

The political economy of oil and the war against Bin Laden

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IT may seem that only intense and irrational religiosity motivated Bin Laden and his criminal cohort. There is some truth to this. They were indeed misguided fanatics. Yet, in the rush to see an apocalyptic clash of civilizations, even many scholars seem to have forgotten that Bin Laden was a successful businessman, an ally of US military and political elites, and a politician himself. The murky history that turned an erstwhile US ally into a deadly enemy is more complex than simply a sickening morality play of our religion vs. theirs.

In the 1970s and 1980s the Bin Laden family amassed billions as the construction firm they headed built roads, mosques, and military bases for the Saudi government. But the ambitions of Osama were higher both economically and politically. He wanted both for himself and Saudi Arabia a higher share of the oil profits. Realizing that this would lead them in direct conflict with the US oil companies and their backers in the US government and military, the Saudi rulers who had welcomed the bin Ladens into their fold lost their nerve (Aburish 1996). The royal family apparently refused to cut bin Laden a share of the more lucrative oil business, which it reserves for itself and the Exxon Mobil group of companies. It seems

By engaging in a dangerous game of wealth and power during and after the cold war the US helped create a Frankenstein-like scenario. Ironically, it was the CIA that funded, armed, trained and helped build the bases for bin Laden's fighters in the 1980s during its crusade against the former USSR. Without a thorough coming to terms with this history, no sensible policy in the Middle East that will secure long term peace and stability in the region can be formulated.

that a desperate bin Laden made a bid for state power in the late eighties/early nineties.

In 1990, after Iraq had invaded Kuwait, bin Laden tried to raise an army of his Afghan war veterans to "safeguard" Saudi Arabia. But the Saudi royal house, aided by half a million U.S. troops, prevented what would have amounted to an in-house coup. The threat of bin Laden was taken seriously enough so that he was promptly stripped of Saudi citizenship for his act of treason, and was forced to move to the Sudan where he began aiding Exxon Mobil's rivals in the guise of a missionary. In the Sudan bin Laden led an Islamic "anti-poverty" project that built a road from Khartoum to Port Sudan, literally paving the way for an oil export pipeline that the China National Oil Company and France's Total soon exploited. To this day, the non-royal Saudi businessmen continue to fund bin Laden's cause in the Sudan.

But bin Laden and his horrible tactics represent much more than one ruthless individual with wealth and political ambition. Bin Laden reflects the growing threat to the Saudi royal family and, therefore, the continued U.S. control of Saudi oil and gas. The worsening economic conditions in the country, the Saudi government's many internal contradictions, general social decay, as well as periodic strikes by foreign workers in the oil fields in Saudi Arabia "have shaken the kingdom to its foundations," wrote a serious London-based Palestinian journalist in 1997. "The only thing keeping Saudi Arabia from disintegrating or falling to an Islamic group is the absence of a cohesive force capable of replacing the royal family ... But [such groups] are gaining strength at a rapid rate" (Said Aburish, The Rise, Corruption and Coming Fall of the House of Saud, St. Martin's Press, 1996, p. xvi).

For complicated tactical reasons, bin Laden moved his operations from the Sudan to Afghanistan, where the increasingly powerful fundamentalist Taliban had what may seem like strange hopes of becoming energy barons. Actually, as the US analysts recognized, Afghanistan could be a strategic geopolitical spot in the political economy of oil. The U.S. Energy Information Agency recently published a report that began: "Afghanistan's significance from an energy standpoint stems from its geographical position as a potential transit route for oil and natural gas exports from Central Asia to the Arabian Sea. This potential includes the possible construction of oil and natural gas pipelines through Afghanistan..." Others have seen this as part of a far grander geopolitical strategy. This goal was most clearly explained by Brzezinski in a 1997 book entitled The Grand Chessboard: "For

America, the chief geopolitical prize is Eurasia.... [I]t is... the chessboard on which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played." (p. 31) His "teaching" appears increasingly to be serving as a blueprint for U.S. strategy and tactics in the middle-east and central Asia.

