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### Re-reading *Geography of World Affairs* by John P. Cole

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The section that is shown below is taken from a book written in 1959 by the geographer John Peter Cole. Author of more than 25 volumes of geography, in *Geography of World Affairs* Cole proceeds to a meticulous and sophisticated analysis of international political issues, supported by corroborating maps, graphs and statistical tables. The book is very useful not only to have a clear and complete idea of the global international relations after the Second World War, but also to understand how the perception of the world has changed over time. However, this article is not intended to be a clear and complete analysis of the topics that will be briefly discussed, but to provide a number of comments on some examples of the perception of certain themes that depend on crystallized stereotypes in the collective imaginary of our time.

The extract reported concerns the geopolitical situation of *North-East Africa* and of a region that nowadays we call the *Middle East*<sup>1</sup>. By reading the passage, the emphasis should be placed on several topics, primarily on the active role of the western companies (U.S. and European) in terms of oil production and trade in the above-mentioned areas. As a matter of fact, Cole defines oil as “*the only mining activity employing a large*

*number of persons*”, even if the amount consumed in the countries of North Africa and Middle East is very little. According to the geographer, the causes are attributable to the major U.S. and European companies that deal with the extraction of oil and allow it to be consumed elsewhere. Cole blames this on the fact that the oil-producing countries were in most cases backward and under-populated and that made them unstable, encouraging the dominance, for instance, of the major British companies in Iran. Even the desperate attempts to nationalize oil companies ended up in total financial collapse, leading the oil-producing countries to ask for help from foreign companies again.

These dynamics triggered a number of chain reactions that caused:

1. the dependence of the western countries on Middle East oil production;
2. the lack of development of manufacturing industries in North Africa and the Middle East, since crude oil was refined abroad;
3. the misdistribution of the royalties in oil-producing countries.

This situation remained almost stable until the birth of OPEC<sup>2</sup> in 1960. OPEC is an inter-governmental organization founded by Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela. It came to number 15 nations in the following years. OPEC was formed by the main oil-producing countries as a response to the dominance of the major

<sup>1</sup> Excluding Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan that, on the contrary, the author includes.

<sup>2</sup> Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. For more on this topic visit the official website of OPEC: [http://www.opec.org/opec\\_web/en/about\\_us/24.htm](http://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/24.htm).

foreign oil companies. In 1973, a shock<sup>3</sup> caused by the supply of energy occurred in the West: the oil-producing countries autonomously fixed crude oil prices with disregard for the major Western companies, which, for decades, had controlled the hydrocarbon global market. From that moment on, the OPEC countries began to establish their own oil policies independently of Western companies in order not only to improve their economic situation, but also to gain more autonomy in international political decisions (Bucarelli and Labbate, 2014, pp. 468-469). Since then, the global production of OPEC has not followed a steady trend of growth: there was an early stage of uninterrupted growth up to 1974. For a few years, the production has not grown any more, but, on the contrary, has fallen in some years. From 1979 to 1986, there was a decisive phase of multi-year decline. In 1986 a growth trend started and, although with some periods of stagnation or decline, it remained linear over the long term, albeit with a slowdown from the 1990s. During the 2000s after the invasion of Iraq, the fear of attacks on oilrigs and refineries throughout the Middle East slowed down the production considerably. In 2017, after years of disagreement, OPEC and some non-OPEC countries (such as Russia) announced the cut in oil production. This measure was implemented in order to increase prices, which had been falling to very low levels for years. The fall in prices was in fact crippling many of the oil producing countries, whose economy was (and still is) highly dependent on the price of oil (Barsky and Kilian, 2004; Hamilton, 1985; Hamilton, 1996; Hooker, 2002).

Among the most interesting forecasts for the near future is the New Policies Scenario of the IEA<sup>4</sup>, which shows a hypothesis of the annual growth in oil demand of between 2015 and 2040, albeit at a lower rate than historical averages (Bassam, 2017). It is necessary here to point out the importance of oil in current global geopolitical balances, since the adoption of a low-carbon economy is becoming an increasingly tangible possibility. Minimizing the role of the

main oil exporters in the Middle East, however, could not return the desired results. The integration of the energy market between Europe, North Africa and the Middle East can arise from a new paradigm: the waiver of the sole control of sources of energy in favor of their sharing (Morin and Ceruti, 2013, pp. 97-100).

