

From war to warming

The shameful story of BP in Iraq



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The British Museum's current blockbuster exhibition, *I am Ashurbanipal: king of the world, king of Assyria*, is sponsored by its regular partner, the oil giant BP. This is painfully ironic, given that many of the objects on display were originally looted by the British from modern-day Iraq, and BP was one of the biggest profiteers from the devastating US/UK invasion in 2003 that led to hundreds of thousands of Iraqis losing their lives.

It is perhaps no coincidence that BP chose to sponsor this particular exhibition. Its interest in Iraq stretches back a hundred years; from starting to go after its gigantic oil reserves in the 1910s - with the support of the British army, to operating the country's biggest oilfield today. The company has also recently been one of the targets of huge protests near its Rumaila operation in Southern Iraq, as Iraqis rise up and demand their rights.

In the words of Iraqi economist Kamil Mahdi:

"After 2003, and more than two decades of war and sanctions, Iraqis expected their country to benefit from increased oil revenues given the rise in oil prices and the end of sanctions. Instead, revenues were diverted into corrupt spoils and elite consumption of imported goods, leaving the country's infrastructure, public services, industry, agriculture and transport system in ruins, and leaving the environment in a lethal state. Oil companies have been major players in this tragic situation."

The story of BP - and Britain - in Iraq is a shameful one, and the Iraqi people are still living with the consequences. We stand in solidarity with Iraqi communities as they continue to fight for jobs, clean water, safety, democracy and justice.

This briefing was put together by **Culture Unstained**, drawing particularly on work by Kamil Mahdi and Greg Muttitt to whom we are extremely grateful.

A fully referenced version of this briefing is available here: <https://www.behindthelogos.org/iraq/>

Art on front cover (top right) by Mariwan Jalal.

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1. BP was complicit in the catastrophic 2003 war

***“Iraq is the big oil prospect.
BP are desperate to get in there.”***

- UK Foreign Office memo, 6 November 2002.

Minutes of a meeting between BP and the UK Foreign Office reveal how, just a few months before the 2003 US/UK invasion and occupation of Iraq, BP was lobbying the British government to help the company access Iraq’s immense oil reserves. BP calls the reserves “Vitaly important – more important than anything we’ve seen for a long time.”

That meeting was one of five in which the Blair government discussed Iraq’s oil with BP and Shell in the run-up to the war. The companies denied any such meetings took place. It was years later that the minutes were obtained through Freedom of Information requests and revealed in the book *Fuel on the Fire* by Greg Muttitt, which tells the full story of how throughout the war, occupation and aftermath, BP kept its eyes on the prize.

The illegal invasion and subsequent Iraq war killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians and destroyed their country. We may never know the exact number of deaths, but estimates range from 151,000 violent deaths as of June 2006 to 461,000 total deaths as of June 2011. Many more have perished in the aftermath or lost their homes, livelihoods and loved ones.

Sixteen years later, Iraq is still reeling from the effects and aftermath of the war and occupation. Public institutions have collapsed, infrastructure has been decimated, new terrorist groups such as Daesh (Islamic State) have arisen, poverty and hardship have increased dramatically and corruption is rife - another inevitable consequence of institutions built through occupation.



Super Cobra fires rockets into an enemy mortar position in a cemetery near Najaf Iraq in August 2004.



Protester at the British Museum reminds us of BP’s role in the decision to go to war. Photo Kristian Buus.

BP’s revolving door

But BP got its wish. It was the first western company to set up shop in post-war Iraq in 2009. Greg Muttitt’s book demonstrates just how closely the UK government and BP worked together before, during and after the invasion to serve the company’s interests:

- In 2004, BP hired Sir Jeremy Greenstock, who had been Britain’s Special Representative to Iraq. Just three months into the new job he and his new BP boss, John Browne, jointly met Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi to lobby for BP.
- Terry Adams, former head of BP Azerbaijan, was hired by the UK government to write Iraqi oil policy, and to help transfer the publicly-owned oil production into the hands of companies like BP.
- When in 2009 long-term contracts were offered to multinationals, ‘the Iraqi government was little more than a puppet,’ according to Muttitt, ‘consisting of UK and US allies who’d had no administrative experience before the occupation put them in power. So they needed to be trained in oil negotiations. The training provider? BP.’
- In a public auction two months later, BP won the contract for Rumaila, Iraq’s largest oil field. But, reveals Muttitt, ‘even this was not enough, so over the following months, BP entered a private negotiation with the Iraqi oil minister, without civil service oversight. The result was a contract much more favourable to BP.’
- The Chilcot enquiry into the Iraq war revealed in 2016 that BP had started a technical review of the Rumaila field as early as 2003.

