

Britain: Foreign secretary admits oil central to war vs. Iraq

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Foreign Secretary Jack Straw has admitted that oil is a key factor in the UK's willingness to participate in a US-led war against Iraq.

Straw was speaking to a meeting of British ambassadors in London last week, just as the government announced it was dispatching military reservists and a naval task force to join American forces in the Gulf. Iraq is home to the second largest oil reserves in the world.

The two-day London conference had been called to discuss British foreign policy objectives over the next decade.

One such strategic priority was to “bolster the security of British and global energy supplies”, Straw told the 150-plus assembled diplomats. Others included minimising the threat of terrorism; controlling immigration; promoting the UK's economic interests; and maintaining a “stable international system based on the UN, the rule of law and multilateral cooperation”.

Officially the government contends that its confrontation with Iraq is due to fears that it has, or intends to develop, “weapons of mass destruction”. It maintains this position despite the fact that an exhaustive sweep of the country by United Nations weapons inspectors has produced no evidence to back such claims.

In ruling circles, however, government officials admit that oil is the real reason. The *Guardian* newspaper reported on the ambassadors meeting that “some ministers and officials in Whitehall say privately that oil is more important in the calculation than weapons of mass destruction. These ministers and officials have pointed to the instability of current oil sources—the Middle East, Caspian region and Algeria—and the need for secure alternatives.”

With UK North Sea oil production in decline, British

policymakers have been sounding alarm bells as to future supplies. Analysts estimate that the UK could be totally dependent on imports for its energy requirements within 50 years. The problem is not confined to the UK alone—it is anticipated that more than 92 percent of Europe's oil, and 81 percent of its gas, will have to be imported from overseas within 30 years.

British foreign office concerns for oil supplies are not only motivated by the need to meet the country's energy requirements, however.

The country, or countries, able to establish control over this vital resource will secure a major advantage over their international rivals. This is the prime factor motivating US policy in the Middle East. By occupying Iraq and seizing its oil resources, the US hopes to establish its undisputed hegemony as against Europe and Japan.

The Blair government has similarly resolved that the issue of oil supplies must be settled by force of arms. In 1998 it commissioned a “Future Strategic Context for Defence” review, aimed at identifying the main challenges facing Britain over the next decades and targeting military resources accordingly.

The review specified oil supplies as a key area jeopardising “the fundamental interests or security of Western nations”. Offshore energy resources “are likely to become a growing source of international dispute and potential conflict” and contained “potential for aggressive competition for resources” between nations, it warned. This would have to be factored into UK defence policy, especially with oil supplies likely to remain “concentrated within the Gulf for the foreseeable future”.

Such considerations underscore the real reason why Prime Minister Tony Blair has allied his government so

firmly with the US war drive against Iraq, in defiance of popular opposition.

Blair is seeking a quid pro quo arrangement with the US whereby in return for supporting the latter's military take-over of the Middle East, British capital is given a commanding slice of Iraq's oil reserves.

The prime minister indicated as much in his speech at the George Bush Senior Presidential Library in Texas last April. "Who develops oil and gas, what the new potential sources of supply are, is a vital strategic question," the prime minister told his audience of US government officials and dignitaries.

The US and the UK had the "best energy companies in the world," he said, but the two countries must forge a collective strategy to ensure "the political and corporate world cooperate together" to safeguard their interests.

His concerns were echoed by Lord Browne, chief executive of British Petroleum, one of the world's largest oil companies. The Bush administration must ensure a "level playing field for the selection of oil companies" to go into Iraq following a US take-over of the country, Browne urged last October. His plea followed revelations that US oil officials had met secretly with Iraqi opposition leaders in Washington to discuss a post-war carve-up of oil production.



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