Another noteworthy element that emerges insistently in the extract below is certainly the use of the expressions *Northeast Africa* and *Southwest Asia* rather than *North Africa* and *Middle East*. Regardless of the slightly imprecise history of the *Middle East* linguistic expression<sup>5</sup>, it is interesting to focus the attention on the geopolitical background that affects the linguistic conventions and the use of certain expressions rather than others. Cole inserts the passage in a chapter entitled *The Region of the Inner Zone* which also includes *Non-communist Europe and Northwest Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia and Japan, Korea, Formosa*. The most interesting thing is the proper use of the names of the geographical areas in relation to the continent they belong to, as an attempt to try to dissociate them from all kinds of national or individual viewpoints. Actually, from a geographical perspective, the border between East and West is fluctuating and indefinite (Prezzo and Redaelli, 2002, p. 19). As a matter of fact, from the European perspective, the American continent is regarded as the West but, from the American perspective, the Asian continent will be considered the West. And everyone knows that the only thing that matters is the perspective, the point of view or, to borrow from Said, the *vision*: “*the Orientalist vision*” is “*a vision by no means confined to the professional scholar, but rather the common possession of all who have thought about the Orient in the West*” (Said, 1978, p. 69). The East and West have acquired a *complexity* of meanings and cultural references that lead, for example, to associate North Africa with the Middle East for common history and religion (Prezzo and Redaelli, 2002, pp. 19-24). The word *complexity* derives from the Latin *complexus*, which meant intertwined, united. Therefore, the

and an embargo on the more pro-Israeli countries as retaliation and warning not to give it help.

<sup>4</sup> International Energy Agency, <https://www.iea.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> In this respect refer to: Lewis, 1975, 1994; Campanini, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> On October 6 1973 (Day of the Yom Kippur), the Egyptian and Syrian army simultaneously attacked Israel. In the following days, the Arab OPEC countries decided to support the action of Egypt and Syria through robust increases in the price of barrels

Mediterranean becomes the sea of complexity, the sea that unites heterogeneity, the sea that generates diversity (Morin and Ceruti, 2013, pp. 83-84). Nevertheless, we cannot fail to take into account that “cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving these other cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be. To the Westerner, however, the Oriental was always like some aspect of the West” (Said, 1978, p. 67): the problem lies in the single vision that each state has of the Other. The states raise high walls within which they contain their identity that struggles to trespass, preventing a multicolor and multifaceted blend. Apart from the Europocentric issue, which is also of absolute importance, in relation to oil production and trade, the author underlines a still current geopolitical reality, even if 70 years have passed since the publication of his volume.

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## Geography of World Affairs<sup>6</sup>

**John P. Cole**

### Southwest Asia and Northeast Africa

No part of the world has for so long been the home of civilization and the scene of conflicts as the region between and including the Nile in Northeast Africa and the Indus in South Asia. Archaeological evidence suggests that here were the earliest cultivators, the first irrigation works, the first cities, and the oldest empires. Here also the Christian and Muslim religions had their origins. Today, Southwest Asia might be called the centre of world affairs, even though the individual countries belonging to it are among the poorest and weakest in the world. It lies between Europe and the rest of Asia, between the U.S.S.R and Africa. It has land frontiers with the U.S.S.R. in the north, with South Asia and even China in the east, with East Europe and non-communist Europe in the west, and with Africa in the south.

The region of Southwest Asia and Northeast Africa is given considerable unity by a number of features. Firstly, from the centre of the region, Arabia, the Muslim religion spread almost everywhere over it and, indeed, was carried far beyond its limits, into parts of Africa and Europe to the west and into Asia to the east. Today most of the inhabitants of the region are still Muslim. Secondly, several hundred years ago almost all of the region came under the control of the Ottoman Empire, centred on Turkey. During the period of Turkish control, little material progress was made, and, indeed, irrigation works were even neglected. Since the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey has remained somewhat aloof and apart from the rest of Southwest Asia. Thirdly, the language of much of the region is Arabic, though the Turkish (Turco-Tatar family) and Persian (Indo-European family) languages belong to completely different families, which is why Turkey and Iran (Persia) are outside the Arab group of countries. Finally, the whole region is poor, good farmland is restricted by dry conditions to very limited areas, and irrigation is vital to the agriculture of several of the countries. In only two respects does the region resemble

non-communist Europe. It is broken into a number of peninsulas by seas that penetrate far inland, and it is divided into a large number of political units. Here the comparison with Europe ends.

As Turkish control of the region weakened in the 19th century and collapsed as a result of the First World War, other powers were able to extend their influence in the region. Britain, with its interest in a reasonably direct route to India, was one of the first, and France, with its expanding empire in Northwest Africa, was also interested. Before this, Russia had started to penetrate into the region and it annexed the Caucasus and Transcaucasia early in the 19th century. Germany was particularly interested in establishing a sphere of influence between Central Europe and the Persian Gulf, but defeat in the First World War put an end to this project. Italy also established colonies in Libya before 1914 and attempted to build up a sphere of influence in Northeast Africa, the annexation of Abyssinia being a further step in this direction. By the beginning of the Second World War, therefore, much of the region had been annexed or influenced in some other way by European powers, and even the U.S.A. had economic interests there. Since the war the tide has turned against the Europeans and, in particular, Britain, France, and Italy have lost influence in the region. A number of independent states have begun to exploit the growing national consciousness of their inhabitants and to enter the already complicated game of power politics now being played in the region. Two important recent examples were the formation early in 1958 of important the United Arab Republic (Egypt, Syria, and the Yemen) and the Arab Federation (Iraq and Jordan). Finally, the appearance of Israel on the scene shortly after the Second World War has further added to the confusion. Its inhabitants may claim that they are not Europeans, but certainly many have been educated in Europe or Anglo-America and in technical and organizational matters are far superior to their Arab neighbours.