A history of war for oil

At their heart, the war and occupation were designed to serve oil interests above all else. This is perhaps a natural extension of BP and the British government's long and shameful history of intervening in Iraq in order to extract its oil wealth.

In 1915 the UK government bought a 50% stake in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, BP's precursor, and promptly invaded Southern Iraq - then part of the Ottoman Empire - with access to its oil as a leading objective.¹ Britain occupied and administered the new state of Iraq at the end of the First World War, remaining influential after independence and ensuring its oil companies could maintain their domination over the region's oil until the 1970s. In fact, some have suggested that a century-long quest by US and UK oil companies to control Iraq's huge oil reserves drove up to seven wars, including the 2003 conflict.

Prior to that, British companies (with the backing of the British government) had been actively involved in selling arms to Saddam Hussein despite his well-documented violations of human rights, including the horrific massacre of the Kurds at Halabja using chemical weapons.

1 BP's history in Iraq is summarised in Greg Muttitt's 2011 book *'Fuel on the Fire.'* See: <http://www.fuelonthefire.org/>



Iraq Petroleum Company laying down an oil pipeline in the 1930s. Photo: Matson Collection [Public domain].

This close trading relationship lasted right up to his August 1990 invasion of Kuwait, when suddenly Saddam was recast as the UK's enemy. This is another example of a common pattern: the UK government working hand in hand with big British companies to put profit before the lives of ordinary people, currying favour with human rights abusers when it's in their interests, intervening militarily when their interests shift, then looting the spoils.

2. Iraqis have held massive protests against the impacts of foreign oil companies

"In Basra you see the wealth pouring out of the community every day – from oilfields over there, less than a kilometre from where we are sitting – and then you see the poverty and lack of employment in the villages, while companies import thousands of foreign workers."

- Ali, who was involved in mass protests in 2018.

Years of discontent escalated into massive protests in oil-rich Southern Iraq in the summer of 2018. The opening up of Iraq's multi-billion dollar oil reserves to foreign oil companies like BP, Shell, Exxon, Eni and Petrobras to operate, was supposed to bring economic growth and prosperity to all Iraqis.



Military forces intervene during the Basra protests in 2018. Photo by Khalid Tawfik Hadi.

Instead, they have seen little to no benefit; large profits are sucked out of the country and into the hands of foreign shareholders, costs are inflated and much of Iraq's share is siphoned off by corrupt politicians and warring political factions.

Anger over this corruption and political nepotism, the mass unemployment on the doorstep of such lucrative oil reserves, collapsing infrastructure including power cuts and water shortages, a lack of basic healthcare, and undrinkable water, led to tens of thousands protesting. Some made their protests at the actual gates of BP and the other foreign oil companies themselves.

According to Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, writing in the Guardian:

“In the eyes of the local villagers, the heavy traffic rumbling along the narrow road has become a daily reminder of the contrast between the boundless wealth lying underneath their homes and the abject poverty above ground.”

State crackdown

The protests were met with police and army repression, including the deliberate use of live bullets, and violence from paramilitary groups associated with some of the political parties being criticised. Iraq’s High Commission for Human Rights found that between 1 August and 7 September 2018, 20 people were killed, 492 people were injured (including 80 members of the security forces), and another 425 were arrested for participating in the protests. Some were tortured in detention, and some are still missing.

In October, a civil society fact-finding team named some of the victims of state violence:

“One example is the killing of Harith al-Salami. Security forces broke his skull and left him to bleed to death in detention. Kidnappings and killings by other unknown parties also occurred, such as in the case of Ali Abbas, who was found lying on the bank of the Shatt al-Arab, his body showing traces of torture including fractures in his hands.”

