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Israel, Gaza, and the Struggle for Oil



Aerial View of Haifa oil refineries. Photo: Meronim, [CC BY-SA 4.0 Deed](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

It was the sign that got to me. I was standing with protesters outside the Burlington (VT) City Hall at a rally organized by Jewish Voice for Peace. To my left I spotted a man, grim-faced and silent, holding aloft a piece of cardboard with these words scratched in black:

“Jews against Genocide.”

“So it has finally come to this,” I said to myself.

Why, I wondered, would Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Biden administration risk their standing in the world and ignore calls for a ceasefire? Did they have an unspoken agenda?

As a chronicler of the endless post-9/11 wars in the Middle East, I concluded that the end game was likely connected to oil and natural gas, discovered off the coast of Gaza, Israel and Lebanon in 2000 and 2010 and estimated to be worth \$500 billion. The discovery

promised to fuel massive development schemes involving the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia.

Also at stake was the transformation of the eastern Mediterranean into a heavily militarized energy corridor that could supply Europe with its energy needs as the war in Ukraine dragged on.

Here was the tinderbox waiting to explode that I had predicted in 2022. Now it was exploding before our very eyes. And at what cost in human lives?



Map of the Eastern Mediterranean region showing the area included in the USGS Levant Basin Province assessment. Photo credit: USGS.

Reflections on the Israeli War on Gaza

The year 1975 was my last in beautiful, cosmopolitan Beirut, Lebanon, before it descended into 15 years of brutal civil war, killing 100,000 people.

As a journalist for the *Beirut Daily Star*, I began reporting on the escalating tensions among the ruling Maronite Christians, Shiite Muslims — located primarily in southern

Lebanon not far from the border with Israel — and the Palestinians caught in between. The presence of Yasser Arafat’s Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon was not appreciated by Lebanon’s Maronite Christian ruling elite.

The PLO had been forced out of Jordan by King Hussein during what became known as Black September (1970). In that conflict Arafat’s forces fought to prevent Jordanians from regaining control of the once-Jordanian-controlled West Bank, after Israeli forces had pulled out following the Six Day War of 1967. Defeated by King Hussein’s forces, Palestinian refugees poured into Lebanon. In their desperation to be heard by the international community, Palestinian militants began hijacking planes in 1968 to express their grievances against Israeli occupation.

Those three years of reporting in the Middle East gave me a rare lesson in how oil was turning desert sheikhdoms into modern city states, and Beirut into a refuge for the rich — but also a refuge for displaced Palestinians, which ultimately would not be tolerated.

From the rooftop of my apartment I witnessed French Mirage jets supplied to the Maronites roaring overhead to drop bombs on a Palestinian refugee camp on the outskirts of Beirut. Days later, I spent an afternoon on my belly, hiding under a desk as bullets flew around a Christian school where I had taken refuge during a sudden outbreak of fighting.

I began writing about parents dodging bullets to rescue their children. I did not know who was fighting whom, and as dusk descended on the school, I happily accepted a parent’s offer to rush me to safety. As we dashed to his car, his hand tightened on mine as we narrowly escaped a sniper’s bullet. He was a Palestinian Christian, and he likely saved my life.

Shortly afterwards, I returned to the States, not keen on covering a war that made no sense to me. It would take another seven years before I would figure out that this ongoing “civil war” was really about ridding Lebanon of radicalized Palestinians.

In 1982, the Israeli army invaded Lebanon and coordinated with right-wing Lebanese Phalangist forces to slaughter hundreds of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. Arafat and his PLO got the message. They departed Lebanon for exile in Tunisia that year, and the Palestinian resistance, once secular and leftist, gave way to the rise of the Islamist Hezbollah fighters who resisted future Israeli incursions into Shiite-dominated southern Lebanon, and ended up earning the respect of Lebanon’s large Shiite population. Public opinion in the US and the world began to shift against Israel in the aftermath of the Sabra and Shatila massacres, but the American media and members of Congress equated

criticism of Israel with antisemitism and invariably reminded the world of the horrors of the Holocaust.

Censorship of anyone who showed sympathy for the Palestinians was pervasive, so I took a hiatus from writing about the Middle East during this time, and ended up joining my future husband, author and investigative journalist Gerard Colby, in investigating the genocide of Amazonian Indians during the 1960s and '70s. The result of our 18-year investigation was *Thy Will be Done: The Conquest of the Amazon: Nelson Rockefeller and Evangelism in the Age of Oil* (HarperCollins, 1994). That work became my primer for understanding oil and power at the highest level.

Death of a Master Spy — and Oil

By the mid-1990s, I was drawn back to writing about the Middle East, which was always in my heart, having been born in Beirut and having attended high school there — which was the beginning of my political awakening. But this time I was on a personal mission. I decided to investigate the circumstances behind the plane crash that killed my father. I was six weeks old at the time. Daniel Dennett had just completed a top secret mission to Saudi Arabia in March 1947.

