



TeachableMoment Classroom Lessons

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility

Published on *Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility*
(<http://www.morningsidecenter.org>)

[Home](#) > Oil: Saudi Arabia, the U.S. & Osama bin Laden. Three Lessons for High School Students

OIL: SAUDI ARABIA, THE U.S. & OSAMA BIN LADEN. THREE LESSONS FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Submitted by [Alan Shapiro](#) [1] on Sat, 07/23/2011 - 13:39

Area: Current Issues

Grade Level: High School

Topic: Energy & Climate Change

Description:

Most Americans are "energy illiterate." These lessons for high school students promote energy literacy, especially about oil. We begin with a student energy quiz, followed by three readings and suggested classroom activities.

By Alan Shapiro

LESSON ONE

Ask students: What differences would it make in your life if the oil wells of the world suddenly went dry? List their responses on the chalkboard without comment.

Distribute **Student Worksheet I**, "Our Dependence on Oil," and ask students to read it.

What additions can students now make to the list on the chalkboard? Urge them to think about ways they travel and businesses that service such travel (e.g., cars, buses, motorcycles, planes...service stations, garages...oil companies); everyday products they use (e.g., plastic tape players). Oil is found in literally thousands of products (see the American Petroleum Institute website-www.api.com [2]) — soft drink bottles, aspirin, toothpaste, deodorants, food additives to prevent spoilage, plastics in TVs, telephones, and computers, photographic film, sneakers, the fabrics of clothes, drugs. And of course oil generates electricity and provides heating for homes

and apartments.

What questions do students have about the list they have generated or about what they have read in the worksheet?

(A note about questions: Good teachers have always devoted time, effort, and intelligence to framing the best questions they could and recognized them as vital tools for learning. But how much attention do teachers give to helping students learn how to frame good questions? These lessons emphasize a process that includes 1) having students write down questions they think will advance their understanding; 2) subjecting these questions to careful analysis and, if necessary, to reframing; 3) developing student understanding that the nature of a question-its form and assumptions-determines the nature of an answer; that some questions are better than others; and that question-asking and question-analysis are essential ingredients in critical thinking. "Thinking is inquiry, investigation, turning over, probing or delving into so as to find something new or to see what is already known in a different light. In short, it is questioning." -John Dewey)

Having written, without comment, student questions on the chalkboard, the teacher can examine the questions in terms of the following:

- Is the question clear? If not, how might it be reworded?
- Is the question answerable? If so, how?
- Is it answerable with facts? From where?
- Is it answerable with opinions? Whose? Why?
- Is there any word in a question that needs to be defined before the question can be answered intelligently? If so, how shall it be defined?
- Does a question contain an assumption? If so, is this assumption reasonable to make? If not, how might the question be reworded?
- Must certain questions be answered before others? If so, which? and why?

Keep the students' questions on the chalkboard and have students write them in their notebooks for later consideration.

Distribute and assign for homework **Student Worksheet 2**, "Saudi Arabia and the United States."

STUDENT WORKSHEET 1:

OUR DEPENDENCE ON OIL

In the past century oil, supplemented by natural gas, replaced coal as the main power source for the industrial world. Its importance is impossible to overestimate. Daniel Yergin, in *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power*, writes:

Today we are so dependent on oil, and oil is so embedded in our daily doings, that we hardly stop to comprehend its pervasive significance. It is oil that makes possible where we live, how we live, how we commute to work, how we travel...Oil (and natural gas) are the essential components in

the fertilizer on which world agriculture depends; oil makes it possible to transport food to the

the fertilizer on which world agriculture depends; oil makes it possible to transport food to the totally non-self-sufficient mega-cities of the world. Oil also provides the plastics and chemicals that are the bricks and mortar of contemporary civilization, a civilization that would collapse if the world's oil wells suddenly went dry. (page14)

Where does the oil that powers the United States come from? More than half comes from sources outside the country. In July 2001 the leading foreign supplier of oil was Saudi Arabia, which sold the U.S. 1,713,000 barrels of oil daily (a barrel equals 42 gallons).

Saudi Arabia's 259,000,000,000 barrels of proven crude oil reserves represent more than 25% of the world total.