3. BP is extracting Iraq’s wealth with no benefit to ordinary Iraqis

“BP, ExxonMobil and others have systematically been grabbing control over the Iraqi oil industry ever since the US invasion... The people of Iraq gain very little from their own oil industry and in fact have to ask how does it benefit us at all? We get environmental problems, higher cancer rates, but the money doesn’t go to improving conditions for the people.”

- Hassan Juma’a Awad, president of the Iraq Federation of Oil Unions.

The first oil contract following the Iraq war was dubiously allocated to BP and the Chinese National Petroleum Company. It was signed in 2009 to develop Southern Iraq’s super-giant Rumaila oilfield - the third largest in the world, representing nearly half of Iraq’s output. The companies were set to receive returns of up to \$660 million per year for the next 20 years.



Despite the pollution and searing heat of the flame, this flower decided to live and to resist the conditions. Photo taken in Iraq’s oilfields by Malik Alawe.

This followed a major push by Britain and the US to force an Oil Law through the Iraqi parliament that legalised oil privatisation in Iraq. The law was not passed, largely because of a popular Iraqi campaign against it. It was then decided to sign long-term contracts with foreign oil companies even though there was no legal basis for doing so, and BP was at the front of the queue.

The Rumaila contract was opposed by many in Iraq, including oil experts, the management of the South Oil Company (which would have to work with BP on the Rumaila field), the oil trade union and the parliamentary oil and gas committee. Many decried it as illegal, since it was approved by the oil minister, circumventing the Iraqi parliament which was supposed to have the final say according to the country's constitution. Behind the scenes, BP changed the terms significantly from the public auction result which, combined with the way the oilfield was subsequently run, resulted in greater profits for the oil company, at the expense of the Iraqi people.

At the time, output from the field was 1.1 million barrels per day (bpd). By the following year the field was producing 1.45 million bpd and in August 2018 plans were made to boost crude output to 2.1 million bpd by 2020. The contract runs until 2034 after it was extended in 2014. See section 5 for the climate change implications of this.

In January 2018, following the defeat and withdrawal of Daesh (Islamic State), BP signed a Memorandum of Understanding to develop the newly accessible Northern Iraqi Kirkuk oilfield. Kirkuk is another of the biggest oil fields in the Middle East, and one whose riches had first enticed BP's precursor (the Anglo-Persian Oil Company) into the newly-formed state of Iraq to start extracting its resources in the 1920s. The final contract has yet to be signed, but, as with Rumaila, there is little transparency on the part of BP about its planned activities.

Dependent on oil

Currently, the Iraqi economy is almost completely reliant on oil production. In 2012 almost 45% of Iraq's GDP was dependent on oil, with only Kuwait, Libya and Saudi Arabia having a higher proportion of oil-dependent GDP. In 2013 99.8% of Iraq's exports were fuel-related, the highest in the world, and in 2017 OPEC's statistics show that the value of petroleum exports were 94.34% of total Iraqi exports. The second largest commodity sector in Iraq is agriculture, which is responsible for only 5% of the country's GDP.



Art by Iraqi artist Mariwan Jalal.

This leaves the Iraqi economy vulnerable to fluctuations in oil prices as well as any global attempts to limit oil production in response to climate change. The large amounts of oil money flowing to corrupt local and national officials means that it is not being invested back in the infrastructure and services that the people of Iraq most desperately need. It also means that it is more difficult to find investment for other more sustainable social and economic ventures.

Criticisms of BP

BP is seen by ordinary Iraqis as one of the worst offenders amongst the foreign oil companies. While BP claims that it is employing Iraqi workers and 'giving back' to the community, locals complain that in reality, Iraqi workers are usually paid a small percentage in comparison to foreign workers, who also take most of the better-paid jobs, despite plenty of Iraqi expertise being available.

In the words of Iraqi economist Kamil Mahdi:

"Extreme health and energy-poverty conditions have worsened as the activities of BP and other companies have expanded and as oil production and exports increased. It is not good enough for these companies to claim they are not directly responsible for the outcome."