As head of counterintelligence for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and its successor, the Central Intelligence Group (CIG), his assignment was to determine the route of the Trans-Arabian Pipeline (aka Tapline) and whether it would terminate in Haifa, Palestine, soon to be Israel, or nearby Lebanon.

His last report stated that US oil executives were upset with anti-Zionist Syria, which was refusing to let the pipeline cross Syrian territory.

This was remedied in 1949, when the CIA removed Syria's democratically elected president, Shukri al-Quwatli, and replaced him with a Lebanese army officer who gave the green light to the pipeline crossing over Syria's Golan Heights and terminating near the southern Lebanese port of Sidon.

Saudi oil, and the Trans-Arabian Pipeline which carried it to the Mediterranean Sea, was important to American ambitions in the Middle East. *The New York Times*, on March 2, 1947, carried a full page story about it entitled: "Pipeline for US Adds to Middle East Issues: Oil Concession Raises Questions Involving the Position of Russia."

The article, written by President Harry S. Truman's future son-in-law, Clifton Daniel, was a treatise on the "Great Game for Oil." "Protection of that investment," Daniel wrote, "and the military and economic security that it represents, inevitably will become one of the

prime objectives of American foreign policy in this area, which already has become a pivot of world politics and one of the main focal points of rivalry between East and West.” The East, of course, was the Soviet Union. And the US’s exclusive concession in Saudi oil would soon elevate it into becoming a world power, much to the consternation of not only the Soviets, but also the British and the French. Our erstwhile wartime allies were all quietly trying to undermine US interests in the Middle East.

In 1944, my father wrote in a declassified document that his mission for the OSS was “to protect the oil at all costs.” Three years later, as he left Saudi Arabia for Ethiopia on another oil mission, his plane mysteriously crashed, killing all six Americans on board. A CIA official confessed to me, “We always thought it was sabotage, but we couldn’t prove it.” Feeling validated in my quest for the truth, I began digging into history for more context.

After World War II, the US would replace a much-weakened Britain as the overseer of what was to become Israel. And Israel, following its war for independence in 1948 and its expulsion of 750,000 Palestinians from their homeland, would rapidly become a heavily militarized outpost hitched to US interests, with pro-Western European Jews who had survived the Holocaust settling there to protect their lives — and unwittingly to most — to protect Saudi oil “at all costs.”

Seizing Iraq: A ‘First Class War Aim’

My search for oil connections sent me even further back to World War I, when seizing the oil of Iraq became a “first class war aim” for the British admiralty under Winston Churchill. He had decided in 1911 that the British navy would have to replace its fuel source (coal, of which Britain had plenty) with cheaper and more efficient oil (of which Britain had none), hence requiring Churchill to fight “on a sea of troubles” to get oil for his Navy.

Britain succeeded, with the help of Lawrence of Arabia and Arabs who were promised independence in return for helping to drive the Turks (the tottering Ottoman Empire) out of the Middle East. Instead, by 1917, Britain’s foreign minister, Arthur Balfour, penned the Balfour Declaration signaling British approval of a Jewish home in Palestine.

Less known is the fact that the declaration was actually a letter written to Walter Rothschild, a scion of Europe’s powerful oil and banking family. Both men understood the stakes were high for protecting a pipeline planned to bring oil from Iraq (which was seen as an especially promising source) to the West, through the port of Haifa.

Establishing a colony of European Jews in and around the pipeline's terminal point in Haifa would assuage their security concerns.

Netanyahu: 'Soon the Oil Will Be Flowing to Haifa'

In 1927 oil exploration yielded a major strike near Kirkuk, Iraq; the long-planned pipeline was completed in 1934 and oil flowed through it to the West until 1948, when it was closed by the Iraqis during the First Arab–Israeli War. Some five decades later, reopening it became a rallying cry of then-Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the US invasion of Iraq. Netanyahu envisioned Saddam Hussein being overthrown and replaced by a pro-Israel Iraqi dissident named Ahmad Chalabi. “Soon the oil will be flowing to Haifa!” Netanyahu proclaimed. “It’s not a pipe dream.”

But Chalabi was soon ousted and discredited as the creator of the US government’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD) pretext for invading Iraq, and Netanyahu’s pipe dream had to be put on hold.

In 2000, significant natural gas fields were discovered off the coast of Gaza and Israel. The Palestinians claimed that the gas fields off its coast, known as Gaza Marine, belonged to them. Arafat, now settled in the West Bank, hired British Gas (now the biggest energy supplier in the UK) to explore the fields. He learned they could provide \$1 billion in badly needed revenue. “This is a Gift of God for our people,” Arafat proclaimed, “and a strong foundation for a Palestinian state.”