Osama bin Laden, the accused mastermind behind the September 11, 2001 attacks on the U.S., was born and raised in Saudi Arabia. He castigates the rulers of his native land as traitors to Islam, as corrupt agents of the U.S. who sell it oil cheaply and allow it to manipulate oil prices. He wants to overthrow the Saudi government and break its connections with the U.S.

Keep this information in mind as we consider 1) oil and its importance; 2) Saudi Arabia and its relationship with the U.S. and 3) Osama bin Laden's aims.

STUDENT WORKSHEET 2:

SAUDI ARABIA AND THE UNITED STATES

Read and study the following. Then write down and bring to class three questions that, if answered well, would give you a better understanding, especially of any of the following:

- Saudi-U.S. agreement
- Saudi-U.S. disagreement
- problems of the Saudi government

Oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia in 1938. The country then was only six years old, having been unified in 1932 through an agreement between King Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud and the very strict Wahhabi sect of Islam. The first discovery was followed by others. And a poor desert kingdom was on its way to becoming a fabulously rich and important country.

Americans learned how important oil was to the future of the United States during World War II. Its army, navy, and air force were fueled by oil, mostly from U.S. oilfields, for vehicles of every kind, but especially tanks, ships and aircraft. That Germany and Japan did not have access to reliable sources of oil contributed to their defeat.

But American strategists were convinced that U.S. oil resources would not be sufficient for the post-war era. They concluded that the Middle East in general and Saudi Arabia in particular with its huge untapped deposits of oil would be crucial as a supplier. An American company had made the initial oil discovery in Saudi Arabia, and Americans had helped to create Aramco, the state oil company.

Even before the war ended President Franklin D. Roosevelt met King Ibn Saud on a ship in the

Even before the war ended President Franklin D. Roosevelt met King Ibn Saud on a ship in the Suez Canal. Details of their meeting have never been made fully public. But it is believed that at this meeting the two established the basic arrangement that has existed to this day: the U.S. would guarantee the protection of the Saudi kingdom and the Saudis would provide the U.S. with privileged access to their oil.

What is on the public record is a letter from Roosevelt's successor as president, Harry S. Truman, to King Ibn Saud in 1950: "I wish to renew to Your Majesty the assurances which have been made to you several times in the past, that the United States is interested in the preservation of the independence and territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia. No threat to your Kingdom could occur which would not be a matter of immediate concern to the United States."

During the half century since 1950, the U.S.-Saudi relationship has usually been very good and very profitable to Saudi Arabia and to American oil companies. The U.S. has been getting about 15% of its crude oil imports from the kingdom. Aramco and its U.S. partners have made huge profits from sales of Saudi oil. The Saudis buy \$6-10 billion worth of goods every year from American companies. And the Saudi royal family, which consists of some 7,000 members, has become immensely wealthy as well as safe from attack because of American protection. The U.S. has provided the Saudis with American military advisors, huge quantities of weapons and training, and management support for the kingdom's internal security force, the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG).

The U.S. has been able to count on Saudi Arabia's power as an oil producer to keep prices stable, a very important element in U.S. prosperity. The only exception came in the early 1970s when Middle East oil producers, including Saudi Arabia, in retaliation for U.S. support of Israel during a war in 1973, for a time sharply reduced production and allowed prices to rise higher than they had ever been before.

The U.S. and Saudi Arabia both opposed the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Viewing the Soviet move as a threat to U.S. dominance in the Persian Gulf, President Jimmy Carter declared that an attack on any Gulf country would be regarded "as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America" and would be resisted "by any means necessary, including military force." The Saudis, too, saw the Soviet action as a threat to their own country as well as to Sunni Muslims who make up the bulk of the Afghan population. Both countries supported the Afghan resistance with money, arms, and covert operations.

In 1989, when the Soviets gave up and withdrew from Afghanistan, the U.S. also withdrew, abandoning any involvement with the future direction of the country. The Saudis, however, maintained their interest, supporting the Taliban, who emerged victorious in an Afghan civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal. The Saudis made a gift of 150,000 barrels of oil daily to the Taliban in 1999 and through at least mid-2000.