Mahdi argues that in the cases of Rumaila and Kirkuk, BP is taking over what was a functioning national company and effectively incapacitating it for decades to come, taking away Iraq's ability to integrate the oil industry in its own economy. He adds that the costs of the foreign companies' operations generally have been excessively high and charged to Iraq. These include exaggerated pricing for fairly standard contracts and expensive offices, facilities, recreation and travel for senior foreign staff. He also argues that the terms of BP's operations mean the company carries very little risk.



A young girl protests the poor conditions in Basra and carries a sign saying "Rights aren't lost if there are those who demand them." Photo by Khalid Taufik Hadi.

4. BP is depleting and polluting Southern Iraq's scarce water supplies

"In Basra, all the wars weren't enough for us to die in them, it became outdated that we died by bullet or by car accident. Now, even the taps kill us, the very taps that are the sources of water to our houses."

- Khalid Tawfiq Hadi.

Southern Iraq is facing a water crisis. For many months, residents of Basra have turned on their taps to find cloudy, brownish-yellow salty water that is too dirty even to wash clothes in, let alone drink. The once lush region where the rivers of Tigris and Euphrates meet used to be verdant, watery and full of palm trees and grazing animals. Known as the cradle of civilization where the first great cities of Mesopotamia thrived, it has been a profoundly fertile land for thousands of years. Now, writes Ghaith Abdul-Ahad:



Sewage is dumped into one of the rivers extending to Shatt al-Arab in Basra, Iraq. Photo: Reuters.

"Drought and the intrusion of saltwater from the Gulf have wiped out most of the palm groves, the cattle have been sold, local rivers have dried up and the canals have stagnated, clogged with rubbish."

This situation is badly exacerbated by the oil industry. Shockingly, with water sources under so much pressure, up to 66% of the residual water² from the Tigris river is potentially available for use by the oil industry in the Province of Basra. BP itself has been using large amounts of water to keep up the level of oil production in its Rumaila field. The company recently increased production thanks to its water injection programme – more than doubling output in the northern area of the field. According to its own report, BP injected over 720,000 barrels per day (bpd) of water in 2016 and 2017. This comes at a time when droughts exacerbated by climate change are also reducing the availability of fresh water (see more details in section 7). The constraints on water supply even led BP to revise down the planned increase of production in Rumaila (from 2.85 million bpd to 2.1 million bpd. Currently production is at 1.48 million bpd).

2 Source: Dr Hassan Khalil Hassan, University of Basra http://www.almothaqaf.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=933811&catid=288&Itemid=601

Toxins from oil extraction

The oil industry is not only worsening droughts, it is actively polluting local water resources. In October 2018 a civil society fact-finding mission found dangerous levels of pollution in Basra's water supplies. Extreme rates of cancer, asthma, allergies and birth defects have also been reported among residents of Basra and the surrounding region who live near oil facilities. The toxins in the water come from

the disposal of industrial and petrochemical waste through pipelines, and is so bad that the fact-finding team advised that this water is not appropriate for residential use. Unfortunately, bottled water is often unavailable, or unaffordable to many.

The fact finding mission was created to investigate the large-scale contamination in the Province of Basra's water supplies, with about 100,000 residents of the province

estimated to have been taken ill after drinking polluted water in the summer of 2018. Chemical and bacterial contamination of Basra's water has been found to be extremely high and salinity is more than 20 times the recommended level. This was one of the triggers for the mass protests - dubbed by some as the "water uprising".

The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights documented 7,000 cases of colic, diarrhoea and poisoning due to water contamination in just two days in August. The organization warned:

"The health services provided by the Basra hospitals can hardly cater to the needs of 15% of the cases. Some patients were left to lie on the floor as they failed to receive any treatment."

In 2015, a government official in Basra said that the province records 50 new cancer cases each month due to the polluted air that is associated with oil extraction. In 2018, Basra Province's Health and Environment Committee revealed that four new cancer cases are registered every day as a result of air pollution. See section 5 for more on BP's gas flaring.

5. BP is exacerbating climate change in Iraq

“The smell is bad, the waste enormous, and the environmental impact appalling.”

