

OIL AND WAR: RESOURCE CONFLICTS AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF ENERGY

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I. Introduction

Natural resources have historically played a central role in warfare, but no resource has been as strategically significant as oil. With the advent of mechanised warfare and industrial economies, petroleum became essential for military mobility, industrial production, and economic stability. Consequently, access to oil resources has frequently influenced decisions to wage war, intervene militarily, or maintain prolonged military presence in resource-rich regions.

The relationship between oil and war is not merely economic; it is deeply embedded in geopolitical strategy, power politics, and global security considerations.

II. Strategic Importance of Oil

Oil serves as a critical input for modern military operations, transportation systems, and industrial economies. Control over oil reserves ensures:

- I. Energy security for domestic consumption
- II. Operational capacity for armed forces
- III. Economic leverage in international relations

States lacking sufficient domestic oil reserves often pursue external strategies to secure stable access, making oil a strategic driver of foreign policy and military intervention.

III. Historical Evolution of Oil-Related Conflicts

A. Early Twentieth Century

The importance of oil became evident during the First and Second World Wars, where access to fuel determined military effectiveness. Control over oil fields and supply routes was a key strategic objective for major powers.

B. Post-War Period and Cold War

During the Cold War, oil-rich regions became arenas of proxy conflicts. Securing influence over petroleum-producing states was considered vital for maintaining global power balance.

IV. Oil and Conflicts in the Middle East

The Middle East, home to a significant portion of the world's proven oil reserves, has witnessed repeated conflicts linked to energy interests. Wars in the region often involved protection of oil infrastructure, securing supply lines, or influencing regimes controlling oil wealth.

Notable conflicts include the **Gulf War**, where the invasion of Kuwait threatened global oil supplies, and the **Iraq War**, which intensified debates over oil-driven military intervention.

V. Oil as a Cause and Consequence of War

Oil functions both as a **cause** of war and a **target** during war:

- I. As a cause, competition over oil resources motivates armed intervention and regime change.

- II. As a consequence, oil infrastructure becomes a strategic military target, leading to environmental damage and long-term economic disruption.

The destruction of oil facilities during conflicts often results in humanitarian and ecological crises.

VI. Role of Oil-Producing States and Organisations

Oil-producing states and organisations exert considerable influence on global politics. Bodies such as **Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)** play a crucial role in regulating oil production and pricing, indirectly affecting geopolitical stability.

Control over oil pricing and supply can function as a political tool, shaping alliances and conflicts.

VII. Oil, War, and International Law

International law addresses resource-related conflicts through:

- I. Laws governing armed conflict
- II. Protection of civilian infrastructure
- III. Regulation of exploitation of natural resources during occupation

However, international law does not explicitly prohibit wars motivated by resource acquisition. Legal regulation often focuses on conduct during war rather than underlying economic motivations.

VIII. Environmental and Humanitarian Consequences

Oil-related wars cause extensive environmental damage, including oil spills, fires, and ecosystem destruction. These conflicts also lead to

displacement of populations, economic collapse, and long-term instability in affected regions.

Environmental harm caused by destruction of oil infrastructure raises questions of accountability and reparations under international law.

IX. Contemporary Trends and Energy Transition

The global transition toward renewable energy has the potential to reduce oil-driven conflicts. However, during the transition period, competition over remaining oil resources and strategic reserves may continue to generate tensions.

Energy security remains a central concern for states, influencing military strategy and international alliances.

X. Conclusion

Oil has played a decisive role in shaping modern warfare and geopolitics. While it has fueled economic growth and industrialisation, it has also contributed to violent conflicts and geopolitical instability. Existing legal frameworks inadequately address the root causes of oil-driven wars, focusing instead on regulating conduct during conflict. A sustainable reduction in resource-based warfare requires diversification of energy sources, strengthened international cooperation, and enhanced legal accountability for resource exploitation during armed conflicts.

Footnotes

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3. Philippe Le Billon, “The Geopolitical Economy of Resource Wars,” (2001) 30 *Geopolitics* 561.
4. United Nations Security Council Resolutions relating to the Gulf War (1990–91).
5. Anthony Sampson, *The Seven Sisters: The Great Oil Companies and the World They Shaped* (Viking Press).
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7. United Nations Environment Programme, *Environmental Impact of Armed Conflict*.