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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

BY CHARLOTTE DENNETT

15.05.2021

Pipeline Politics: From Afghanistan to Gaza

It's too early to tell if the bombing deaths of over 60 Afghan schoolgirls will change President Biden's trajectory for withdrawing American forces from Afghanistan. So far he's adhered to the tired old mantra of why our troops were sent there in the first place — to fight the terrorists res

Likewise, there is an oil and gas connection to the ongoing battles between Israel and the Palestinians.

The TAPI Pipeline

Key to its success is securing its passage through lands occupied by warlords. The fiercest warlords of all — deemed most capable of protecting the pipeline — are the Taliban. As recent as February, 2021, the Taliban promised —once again — to protect the TAPI pipeline, described by The Diplomat's Katherine Putz as a “monumentally important project — but it's unclear whether it will ever be built.”

Below is an excerpt from my book, The Crash of Flight 3804: A Lost Spy, A Daughter's Quest, and the Deadly Politics of the Great Game for Oil which delves into the oil and gas connections to the bloody conflicts in Afghanistan, as well as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Israel. All sources are documented in the book.

Dick Cheney, as CEO of Halliburton before becoming Bush's vice president, had certainly made it his business to know where the great oil and gas prospects of the world lay. He made a number of trips to Afghanistan to court the Taliban in 1998, knowing from firsthand experience that one of the greatest prospects in modern times lay in and around the Caspian Sea. The Washington-based American Petroleum Institute had called the Caspian “the area of greatest resource potential outside of the Middle East,” and Cheney

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readily concurred, telling a group of oil company executives in 1998, “I can’t think of a time when we’ve had a region emerge as suddenly to become as strategically significant as the Caspian.” Even after Unocal withdrew from Afghanistan in 1999, Cheney kept a watchful eye on developments in the region, especially after Bush chose him as his running mate in 2000.

During his presidential campaign, Bush himself let the cat out of the bag about his priorities if elected president. He told a Boston audience during his first presidential debate on October 3, 2000: “I want to build pipelines to move natural gas. . . . It’s an issue I know a lot about. I was a small oil person for a while.” Indeed, compared to the Rockefeller-spawned ExxonMobil and Chevron giants that invariably cornered the most lucrative oil and gas markets in the world, Bush’s Zapata Oil was small potatoes. His ascent to the presidency promised more open doors to the “small oil people” in the former Soviet republics in the Caspian Sea region, and in Iraq. Under Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz even admitted to the *Guardian* in May 2003 that everyone in the oil business knew Iraq was rich in oil.

Once in office, Bush appointed so many oil executives to his cabinet that the *Oil and Gas Journal* gushed, “From industry’s perspective, the casting of the lead roles couldn’t be better.” Besides Cheney as Bush’s vice president, there was Condoleezza Rice, Bush’s national security advisor, who had served on the board of Chevron and had once been honored by having a Chevron oil tanker named after her. (The name was removed after she joined the Bush administration.) Bush’s commerce secretary and former campaign manager, Don Evans, had been the CEO of a Colorado-based oil company and a director of TMBR/Sharp Drilling.

The administration immediately explored rekindling relations with the Taliban, for the simple reason that the Taliban held out the most hope for stabilizing Afghanistan and enabling oil and gas pipelines to pass through the country. But by August 2001, the Taliban was balking at some of the conditions laid down by the Bush administration for moving forward, causing Washington to threaten the Taliban militarily if they did not cooperate: “Either you accept our offer of a carpet of gold,” said US representatives, “or we bury you with a carpet of bombs,” reported the French authors of *OBL: The Hidden Truth*. Negotiations broke down when, after the 9/11 attacks, the Taliban refused to turn over Osama bin Laden. (Less known is the fact that the Taliban had sought proof that linked bin Laden to 9/11, and the Bush administration refused to supply it.)



Since 1998, the Taliban have long been viewed as the military force most capable of protecting the TAPI pipeline. Photo: Ruby Goes, CC license.