In the mid 1990s, Unocal and some non-U.S. firms were proposing pipelines that would carry gas and oil from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan. "The Taliban's control of the pipeline route made the pipeline possible," said the husband of Pakistan's then Prime Minister Bhutto (Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia by Ahmed Rashid).

But almost immediately the Taliban turned against the U.S. oil companies which returned the compliment both by their own retaliatory policies and via the US government's then not-too-effective anti-Taliban policy. First, Unocal

unilaterally set the Taliban's future cut at a miserable 15 cents per 1,000 cubic feet. "The Taliban were incensed because they were not consulted about the gas price, and they demanded a larger transit fee" (Rashid). Then in 1999, the Clinton administration forced Unocal to drop the project entirely. U.S. rulers felt that the Taliban could not or would not guarantee a stable Afghanistan, especially since Russian influence in the region was rising under the newly elected Putin. From now on, Washington would employ a "get tough" policy against the Taliban.

Whatever were the immediate causes of the tragic events of 9/11, the long and festering economic and political conflicts underlying this and other acts of terrorism cannot be ignored. By engaging in a dangerous game of wealth and power during and after the cold war the US helped create a Frankenstein-like scenario. Ironically, it was the CIA that funded, armed, trained and helped build the bases for bin Laden's fighters in the 1980s during its crusade against the former USSR. Without a thorough coming to terms with this history, no sensible policy in the Middle East that will secure long term peace and stability in the region can be formulated.



Dr. Rubaiul Murshed

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ABC of Anthrax

Whenever we talk about the September 11 (2001) incident, the word "Anthrax" comes automatically. Do you remember those days? Switched on either CNN or local news -- Anthrax scare used to travel all the time together with terrorism.

Anthrax is primarily a disease of herbivorous mammals, although other mammals and some birds have been known to contract it. Humans generally acquire the disease directly or indirectly from infected animals, or occupational exposure to infected or contaminated animal products. Control in livestock is therefore the key to reduced incidence. There are no documented cases of person to person transmission. The disease's impact on animal and human health can be devastating. The causative agent of anthrax is the bacterium, Bacillus anthracis, the spores of which can survive in the environment for years or decades, awaiting uptake by the next host.

The disease still exists in animals and humans in most countries of sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, in several southern European countries, in the Americas, and certain areas of Australia. Disease outbreaks in animals also occur sporadically in other countries.

There are three types of anthrax in humans: cutaneous anthrax, acquired when a spore enters the skin through a cut or an abrasion; gastrointestinal tract anthrax, contracted from eating contaminated food, primarily meat from an animal that died of the disease; and pulmonary (inhalation) anthrax from breathing in airborne anthrax spores. The cutaneous form accounts for 95 per cent or more of human cases globally. All three types of anthrax are potentially fatal if not treated promptly.

Vaccines are available for animals and humans. However in humans their use should be confined to high-risk groups, such as those occupationally exposed and in some military settings. Antibiotic therapy usually results in dramatic recovery of the individual or animal infected with anthrax if given before onset or immediately after onset of illness. Antibiotic therapy may be also used for prophylaxis in asymptomatic patients believed to have been exposed to anthrax spores.

Violence against women and HIV/AIDS

LN. SHAKEEL AHMED IBNE MAHMOOD

AS the Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus which causes AIDS continues to spread in many parts of the world, women are now said to constitute an increasingly large proportion of those infected worldwide.

This has mainly been attributed to the fact that until lately, women did not have an independent method of protection by which they could help shield themselves from both pregnancy and infection with sexually transmitted diseases, including the HIV.

Violence against women and girls is defined in the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women as "...any form of gender based violence, that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life."

Violence against women takes many forms, including physical violence, sexual violence and psy-

chological abuse. It occurs in three domains: the family, the community, and perpetrated or condoned by the state. Many forms of violence are widespread globally, such as domestic violence, rape and sexual abuse, and sexual harassment. Others are linked to particular cultural or traditional practices of various countries, including female genital mutilation, child marriage, honour killings (where a woman who has been raped is killed by a male of her family to protect the family honour), and the inheritance of the wife of a deceased man by his brother. Around the world at least one woman in every three has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime.