An even closer U.S.-Saudi alliance occurred in 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait, an attack that both U.S. and Saudi leaders regarded as a threat to Saudi Arabia and the rest of the rich Persian Gulf oilfields. The Saudis permitted the U.S. to establish bases for American soldiers in their country and to use its airfields for strikes against Iraq. After Iraq's defeat, thousands of American soldiers remained in Saudi Arabia, as they do to this day.

Despite its great oil wealth and potentially great natural gas wealth, Saudi Arabia faces serious problems.

1. The authoritarian Saudi government is notorious for corruption and wasteful spending. Family

1. The Saudi Arabian Saudi government is notorious for corruption and wasteful spending. Family princes are well known for their un-Islamic behavior in Western Europe-partying, drinking, being with prostitutes. Family members have also cheated the state in oil and construction deals. Meanwhile, this behavior and support for unprofitable state enterprises has resulted in a rising national debt and widespread unemployment-perhaps as high as 30% among those under 25 who make up more than half of the Saudi population. Resentment has grown among these young people who are out of work and have no say in the government.

2. With its oil wealth the Saudis have financed madrassas, religious schools, in the Muslim world for young people who would otherwise probably have no schooling at all. These schools, led by Wahhabi clerics, teach almost exclusively reading and memorization of The Koran, Islam's holy text. In some, in Pakistan for example, the schools also have provided military training aimed at those who are viewed as enemies of Islam and that, for some Muslims, includes Saudi Arabia itself. Such schools in Pakistan also trained many of the Taliban at the time of the war against the Soviet Union.

The rulers of Saudi Arabia have maintained and spread the strict legacy of the Wahhabi brand of Islam. Saudi Arabia enjoys great prestige among Muslims as the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad, as a land whose law is The Koran and as the site of Islam's holiest shrines at Mecca and Medina, to which millions of Muslims come each year on a hajj, or pilgrimage. So important is this history that King Fahd no longer uses his royal title but calls himself "The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques."

But ordinary Saudis are aware of the difference between what their rulers profess about religion and how some of them behave, and do not necessarily respect Saudi clerics who support the government and live well in big houses. Some Saudi clerics, however, are clearly unhappy with what they see as their government's subservience to the U.S., its recent willingness to break off relations with the Taliban, its quiet acceptance of U.S. bombing in Afghanistan, the presence of American soldiers on Saudi soil. They see the Saudi leaders as not Islamic enough.

3. Strains between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. have appeared during terrorist investigations. After 1995 and 1996 attacks in Saudi Arabia that killed Americans, the Saudis conducted their own inquiries but would not allow American investigators to have access to Saudi suspects. Since the September 11 attacks in the U.S., however, the Saudis have shared much information with the FBI about terrorist suspects, including 15 Saudis who were among the 19 hijackers. But so far Saudi Arabia has been unwilling to freeze the bank accounts of individuals or groups that the U.S. says have terrorist connections. The Saudis say the Americans have not presented them with sufficient proof.

The Saudi rulers are fearful of stirring up more opposition to their regime from Saudis who resent their country's relationship with the U.S. At the same time, the U.S. expects cooperation in the fight against terrorism. Saudi rulers are caught between competing pressures and prefer when they cooperate with U.S. to do so as quietly as possible. Recognizing this, the U.S. government avoids criticism of the Saudi government.

Other matters of contention between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. include:

a. Saudi Arabia has supported the Palestinians in their quest for statehood, as well as the Palestinian militant group Hamas and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah. The Palestinian cause is very popular with ordinary Saudis, many of whom probably feel their rulers are not aggressive enough in supporting it. While the Saudis view Hamas and Hezbollah as freedom

fighters, the U.S. sees them as terrorists and has mostly backed Israel.

b. Saudi Arabia opposes the continuing boycott of Iraq, which has caused much suffering and death among ordinary Iraqis. The U.S. continues the boycott because Iraq has refused to permit further inspections of facilities that the U.S. believes may be producing weapons of mass destruction. It has also periodically bombed in Iraq and continues to enforce a no-fly zone for Iraqi aircraft in the southern part of the country.