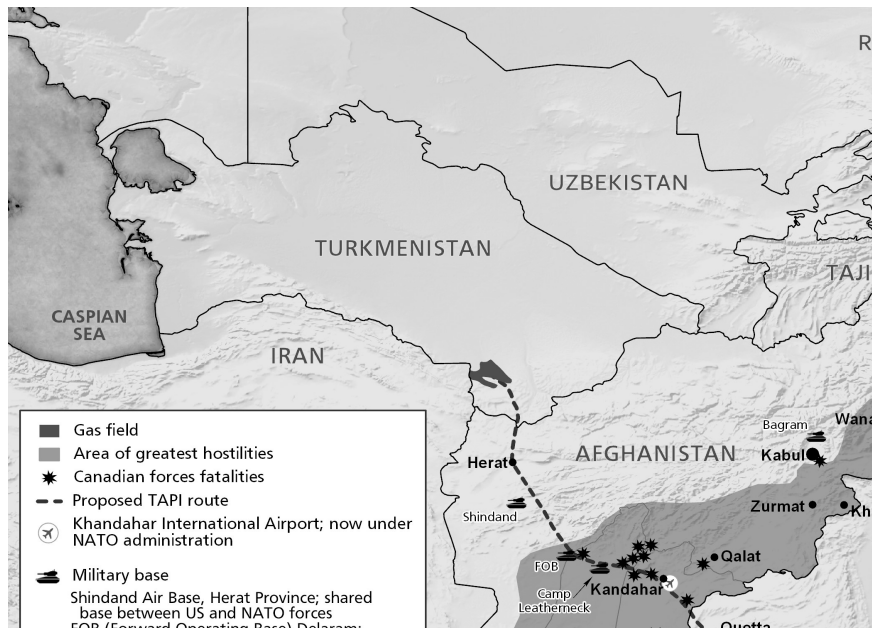
It was just a month later, on October 7, 2001, that President Bush ordered the airstrikes against the Taliban, launching Operation Enduring Freedom. Within six months, American troops had soundly defeated the Taliban. Convinced by May 2002 that stability had been restored to the country, the leaders of Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan met to give the go-ahead for a natural gas pipeline, now called TAPI, for the countries it would traverse: Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan — and India, which was invited to join the project. The economic benefits that would accrue to Afghanistan included millions of dollars in transit fees and thousands of jobs so desperately needed in the war-torn country. Reported the BBC, “It is also hoped such a project would boost regional economic ties and pave the way for further foreign investment.” The Asian Development Bank began a feasibility study. Everything seemed to be going to plan. But which plan? Was sending American troops to Afghanistan to avenge 9/11 and fight terrorism (and, little known to most people, to stabilize the country for secure pipeline transit) the makings of “a good war,” as this “war of necessity” had been described? Or was it, as Australian journalist John Pilger declared after the initial relentless US and British bombing campaigns, a fraud? Pilger noted that “not a single terrorist implicated in the attacks on America has been caught or killed in Afghanistan.”

Two *New York Times* reporters, for their part, saw through the Bush administration’s insistence that oil had nothing to do with the invasion of Afghanistan. In their December 2001 article, “As the War Shifts Alliances, Oil Deals Follow,” Neela Banerjee and Sabrina Tavernise quoted a consultant with Cambridge Energy Research Associates: “Once we

bomb the hell out of Afghanistan, we will have to cough up some projects there, and this [Unocal] pipeline is one of them.” Since the 9/11 attacks, the two journalists reported, the United States saw Afghanistan as “a stable oil supplier,” noting that the State Department was “exploring the potential for post-Taliban energy projects in the region, which has more than 6 percent of the world’s proven oil reserves and almost 40 percent of its gas reserves.”

Muslims in Afghanistan and beyond, added Banerjee and Tavernise, harbored no illusions about Washington’s ambitions: “Skeptics, especially in the Islamic world, contend that oil interests lie at the heart of the West’s war in Afghanistan.” The authors cited a headline in a Pakistani newspaper as reflecting local sentiment: “The Pipeline of Greed,” read the headline. The accompanying article went on to state, “The war on terrorism may well be a war for resources.”

Articles like this tended to be the exception in the West’s coverage of the war. Canadians, however, got a rare dose of reality when, in 2009, a Canadian energy economist named John Foster declared in the Toronto Star that the war in Afghanistan was a pipeline-driven war. Foster quoted a US State Department official revealing the purpose of the pipeline: “Richard Boucher, U.S. assistant secretary of state, said: ‘One of our goals is to stabilize Afghanistan,’ and to link South and Central Asia ‘so that energy can flow to the south.’ Oil and gas have motivated U.S. involvement in the Middle East for decades,” Foster continued. “Unwittingly or wittingly, Canadian forces are supporting American goals.”¹⁸ In a scholarly report published earlier, Foster had shown that Canadian forces bore the brunt of the fighting in Kandahar Province along the pipeline route. “The impact of the TAPI pipeline on Canadian Forces must be assessed,” he wrote, “given that the proposed pipeline route traverses the most conflict-ridden areas of Afghanistan, crossing through Kandahar province where Canadian Forces are attempting to provide security and defeat insurgents.”

