US seeks legal expert to oversee plunder of Iraqi oil

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As Gen. David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker testified before Congress on Monday and Tuesday, and US senators and representatives quibbled over the tactics of the US occupation of Iraq, there was no mention of the real material interests underlying the war.

An article by Walter Pincus in the September 10 edition of the *Washington Post*, headlined "Commerce Seeks Adviser for Iraq Oil Interests," focused attention on a central objective that has motivated the four-and-a-half year colonial occupation: the plunder of Iraq's vast oil wealth.

According to an August 21 proposal by the US Commerce Department examined by Pincus, the department is seeking an international legal adviser, fluent in Arabic, "to provide expert input, when requested" to "US government agencies or to Iraqi authorities as they draft the laws and regulations that will govern Iraq's oil and gas sector."

In early July, the cabinet of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki approved US-backed draft legislation on the future development of Iraq's oil resources, estimated at between 115 and 215 billion barrels.

Central to US plans is the restructuring of the Iraq Oil Ministry to establish the Iraq National Oil Company (INOC), a key step towards ending the Iraqi state monopoly of the oil industry, which could take the form of selling an interest in the INOC to foreign—primarily US—producers. The legislation revives a semi-colonial form of oil contract called a "production-sharing agreement," which would give foreign companies exclusive rights to exploration and production for as long as 20 years.

The Commerce Department's proposal envisions that "as part of a US government inter-agency process, the US Department of Commerce will be providing technical assistance to Iraq to create a legal and tax environment conducive to domestic and foreign investment in Iraq's key economic sectors, starting with the mineral resources sector." The department is proposing the recruitment of a US-backed and funded expert to advise on this process.

According to the Commerce proposal, "Iraqi officials will be able to access the expertise of world-class professors and practitioners; they will also attend technical workshops which will address Iraq-specific legal and tax issues."

The draft legislation has nothing to do with helping the Iraqi people manage and share in the profits of the oil industry in their country. This is the official and media line on the US demand for the "reform" of the Iraqi oil sector. In reality, the new oil law being pushed by Washington is aimed at privatizing the country's vast oil resources and placing them at the disposal of US-based oil conglomerates.

According to the *Post* article, "Based on the Commerce proposal, the United States has decided that Iraq needs a US-funded expert who will be responsible 'to review draft [Iraq] subsoil laws and draft subsoil regulations to ensure their compliance with international legal standards' and share his of her conclusions with US agencies 'or with Iraqi authorities'."

This legal contractor will also be tasked with reviewing "the draft by-laws of the Iraqi agencies that will be created to grant exploration and exploitation licenses, to enter into joint venture agreements with foreign firms ... and to regulate Iraq's hydrocarbon sectors." In other words, this expert will be on hand to defend the legal and business interests of US corporations as they pillage Iraq's oil resources.

Behind all the bogus claims of Iraqi "weapons of

mass destruction" and Saddam Hussein's links to terrorism that were utilized to justify the 2003 invasion was the drive by US energy conglomerates to privatize Iraq's oilfields. This received no mention in this week's congressional hearings, as Democratic and Republican lawmakers solidarized themselves with Gen. Petraeus and the goal of "success" in the Iraq mission.

In line with the long-term interests of US imperialism, the contract for the legal advisor proposed by the Commerce Department is to run from inception through July 31, 2008, with extension options through July 31, 2010.