The majorities of these women live in developing countries and come from among the poorest in their societies. For cultural, social and economic reasons, many of these women do not have equal status with men in society. For most women, there is little or no access to treatment or information, which would allow them to make, informed choices. They may be financially dependent, lack assertiveness, and have little control over decisions that affect their own lives. They may be

isolated and stigmatised within their communities.

All over the world, women's issues are sidelined: 'Our voices are not heard. How do we change this situation? We need to empower ourselves to become more vocal and active, so that we can raise our issues and have a say in decisions which are made that impact on our lives. We need to equip ourselves with knowledge, so that we are confident when we speak out.'

Violence arising from being HIV positive: Violence against women is not just a cause of the AIDS epidemic. It can also be a consequence of it. Women who know their HIV status and either speak out about this or attempt to tell their partners, are often at risk of violence from their husbands, family or community. Women have been beaten, thrown out of their house, abandoned by their families, and even murdered, following disclosure of their HIV status to their partner or families.

In Egypt, 35 per cent of women surveyed said they were beaten by their husband at some point during their marriage; in Nicaragua, 52 per cent of women said they were physically abused by a partner at least

once; in South Korea, 38 per cent of women said they were abused by their husbands; and in the United States, 28 per cent of women reported at least one incident of physical violence from an intimate partner (AP). UNICEF says civil society, including community and religious leaders, could promote an integrated approach to curb domestic violence by supporting legal, literacy, education and employment opportunities (Press Association Newsfile, 31 May, 2000).

(Source : 1 Jun 2000 Subject: [south asia] Digest Number 263)

Understanding the factors that put women at risk of infection: Women are both socially and biologically more vulnerable than men:

- Many cultural practices worldwide have an impact on the spread of HIV/AIDS and are harmful to women:

- In cultures throughout the world, it is assumed that men should play the dominant role in initiating sex, and therefore women are not able to negotiate safe sex

- In many cultures, virginity is equated with innocence, so questions by young women about sex and reproduction are frowned upon as it is assumed that they are actively engaging in sex outside of marriage

- In many countries in Africa and Asia it is believed that intercourse with a virgin will cure the man of HIV/AIDS

- In Senegal, there is the belief that women who do not undergo female genital mutilation cannot enjoy sex. The use of unsterilized instruments, as well as injury during intercourse promotes the spread of HIV.

In Mexico the research team developed tools to assess HIV-infected women's self-esteem, the incidence of violence in their lives and their ability to negotiate safe sex. They found that HIV+ women had higher self-esteem than other women. This appears to be because when a woman "comes out," she shows her empowerment, and her need for an income often enables her to become economically independent. Further, it was found that the official policy to distribute AZT to all who needed in fact shortchanged women. Delivery was through the social security system, but most women work in the informal sector. These findings are now being used to re-consider distribution policies.

In India, interviews with HIV+ women revealed that, despite public information campaigns, they learned about the protection that condom use offered after they had become infected. Research findings are helping public health officials and AIDS organizations target information more effectively.

In Zimbabwe, the research results have dramatically demonstrated how the burden of care falls largely on women, increasing their responsibilities as caregivers, food providers, nurturers as well as role models in the face of adversity. The findings point to specific services and social protections that could be formulated to provide greater support for women and girls.

Influencing policy is one of the key goals of the programme. Partnerships between women's rights activists, HIV advocates and policy makers provide a basis for action and information to empower women to take appropriate decisions about the disease, to learn skills in assertiveness to negotiate safe sex and resist sexual violence, and to provide women with economic resources to face the new challenges that are pushing them into poverty.

Facts & figures

- Of the 34.7 million adults living with HIV/AIDS, 47% - or 16.4 million - were women in 2000.
- 46% of adults newly infected with HIV in 2000 were women.
- 52% (1.3 million) of all AIDS deaths in 2000 were women.

Since the beginning of the epidemic, over 9 million women have died from HIV/AIDS-related illnesses.

