially terrible consequences, such as climate change and war. One way to describe an important flaw in the *Report* is to note that its *scope*, a term very familiar to environmental professionals, was inadequate.

Chapter 2 of the *Report* outlines the context of the attacks on September 11 and sets the scope for the rest of the document. Oil is mentioned in passing but without emphasis or sense of centrality. It's as if oil were irrelevant to the attacks of 9/11 and the earlier attacks of al Qaeda on installations overseas.

Yet currently about 60% of the oil used in the United States is imported. Western European countries and Japan, the major allies of the United States, are even more dependent upon imports than the US. The Middle East is a key source for these resources.

Saudi Arabia sits on about one quarter of the global oil reserves, which makes it a prime object of American concerns. Irvine H. Anderson's classic history of Aramco, the Saudi-American company pumping Saudi oil, explains how the American position evolved. At the end of and after World War II, the American government sought to ensure that access to this oil would be secure for the United States and its allies. Indeed, the operations of the US Navy and the energy needed to rebuild Europe after the war were predicated on the security of Saudi oil.

Only the security of Israel has come anywhere close to rivaling oil as a key objective of American policy in the Middle East. Every American president since Franklin Roosevelt has firmly sought to ensure the security of Aramco's operations.

Some will be quick to say that oil had nothing to do with 9/11. They will argue that Usama bin Laden was not trying to capture any oil fields when he attacked New York and Washington, DC, nor was the US trying to seize oil wealth when it invaded Iraq.

Such protests, however, miss important considerations about the connections between oil and national security. If the scope of understanding 9/11 includes only failures of intelligence and defense, it is impossible to understand the motives for the attacks.

Americans have a hard time understanding why a military presence in the Middle East, particularly in Saudi Arabia, is so infuriating to bin Laden and his followers. It is less difficult, however, to grasp that the deployment of American troops has something to do with the oil.

What role does dependence upon Saudi oil play in the Commission's *Report*? None. Instead the mantra is, "They attacked us because our intelligence failed.

Therefore we must change our intelligence strategies to prevent future attacks."

And the oil? It's assumed in the *Report*, not discussed. Do we need to think about alternatives to oil? These alternatives are not mentioned. Do alternatives exist to the oil? Not relevant, based on the silence of the *Report*.

If the *Report* had reaffirmed current policies on oil, it would at least have acknowledged a serious problem. Absence of oil from serious consideration, however, diminishes the usefulness of the study.

If we cannot think accurately and openly about the oil, we cannot see the whole problem. It is only when oil's relevance to security is acknowledged that we can see more of the picture. Alternatives that permanently reduce dependence on oil from the Middle East could reduce the need for American military deployment in the area. Would that help? Logic suggests it would. For these reasons, the 9/11 Commission needed to include oil in its scope. Long-term prevention of future attacks requires alternatives to dependence upon oil. This is where environmental professionals must help.

#### References

Anderson, I. H. 1981. *Aramco, the United States, and Saudi Arabia*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 259 pp.

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