- a World Bank employee on encountering gas flaring at BP’s Rumaila oilfield.

BP’s long-term plans for its Iraqi oilfields directly contradict the urgent need to leave fossil fuels in the ground and transition rapidly to a zero carbon world. At the moment, BP only invests 3% of its operating capital in renewables. The rest goes into extracting oil and gas, searching for more, and building infrastructure that will lock the world into continued dependence on dirty energy.

We have already shown that in many ways the people of Iraq are not benefitting from BP’s presence. In fact, Iraq is already being hit hard by the climate change that BP’s business model is destined to exacerbate. Rising temperatures, intense droughts, declining precipitation, desertification, salinization and the increasing prevalence of dust storms are already having an effect – and it’s only going to get worse:

- Iraq’s mean annual temperature is expected to increase by 2°C by 2050. It will experience more frequent heatwaves, and the mean annual rainfall is projected to decrease by 9% by 2050.



Cracked earth from drought exacerbated by the heat of oil extraction. Photo taken in Iraq’s oilfields by Malik Alawe.



*A field irrigation project in Muehlah Iraq.
Photo: (cc) Wendy Wyman, via Wikimedia Commons.*

- This will lead to decrease in agricultural productivity, loss of arable land and an increase in the likelihood of crop failure, which in turn is likely to increase rural to urban migration. Such migration will add to the destabilising effect of displacements caused by floods and storms as well as the damage in infrastructure caused by rising sea levels and more erratic weather patterns. With Iraqi agriculture consisting of mostly small-scale farmers, this is a further hit for anyone not working for the oil sector.
- Water resources will become even scarcer. As groundwater becomes depleted, saltwater intrusion will increase which will reduce availability of fresh water even further. This will lead to reduced access to safe drinking water and an increase in conflict over water both locally and – potentially – with Turkey, where the sources of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers which supply more than half of Iraq’s fresh water are located.
- The reduction in access to safe drinking water will lead to an increase in water-borne diseases such as cholera; the decrease in food production will lead to an increase in malnutrition; and the increase in sand and dust storms will lead to an increase in respiratory infections.

And yet BP’s plans to extract increasing amounts of oil from Iraq’s oilfields, for decades to come, will keep the country locked into an oil-dependent economic model that leaves it vulnerable not just to the effects of climate change but to any global or local attempts to limit oil production in response.

Gas flaring

One of BP's most environmentally irresponsible activities in Iraq is gas flaring. The burning of excess gas is a common practice in the extraction of crude oil and the tapping of gas fields in Iraq. It is also very damaging:

- it increases greenhouse gas emissions, releasing both CO₂ and methane
- it contributes to acid rain and can have a damaging effect on the chemical properties of soil around flaring sites
- it increases air pollution, with the associated health implications for local residents – communities surrounding flaring sites have shown an increase in premature deaths, respiratory illnesses, asthma and cancer

In 2017 Iraq was one of the few countries in which flaring was increased, while worldwide flaring levels were reduced by 5%.

This is, in part, another consequence of Western intervention as Kamil Mahdi explains:

“Gas processing plants were destroyed in 1991 by US bombing. Companies like BP have taken contracts that neglect gas processing and this has led to increased flaring. They argue that it’s not their responsibility, which shows that they do not take good environmental and resource management practices seriously.”

Iraq now says it is planning to stop flaring completely from southern oilfields (which include Rumaila) by 2021, and BP has pledged to phase it out by 2030. But, as Mahdi points out, ‘Iraq’s plans to stop flaring gas rest largely on a separate gas-specific contract with Shell, but Shell has been making slow progress, apparently preferring to export gas rather than meet the less remunerative local demand.’

Meanwhile, years of increasing oil production - and the associated flaring practice - have seen a rise in air pollution in the region, with four new cancer cases being registered every day as a result.

