Documents confirm Iraq invasion was a war for oil

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On Tuesday, the *Independent* newspaper published documents revealing that detailed plans to exploit Iraq's oil reserves were discussed by ministers in the UK Labour government and some of the world's largest oil companies, including Britain's BP, in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq.

The mass of official documents confirm that, eight years on and following the death of an estimated 1 million civilians, the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq was indeed a war for oil.

The documents came to light only due to Freedom of Information requests over a period of five years by Greg Muttitt, an expert on Iraqi oil policy, who works for the British charity Platform. Muttitt has written a book, *Fuel on the Fire: Oil and Politics in Occupied Iraq*, published this week.

The documents illustrate the imperialist character of the war. The *Independent* notes: "BP was concerned that if Washington allowed TotalFinaElf's existing contact with Saddam Hussein to stand after the invasion it would make the French conglomerate the world's leading oil company. BP told the Government it was willing to take 'big risks' to get a share of the Iraqi reserves, the second largest in the world."

At the time, it was known that Iraq had vast oil reserves, but the best estimates of a reserve of 112 billion barrels was based on decades-old seismic data. It is estimated by some geologists that Iraq's reserves could be 45 to 100 billion barrels higher.

The documents reveal that in late 2002, at least five meetings were held between British civil servants and ministers and two of the Big Oil conglomerates—BP and Shell.

At one of the meetings, Baroness Symons, then trade minister, informed BP that the Labour government supported British energy firms being given a share of Iraq's oil and gas reserves. She said this would be a reward for Prime Minister Tony Blair's military commitment to US plans for regime-change.

The *Independent* reveals that minutes of one meeting, held October 31, 2002, "show that Lady Symons agreed to lobby the Bush administration on BP's behalf because the oil giant feared it was being 'locked out' of deals that Washington was quietly striking with US, French and Russian governments and their energy firms."

The minutes of the meeting note that Symons would "report back to the companies before Christmas" regarding the effectiveness of her lobbying.

Publicly, the oil companies stated they had "no strategic interest" in Iraq. One week prior to the invasion, Shell said that reports of meetings between the company and the British government over potential oil contracts were "highly inaccurate."

"We have neither sought nor attended meetings with officials in the UK government on the subject of Iraq," Shell said.

However, the documents reveal that following an October 2002 meeting, Edward Chaplin, the Foreign Office's Middle East director at the time, said, "Shell and BP could not afford not to have a stake in [Iraq] for the sake of their long-term future.… We were determined to get a fair slice of the action for UK companies in a post-Saddam Iraq."

On November 6, 2002, the Foreign Office met with BP to discuss Iraq "post regime-change." The Foreign Office memo states: "Iraq is the big oil prospect. BP is desperate to get in there and anxious that political deals should not deny them the opportunity."

On March 1, 2003, BP issued a statement: "We have no strategic interest in Iraq. If whoever comes to power wants Western involvement post the war, if there is a war, all we have ever said is that it should be on a level playing field. We are certainly not pushing for involvement."

On February 6, 2003, Blair said, "The oil conspiracy theory is honestly one of the most absurd when you analyse it. It's not the oil that is the issue, it is the weapons.…"

But in the meetings between BP and the Foreign Office, the oil company said that Iraq was "more important than anything we've seen for a long time."

Far from BP having "no strategic interest" in Iraqi oil, the company moved quickly to ensure its interests post-invasion. In 2005, BP penned a "memorandum of understanding" to provide technical assistance at the Rumaila field in southern Iraq.

It was under the pro-British Iraqi government in the 1950s that BP initially discovered the Rumaila field, the largest oil field in the southern part of the country. The company was keen to profit once again from an asset lost to it for decades by Iraq's subsequent nationalisation of its oil resources. BP notes on its web site, "The company has historical knowledge of the field dating back to its discovery in 1953."

The 20-year technical service contract (TSC) "is good business for BP and competitive with other opportunities in our portfolio," said the company. Subsequent contracts signed between the US puppet government in Baghdad and BP have been the biggest in the history of the industry.