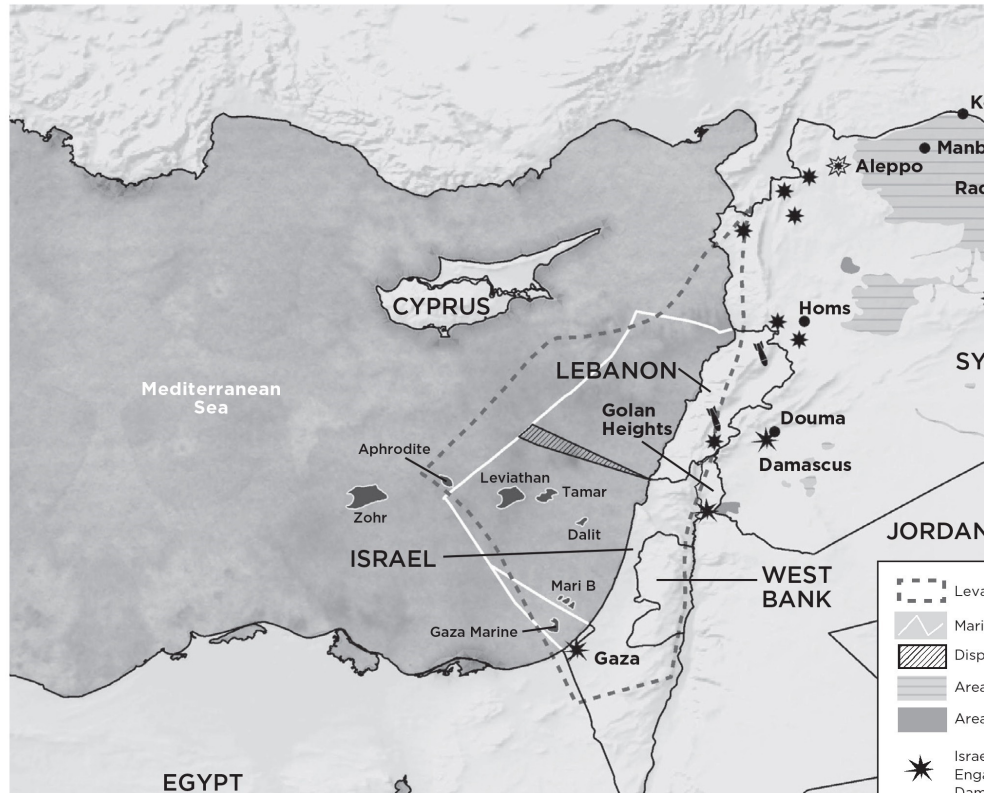


Source: Chelsea Green publishers

The map above shows the projected route of the TAPI pipeline. Part of the caption reads: “In 2006, Canadian forces were give responsibility for securing Afghanistan’s flashpoint provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, key areas for the proposed TAPI pipeline route, along which major US and NATO military bases are located.”

Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid was one of the first to link the pipeline scheme to the Taliban in his book, *The Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. He discovered that “policy was not being driven by politicians and diplomats, but by the secretive oil companies and intelligence services of the regional states.” Oil companies, Rashid continued, “were the most secretive of all — a legacy of the fierce competition they indulged in around the world. To spell out where they would drill next or which pipeline route they favoured, or even whom they had lunch with an hour earlier, was giving the game away to the enemy — rival oil companies.”

What I call “the deadly politics of The Great Game for Oil” is still going on....in the Mediterranean Sea and the countries that border it (including Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, and Libya).



The discovery of huge gas fields off the coast of Israel are only adding to more conflicts in the region.

What About Israel's Latest Assault on Gaza?

The current hostilities in Israel and Gaza are likely to continue Israel's determination to further weaken Gaza and uproot Hamas, ensuring an Israeli monopoly over Gazan gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean. As I explained in my book, former Israeli defense minister Moshe Ya'alon insisted that anticipated proceeds from Gazan gas sales (amounting to \$1 billion) "would not likely trickle down to help an impoverished Palestinians," but would instead "likely serve to fund more terrorist attacks against Israel." The 2008 and 2014 Israeli attacks on Gaza were staged in large part to uproot Hamas and deprive Palestinians of a having their own energy-based economy.

Sadly, in this age of trying to convert to alternative energy to reduce the dangers of climate change, the Great Game is now raging throughout much of Africa. Here is the key to understanding the "endless wars— that's plural —" that have plagued the war-torn Middle East, Central Asia, and now Africa — not just "the forever war in Afghanistan," as President Biden has chosen to characterize US involvement. My parting advice to all who read this: Just follow the pipelines and you shall find the truth about what drives much of US foreign policy...and that includes the Nordstream II pipeline which will carry Russian

natural gas to Germany and beyond, despite the mighty efforts of the US to stop its completion through sanctions against Russia and companies involved in the project. Now that a major American pipeline has been cyberattacked, the American people will have a greater awareness of the vital role played by pipelines in energy flows...and the role of “pipeline politics” in directing, protecting — or impeding — that flow, in the US and overseas.

Charlotte Dennett is an investigative journalist. Her latest book is [The Crash of Flight 3804: A Lost Spy, a Daughter's Quest, and the Deadly Politics of the Great Game for Oil.](#)

CounterPunch 14.05.2021