Both countries play down these disagreements. The main reasons appear to be Saudi Arabia's desire for U.S. military protection and the U.S. desire for Saudi oil-which are what brought the two countries together 50 years ago.

How much of a threat is there to Saudi Arabia's rulers? That is hard to know. But Saudi rulers are certainly concerned about growing numbers of dissatisfied young men in their country as well as Osama bin Laden and Muslim networks like Al Qaeda that aim to sweep away governments like Saudi Arabia's.

FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT SAUDI ARABIA

Head of state: King Fahd

Crown prince: Abdullah

Government: Monarchy with council of ministers

Population: 22.7 million

Geographic size: 1/4 that of the U.S.

Major cities: Riyadh (royal capital), Jidda (administrative capital), Mecca (birthplace of Muhammad), Medina (tomb of Muhammad)

Language: Arabic

Ethnic groups: 90% Arab, 10% Afro-Asian

Religion: Muslim (predominantly Sunni)

Major industry: Extraction of crude oil, which accounts for 90% of the nation's export earnings and 70% of its revenues. The nation exports 8 million barrels of oil daily.

Future industry: The nation has 204.5 trillion cubic feet of proven natural gas reserves, ranking it fourth in the world

Exports to U.S.: Saudi Arabia provides about 9% of the oil used daily in the U.S.

LESSON TWO

1. The teacher may wish to begin the class by having students respond in writing to one of the following two items or by having students discuss one or both items. The main purpose, in either case, is to determine how well students have understood the reading.

a. Discuss concisely the relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. Include: what each

country gains from the association; one issue on which they have agreed and why; one issue on which they have disagreed and why.

b. Discuss concisely one problem faced by the rulers of Saudi Arabia and explain the reasons for it.

2. Discuss: Did the reading answer any of the questions raised yesterday?

3. Divide the class into groups of four. They are to share their questions, examine them in terms of the criteria stated at the previous session and choose one the group regards as its best.

4. Have a reporter from each group read its best question for listing on the chalkboard and analysis. Can any of these new questions be answered by students?

5. Distribute and assign for homework Student Worksheet 3, "Osama bin Laden."

STUDENT WORKSHEET 3:

OSAMA BIN LADEN

Read and study the following brief biography of Osama bin Laden, who is accused by the U.S. of being the mastermind behind the Al Qaeda terrorist network, and then examine statements he has made in recent years. Write down and bring to class three questions which, if answered well, would give you better understanding, especially of the following:

Osama bin Laden's view 1) of the Saudi government; 2) of the U.S. government; 3) of Saudi Arabia's management of its oil.

Born in 1957 in Saudi Arabia, Osama bin Laden is the son of a very wealthy construction businessman and inherited millions of dollars after his father's death in 1968. He is said to have become involved in Islamic politics at the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

As an organizer, recruiter and fundraiser, he worked in Afghanistan and the Middle East. The U.S. also supported the Afghan resistance to the Soviets with money and weapons. By the time of the Soviet defeat in 1989, Osama bin Laden and Muslim fundamentalists from Egypt had established Al Qaeda and training camps for the organization in Afghanistan.

Osama bin Laden's violent anti-Americanism dates from the Gulf War in 1991 when Saudi Arabia, fearing for its own security, allowed the U.S. to put military bases in Saudi Arabia during the war against Iraq. It is also the time when he became a harsh critic of his country's government. Worried about his criticism of them and his leadership of Al Qaeda, the Saudi rulers revoked Osama bin Laden's citizenship in 1994 and his family disowned him.

For about five years he lived in Sudan, then moved to Afghanistan, establishing a close relationship with its Taliban rulers. During the past eight years, he and Al Qaeda have been linked

to the following:

1993: an attempt to destroy the World Trade Center, causing damage and six deaths

1995: destruction of SANG headquarters in Riyadh, killing five Americans and others

1996: explosion at the Khobar Towers in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, killing 19 American airmen

1998: destruction of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing more than 200, mostly Kenyans and Tanzanians

2000: blast in Yemen on the U.S. destroyer Cole, killing 17 American sailors

2001: destruction of the World Trade Center and damage to the Pentagon, killing thousands