Half of Iraq's proven reserves (60 billion barrels) have now been acquired by major international oil companies, including BP and CNPC (China National Petroleum Company). Their consortium, with BP holding a 39 percent stake, is set to profit from the exploitation of Iraq's oil to the tune of £403 million (US$658 million) per year from Rumaila. BP estimates that by 2016, Rumaila's projected production of 2.85 million barrels a day will account for 3 percent of global oil production, 7 percent of OPEC production, and fully 10 percent of Middle East production.

The carve-up of these lucrative assets has escalated since 2008, with three rounds of bidding for contracts. In addition to the BP/CNPC project in Rumaila, the French oil giant Total has taken a stake in the Halfaya oil field, with access to its 4.1 billion barrels. Shell has signed deal with Petronas, a Malaysian firm, to run the Majnoon field on the border with Iran.

Another contract has been signed between US oil major Exxon Mobil and Shell to develop the West Qurna 1 field, north of the Rumaila field and west of Basra. West Qurna 1 holds an estimated 21 billion barrels of oil. According to the latest estimates, the whole West Qurna field holds 43 billion barrels of recoverable oil. This makes it the second largest oil field in the world, after Saudi Arabia's Ghawar field.

A further contract exploiting West Qurna was signed in December 2009. The rights to develop West Qurna Phase II were won by Russia's Lukoil and Norway's Statoil. The Phase II field is known to contain some 12.88 billion barrels of oil. Other oil firms from countries including Brazil, Norway and Kazakhstan have also signed deals to get access to vast amounts of Iraqi oil.

The signing of technical service contracts is an important step towards corporations taking full ownership of Iraq's oil.

An article on the "real significance of the [Iraq] Oil Ministry's bid round" by Muttitt in July 2008 pointed out that the TSCs could be "contrasted with what the companies really want in Iraq—the dreaded 'production sharing agreements' (PSAs), which would give them control over the fields, a large share of the oil extracted, and the potential for huge profits."

As Muttitt points out, "that the contracts were not PSAs misses the point." He continues: "All six of the fields—Rumaila, Kirkuk, West Qurna, Zubair, Maysan and Bai Hasan—are already producing oil, and actually together account for more than 90 percent of Iraq's current production. As such, their investment and technology needs are relatively minor, and could easily be provided within the public sector, as they have been for more than 30 years."

The *Independent* Wednesday reported on the disclosure of another three documents revealing that the British government, at the highest level, was involved in strategic planning regarding Iraq's oil before and during the war.

Minutes of a meeting of government officials held on May 12, 2003, stated: "The future shape of the Iraqi industry will affect oil markets, and the functioning of OPEC, in both of which we have a vital interest."

A meeting of the UK interdepartmental Oil Sector Liaison Group (OSLG) was told by officials that appearing "gratuitously exploitative" in its Iraq policy goals, including plans to "maximise benefit to British industry and thus British employment/economy," could "backfire politically."

The first of the documents reports a meeting of the Foreign Office, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Department for International Development, and the Treasury. The meeting agreed "required action" and that the Iraqi oil industry was the "first main target" when establishing "where specific prospects for British industry exist" and ensuring that "we are properly placed to take them."

It was agreed that a "senior British oil industry person should go out to Iraq to survey the ground and, if appropriate, participate in [for example] the emerging Oil Advisory Board."

Another meeting of officials two weeks later agreed that a "desirable" outcome for the Iraqi oil industry was "an oil sector open and attractive to foreign investment, with appropriate arrangements for the exploitation of new fields."

Fully aware of the overwhelming opposition to the war against Iraq in Britain and internationally, the paper cited above stated that "foreign companies' involvement seems to be the only possible solution" regarding the long-term export of Iraqi oil. But it added that pursing this would be "politically sensitive." It would "require careful handling to avoid the impression that we are trying to push the Iraqis down one particular path."

The material published in the *Independent* confirms once again the necessity for the assembling of a war crimes tribunal to prosecute George W. Bush, Blair and their co-conspirators for their murderous actions.

It sheds incriminating light on the current "humanitarian" pretensions of Britain, the US and France in their military intervention in Libya—the third largest oil producer in Africa.