The Israelis thought otherwise. In 2007, Moshe Yaalon, a military hardliner (who would become Israel’s defense minister from 2013 to 2016) rejected claims by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair that the development of Gaza’s offshore gas by British Gas would bring badly needed economic development to the area. Although proceeds of a Palestinian gas deal could amount up to \$1 billion, Yaalon asserted in a paper for Jerusalem Issue Briefs that the revenue “would not likely trickle down to an impoverished Palestinian people.” He insisted that the proceeds would “likely serve to fund terror attacks against Israel.” It is clear, he added, that, “without an overall military operation to uproot Hamas’s control of Gaza, no drilling work can take place without the consent of the radical Islamic movement.”

One year later, on December 27, 2008, Israeli forces launched Operation Cast Lead with the aim, *Haaretz* reported, of sending Gaza “decades into the past,” killing nearly 1,400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis. But it did not result in Israel gaining sovereignty over the Gaza gas fields.

In December 2010, prospectors discovered a much larger gas field off the Israeli coast, dubbed Leviathan. The field offered enough energy to supply Israel's needs, but also presented Israel, according to the Hazar Strategy Institute, "with one of its greatest challenges: protecting the new offshore gas infrastructure in the Eastern Mediterranean which is vital to its energy security and therefore to its economic security."

I was reminded of the 1947 *New York Times* piece on the Saudi Tapline pipeline, emphasizing the need for protecting this large American investment, hence the need for military and economic security.

In the summer of 2014, Netanyahu launched a massive invasion of Gaza with the aim of uprooting Hamas and ensuring Israeli monopoly over the Gazan gas fields, killing 2,100 Palestinians, three-quarters of them civilians. Journalist Nafeez Ahmed, writing for *The Guardian*, claimed "resource competition has increasingly been at the heart of the conflict [in Gaza], motivated largely by Israel's increasing domestic energy woes." He continued, "In an age of expensive energy, competition to dominate regional fossil fuels is increasingly influencing the critical decision that can inflame war."

After the 2014 invasion, the Gazan economy went into a free fall, exacerbating concerns about growing unrest.

October 7 and the End Game

Netanyahu has succeeded so far in averting questions about how Israel's much vaunted security apparatus could have been taken by surprise by the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023.

He insists on calling October 7 "Israel's 9/11," even comparing how the Bush administration, like Israel, was "caught by surprise" by the terrorist attacks that day (in fact, Bush had been forewarned of an impending attack). Now Netanyahu had a pretext for justifying Israel's latest and most brutal invasion of Gaza.

News has seeped out, however, that he was forewarned by Egyptian intelligence that Hamas was on the verge of orchestrating attacks in Israel. In fact, he was repeatedly warned by Israeli intelligence that the political turmoil surrounding his advocacy for changing the Israeli judiciary threatened Israeli national security.

Which raises the unavoidable question: Did Netanyahu let October 7 happen to achieve his ambitions: silencing his critics, fighting corruption charges, staying out of jail, and rallying the country around a wartime president bent on destroying Hamas?

Much of northern Gaza has been reduced to rubble, and it is his goal to obliterate southern Gaza as well. Perhaps he is thinking that only then, after destroying Hamas and forcing

Palestinians out of Gaza, can he convince international lenders to support his long-held scheme of turning Israel into an energy corridor.

Netanyahu — and possibly President Joe Biden — are likely taking the “long view,” convincing themselves that the world will forget what happened once economic development takes off in the region, powered by Israel’s abundant offshore natural gas in the Leviathan Field and Gaza Marine. Work has already begun on another infrastructure project: building the so-called Ben Gurion Canal, from the tip of northern Gaza south into the Gulf of Aqaba, connecting Israel to the Red Sea and providing a competitor to Egypt’s Suez Canal.

Ben Gurion Canal Project

The Canal Project will also connect Israel to Saudi Arabia’s \$500 billion futuristic Neom tech city. One plan envisioned by the Abraham Accords involved normalizing relations with Israel, and tying the signatories — the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco — into vast development projects in the name of peace.

Ironically, at least for me, this involves a revival of the Trans-Arabian Pipeline, only with its terminal point in Haifa, instead of Lebanon.

On the positive side, much of the world is now recognizing that there can be no development project, no peace process, that does not guarantee the military security of Palestine as well as Israel, and recognize the right of Palestinians to live free of occupation, with the same rights, dignity, and peace as their Israeli neighbors.

Even more encouraging are the stands being taken by American Jews who realize that Netanyahu’s siege of Gaza has only increased antisemitism worldwide. As Rabbi Alissa Wise noted recently, “All of this is making Jews less safe in the world. Israel’s actions in Gaza, but also not just now but for generations — when Palestinians are not free, Jews are less safe in the world. And that is the crux of the matter.”

Peter Beinart, editor of *Jewish Currents*, clearly sees the folly of Netanyahu’s war against Hamas: “You can’t defeat Hamas militarily, because even if you depose it in Gaza, you will be laying the seeds for the next group of people who will be fighting Israel.”

This originally appeared on [WhoWhatWhy](#).

Charlotte Dennett is an investigative journalist. Her most recent book, now out in paperback, is [Follow the Pipelines: Uncovering the Mystery of a Lost Spy and the Deadly Politics of the Great Game for Oil](#).

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