Comments by Osama bin Laden in interviews and public statements:

"The ordinary man knows that Saudi Arabia is the largest oil producer in the world, yet at the same time he is suffering from taxes and bad services...Our country has become an American colony...What happened in Riyadh and Dhahran when 24 Americans were killed in two bombings is clear evidence of the huge anger of the Saudi people against America."(7/10/96)

"Regarding the criticisms of the ruling regime in Saudi Arabia and the Arabian peninsula, the first one is their subordination to the U.S. So, our main problem is the U.S. government, while the Saudi regime is but a branch or an agent of the U.S....We believe that the current oil prices are not realistic due to the Saudi regime playing the role of a U.S. agent and the pressures exercised by the U.S. on the Saudi regime to increase production and flooding the market that caused a sharp decrease in oil prices." (3/97)

"First, for over seven years the United States has been occupying the lands of Islam in the holiest of places, the Arabian Peninsula, plundering its riches, dictating to its rulers, humiliating its people, terrorizing its neighbors, and turning its bases in the Peninsula into a spearhead through which to fight the neighboring Muslim peoples.

Second, despite the great devastation inflicted on the Iraqi people by the crusader-Zionist alliance...the Americans are once again trying to repeat the horrific massacres....

Third, if the Americans' aims behind these wars are religious and economic, the aim is also to serve the Jews' petty state and divert attention from its occupation of Jerusalem and murder of Muslims there. The best proof of this is their eagerness to destroy Iraq,...and their endeavor to fragment all the states of the region such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Sudan into paper statelets....

All these crimes and sins committed by Americans are a clear declaration of war on God, his messenger, and Muslims....On this basis, and in compliance with God's order, we issue the following fatwa [religious edict] to all Muslims: The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies-civilians and military-is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque [Jerusalem] and the holy mosque [Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim." (2/23/98)

LESSON THREE

1. For a concise written response or discussion: Summarize Osama bin Laden's views of the Saudi Arabian government and why he holds them, and his views of the U.S. government and why he holds them.
2. Have any additional class questions been answered?
3. Divide the class into groups of six. 1) They are to share their questions, then choose after discussion the two that interest them most; 2) They are then to examine the two questions in terms of the criteria established earlier and to clarify the questions, if necessary; 3) Finally, they are to answer the questions as best they can.
4. A reporter from each group should summarize for the class the questions chosen and the group's answers. Class members can be invited to comment further.
5. The teacher can then summarize what questions the group has answered, at least in part, and what questions remain to be answered.

For further inquiry and reports, the teacher might assign the remaining questions to individuals and/or groups for additional work.

- The following subjects might also be worth student inquiry:
 - U.S. policy on Iraq, official reasons for it and criticisms of it
 - U.S. relationship with Israel, official reasons for it and criticisms of it
 - The connections between oil use and smog, acid rain, air pollution, ozone depletion, and global warming
 - Sources of energy that might in time replace U.S. reliance on oil, including renewable energy sources such as wind, biomass, geothermal and solar. Also, opportunities for fuel and energy efficiency.
 - Operations of U.S. oil companies in countries other than Saudi Arabia-e.g., Nigeria, Angola, Colombia.

SOURCES:

Newspapers and Magazines

New York Times

The Independent (British)

Newsweek: Fareed Zakaria, "Why Do They Hate Us," 10/15/01 and "The Saudi Game," 11/19/01

The New Yorker: Seymour Hersh, "King's Ransom," 10/22/01

The Nation: Michael Klare, "The Geopolitics of War," 11/5/01

Websites

WEBSITES

American Petroleum Institute: api.org

CNN: cnn.org

Energy Information Administration, U.S. Department of Energy: eia.doe.gov

Federation of American Scientists: fas.org

Public Broadcasting System: pbs.org/frontline

Union of Concerned Scientists: ucsusa.org

Book

The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power by Daniel Yergin

This lesson was written for TeachableMoment.Org, a project of Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility.

Source URL: <http://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/oil-saudi-arabia-us-osama-bin-laden-three-lessons-high-school-students>

Links:

[1] <http://www.morningsidecenter.org/users/alan-shapiro>

[2] <http://www.api.com>