Women were 40 % of HIV/AIDS-infected adults in 1995 and 47% in 2000 and are 48% percent today.

Trend:

The percentage of women infected in 1997 was 41%; in 2000, it had risen to 47%.

- 55% of all HIV+ adults in Sub-Saharan Africa are women. Teenage girls are infected at a rate 5 or 6 times greater than their male counterparts.

- In one Kenyan study, over one quarter of teenage girls interviewed had had sex before 15, of whom, one in 12 was already infected.

-A Zambian study confirmed that less than 25% of women believe that a married woman can refuse to have sex with her husband. Only 11% thought they could ask their husband to use a condom.

- In Trinidad and Tobago nearly 30% of young girls said they had sex with older men - as a result HIV rates are five times higher in girls than in boys aged 15-19.

- By mid-1990s, more than 25% of sex workers in India tested positive for HIV - by 1997 the prevalence rate reached 71%.

[Source: UNAIDS Report on the Global Epidemic, June 2000]

Bangladesh stands second in the world chart: Bangladesh stands second in the world chart when it comes to violence committed against her women by men. A United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) report says, Bangladeshi women are one of the most battered in the world with 47 per cent being assaulted by men.

Papua New Guinea tops in the world charts, with 67 per cent of women affected.

'Nearly a thousand women, many of them as young as six years, suffer rape violence on an average a year in Bangladesh, according to the rights groups.

The violence in Bangladesh took many forms - from wife beating, maiming by acid, rape, to physical and verbal harassment, the report added. And according to newspaper reports, husbands, boyfriends and men who approach women but are rejected, all resort to assault. "The situation of women is really deplorable," the UNFPA report said, adding that "gender-based violence was endemic". Bangladesh was followed closely in the world rankings by India, where 40 per cent of women were assaulted by men. Western countries were not exempt - 29 per cent of women in Canada were assaulted, followed by 22 per cent in the United States and 20 per cent in South Africa.

In Bangladesh, nearly 50 per cent of murder cases against women are linked to marital violence, and by an inability to meet dowry demands and to handle polygamous men.

Gender-based violence also has a sizeable impact on the economy, though its cost is difficult to assess. Costs include health care for victims, missed work, emergency shelters and police protection. "In the United States, employees pay an estimated four billion dollars a year for absenteeism, increased health care expenses, higher turnover and lower productivity," the report says.

Gender inequality also pushes up health care costs. Limited access to care among the poor has a greater impact on women than men, with poor women more likely to die because of pregnancy.

Half a million women die every year during and after childbirth. Its economic costs include lost contributions to the family, increased mortality among the surviving children, and increased burdens of home maintenance and child care to their survivors.

(Source : Southasia Digest, Sep24th, 2000)

The UNFPA's annual report, released last month, says that "if women had the power to make decisions about sexual activity and its consequences, they could avoid many of the 80 million unwanted pregnancies each year, 20 million unsafe abortions, some 750,000 maternal deaths and many times that number of infections and injuries. They could also avoid many of the 333 million sexually transmitted infections contracted each year." The needs of women are often "invisible to men," the report also notes. Until discrimination against women ends, the world's poorest countries cannot develop to their potential, it adds. According to the report:

A woman dies every minute of pregnancy-related causes; Sexually

transmitted diseases afflict women five times more than men; An estimated two-thirds of the 300 million children without access to education are girls, and two-thirds of the 880 million illiterate adults are women; and Some 99% of the estimated 500,000 maternal deaths each year are in developing countries.

Conclusion : As we look to the future, let us be alert to the potential impediments to our success. Let us ensure that the success of new, promising HIV/AIDS biomedical technologies, such as vaccines, which have the potential for making a substantial dent in the epidemic, do not suffer because of entrenched gender barriers. Let us work together to fight against two commonly held beliefs that continue to stand in the way of our efforts, for example, the mistaken belief that empowering women disempowers men. This is not true. Empowering women is not a zero-sum game. More power to one invariably, in the long term, means more power to all. Empowering women empowers households, communities and entire nations.

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