6. BP is whitewashing its activities in Iraq by sponsoring an exhibition of Iraqi culture in the British Museum

“When I saw there would be a special exhibition on my culture and my history, I was ecstatic because for once, my culture’s beauty would be celebrated - but finding out the sponsor was BP was a massive slap in the face. These are the very same sponsors who advocated for the war which destroyed my homeland and slaughtered my people, all in the name of OIL. To BP and the British Museum, I say how DARE you use my culture and my history as an attempt to hide your colonialist skeletons!”

- Yasmin Younis.

BP is an old hand at cultural diplomacy. For decades it has sponsored arts and culture as a way of securing its ‘social license to operate’. It enjoys a much-needed boost in legitimacy by associating itself with some of the UK’s most iconic institutions, such as the British Museum, the National Portrait Gallery, the Science Museum, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal Opera House.

BP holds many of its corporate events in the British Museum and uses the opportunities that ‘BP Exhibition’ launches provide to network with government ministers and shore up relationships with foreign dignitaries. For example, at a Day of the Dead event it sponsored, BP was able to host its own private VIP reception in order to meet strategic policy-makers from the Mexican government, from whom it subsequently won a lucrative contract to drill in the Gulf of Mexico.

In the case of the British Museum, every exhibition that BP has sponsored in the last 5 years has been connected to a region where the company operates, and BP's Vice President Peter Mather, who oversees its UK sponsorship relationships, has admitted: 'When there is an option, naturally we are going to try to match a particular exhibition with somewhere we have an interest.'

It is no surprise that BP is trying to cast its operations in Iraq in a more positive light, especially in the eyes of the cultural, political and business elite who will have attended the Ashurbanipal VIP launch event and enjoyed private views of the exhibition. But the British Museum should not be conferring such legitimacy on such a destructive company in return for just 0.5% of its annual income. And to associate BP's logo with ancient Iraqi artefacts is deeply insensitive, especially given recent history.

Decolonising the British Museum

The National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad is currently full of replicas. The originals are scattered around the world, in the museums of colonising countries, just as Iraq's oil wealth has been extracted and repatriated to enrich foreign oil companies. The British Museum's justification for holding on to such objects: that they are safer and better looked after in London than their country of origin, is beyond ironic in this case.

The mass looting of museums in Baghdad in 2003, and the deliberate plunder and destruction of cultural objects by Daesh in Mosul in 2014-15, were both direct consequences of the UK/US illegal invasion that BP played a significant role in lobbying for. BP sponsorship of Assyrian objects in London today is another painful reminder of this destruction. But it is also a rallying point for social movements to once again put the injustices that Iraq has suffered at the hands of successive UK governments and companies in the spotlight, and demand justice.



*BP or not BP? stage the largest protest in the British Museum's history outside the Ashurbanipal exhibition.
Photo by Safa Kadhim.*



*An Iraqi protester refuses to be silent, despite the best efforts of BP's "Head of Drilling & Spilling" in a performance by BP or not BP? at the press launch of the BP-sponsored Ashurbanipal exhibition in the British Museum.
Photo by Kristian Buus.*

As the movement to decolonise museums gathers momentum, and calls for the return of looted objects get ever stronger, the British Museum needs to acknowledge its colonial foundations and mindset, and that includes dropping destructive neocolonial sponsors like BP.

Art and protest

With so many problematic issues colliding in one exhibition, it is no surprise that the British Museum saw its biggest ever protest on the 16th February 2019, a date chosen as it marks the 16th anniversary of the massive global protests against the Iraq war.

Activists of Iraqi origin working with the protest organisers BP or not BP? also put on a rival exhibition 10 minutes' walk from the British Museum. *I am British Petroleum: king of exploitation, king of injustice* was an interdisciplinary exhibition of work by artists both in Iraq and in the diaspora. It focused on uncovering the realities and consequences of BP's intervention in Iraq, in direct response to the British Museum's own exhibition.

In the words of the rival exhibition's curators:

"The objects displayed in museums are not obsolete relics; they are symbols of an ever evolving history, one through which people can trace their modern-day identities and experiences."

This exhibition and how it is presented matters deeply, and there is no doubt that calls for cultural institutions to reconsider the role they play in rebranding the images of destructive companies and perpetuating colonial mindsets will continue to grow ever louder as resistance to BP's exploitation of Iraq continues to unfold.