

Why America needs Canadian Oil

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In a recent book on women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa, one contributor, who analyzed Saudi Arabia, concluded that nation "remains a country without the basic freedoms necessary for civil society to take root." Eleanor Abdella Doumato chronicled the Saudi prohibition

on political parties, the lack of free speech, restrictions on the media, religion, and assembly, the illegality of trade unions, and the severe restrictions on women's rights (Doumato, 2010: 20).

Over in Russia, Amnesty International noted how, in 2010, "human rights defenders and independent journalists



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In 2011 millions of protesters took to the streets in the Middle East

continued to face threats, harassment, and attacks.” Amnesty pointed out that “freedom of assembly and expression continued to come under attack, including through the banning of demonstrations, their violent dispersal, and the prosecution of individuals under anti-extremism legislation” (Amnesty International, 2011: 270).

Those two countries are the world’s top two oil producers and exporters, but they’re hardly an exception among oil-rich countries. In fact, most major oil producing and exporting jurisdictions score poorly on a variety of civil, economic, and political rights.

Combining oil export data with measurements from Freedom House, a US-based think tank that tracks a variety of liberties, I found that Canada is one of only two countries among the world’s top 15 net oil exporting countries considered “free” in Freedom House’s comprehensive freedom ranking. (Norway is the other.) (Milke, 2011: 19-20).

Three countries—Kuwait, Nigeria, and Venezuela—are classified as “partly free.” However, fully two-thirds of the world’s top 15 net oil exporters are classified as “not free”: Saudi Arabia, Russia, Iran, United Arab Emirates, Angola, Algeria, Iraq, Libya, Kazakhstan and Qatar (Milke, 2011: 19-20).



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Canada is now America's biggest oil supplier

record and instability. The recent Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain and oil-exporting Libya, among others, are instructive examples. Governments that repress their populations, in addition to being morally problematic, are hardly reliable allies or exporters.

It's not that Americans should necessarily boycott oil that originates in freedom-restricting countries. No nation is perfect on civil, political, and economic rights, and some may be in the process of improvement.

But given US dependence on imported oil, Americans should more clearly understand who their human rights-respecting friends are and the consequences of any artificial restrictions on Canadian oil imports.

For example, in 1979, the year of the Iranian revolution during which American diplomats were taken hostage in Iran, Canadian oil constituted just 6.4 percent of all US oil

Americans in particular should take note. The rhetoric about the need for American energy independence notwithstanding, the trend for US oil imports has been up for decades. The only exception has been in recessionary years. Almost four decades after the 1973 oil embargo imposed by some Middle Eastern countries, an event that first put Americans

on notice oil imports should not be taken for granted. The US now imports 5.5 million more barrels daily than it did in 1973 (US Energy Information Administration, 2011).

That's one reason for Americans to think soberly about where their oil originates. Here's another: the link between a poor human rights

imports. That was similar to Iran's share in the year just before the revolution (6.1 percent in 1978). Imports of Iran's oil were cut in half in 1979 and stopped altogether in 1980 (US Energy Information Administration, 2010; calculations by author).

Since then, while the importance of other nations to the US oil import market has fluctuated, Canada's crude has mattered even more.

By 2009 (the last year with comparable data available), Canada accounted for 21.2 percent of all oil imports to the United States, and is now America's biggest supplier. That was more than all Persian Gulf countries at 14.4 percent, down significantly from 1979 when Gulf countries accounted for one-quarter of all US oil imports (US Energy Information Administration, 2010; calculations by author).

All of this matters, or should, to American and Canadian policymakers. That's because, as the International Energy Agency forecasts, oil will remain the world's dominant fuel for the foreseeable future. It predicts 99 million barrels in daily consumption by 2035, up from 86 million now. That same agency also predicts that unconventional oil—think Canada's oil sands—will play “an increasingly important role in world oil supply through to 2035, regardless of what governments do to curb demand” (International Energy Agency, 2010; 2).

To wit, Canada is the only major world oil producer with these two qualities and advantages: first, it already exports significant amounts of crude oil to the United States; second, it is stable in part because of its longstanding positive record on civil, political, and economic rights.

Looking ahead, there's a third advantage: Canada has the potential to greatly reduce American dependence on sources of non-North America oil. That reality can help the United States avoid any economic and policy shocks that might result from an over-reliance on countries with unpredictable, and in some cases, undesirable regimes. In short, Canadian oil is in the American national interest.

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