When considering Southwest Asia and Northeast Africa the reader should always bear in mind the great differences in size and population

<sup>6</sup> Penguin books, Harmondsworth, 1959.

between the various countries. Israel and the Lebanon, for example, are each roughly comparable in size with Yorkshire, while together they have fewer inhabitants than this county. Turkey, on the other hand, is six times as large as England, and Iran and Saudi Arabia are each twelve times as large. Some of the small territories of the Persian Gulf have only a few tens of thousands of inhabitants, while Egypt, Turkey, and Iran each have more than 20 m. The whole region has about 130 m. inhabitants, 80 m. in Southwest Asia and 50 m. in North east Africa. For most of the countries, population figures are only estimates.

Population is distributed very unevenly over the region. In Egypt, for example, almost all of the inhabitants are concentrated in the lands irrigated by the Nile about one-thirtieth of the total national territory. Indeed, most of the population of South-west Asia and Northeast Africa is to be found either in irrigated lands or in the few areas of reasonably heavy rainfall. The more humid areas include the Mediterranean coastlands and some of the mountain areas, of which Ethiopia is the most densely populated. Although the average density is comparatively low, the density in the intensively cultivated parts is in reality very high.

There has been little urban development in the region so far. Turkey, with about 20 per cent of its population in towns, is probably the most highly urbanized of the larger countries, though, among the smaller ones, Israel has most of its population in non-agricultural settlements. Mining and industrial developments have recently been causing migration from rural areas to towns, and centres such as Baghdad in Iraq and Cairo in Egypt are growing rapidly.

Few figures are available to allow the rate of increase of population to be assessed with accuracy, but what data there are suggest that the increase is rapid. In Syria, the Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt, for example, the population is increasing each year by 2-3 per cent.

In spite of the great expansion of the oil industry in certain countries in recent decades, agriculture is still by far the most important activity in all but a few districts. Only in Israel and some of the smaller oil-producing territories of the Persian Gulf do other activities overshadow

farming. Agriculture is very much restricted by low rainfall over most of the region. In parts of Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan it is also restricted by extensive rugged mountain areas. Only Ethiopia can be said to have an abundant rainfall for agriculture over an appreciable part of the national territory.

Most of the countries are more or less self-supporting with regard to food production and there is relatively little specialization in farming. There is a great contrast between the relatively small, intensively cultivated areas, producing crops such as rice, fruits, vegetables, and dates, and the extensive areas of generally scanty natural pasture supporting sheep, goats, or camels. Much of the region is of no use at all for farming. Only in a few areas are specialized crops grown for export in appreciable quantities-cotton in Egypt and fruits in the Mediterranean coastlands.

Undoubtedly there are possibilities of increasing agricultural production in some areas. Higher yields could be obtained by the use of fertilizers and fuller use is now being made of some parts of Turkey with the introduction of mechanization. Except in Ethiopia and the Sudan, however, there are few areas into which cultivation could be extended greatly, and the only real hope of increasing the cultivated area is to provide large works of irrigation in the valleys of rivers such as the Nile, Tigris, and Euphrates which still carry much of their water into the sea.

Forestry and fishing are of little or no importance in most of the region. There are few extensive stands of good timber, while the many seas in the region are of little use for fishing.

In view of the great fame of the oil industry of Southwest Asia the reader should be reminded that, apart from its oil reserves, the region appears to be very poorly provided with mineral deposits (though it has not yet been fully explored). What is more, the principal proved oil reserves are themselves restricted to a very small part of Southwest Asia. With regard to other minerals, Turkey is the only country with an appreciable production of coal, and it also accounts for about one-quarter of the world's chrome ore, while Egypt mines some phosphates. The oil industry is the only mining activity employing a large number of persons. Very little of the oil produced

is actually consumed in Southwest Asia itself.

Of the world's proved oil reserves in 1956, Southwest Asia had almost two-thirds: world 26,000 m. tons; Southwest Asia nearly 17,000 m.; U.S.A. 4500 m.; Venezuela 1685 m.; U.S.S.R. 1330 m. New reserves are of course constantly being discovered and new techniques are making it a commercial proposition to utilize oil in shales. Even so, the present importance of Southwest Asia as a source of oil can easily be appreciated.

From col. IV in table 13, it will be seen that no more than four countries account for almost all of the oil production of the region and, together, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, and Qatar produced about 97 per cent (and more than 18 per cent of the world total). Egypt was the only important producer out-side the Persian Gulf area. So far no large reserves of oil have been found away from the main producing fields around the Persian Gulf itself.

The oil production is almost entirely in the hands of a few European and U.S. oil companies, most of the oil is exported to Europe and other parts of the world, and the main benefit the producing countries derive from the industry is their 50 per cent share of the profits of production. Admittedly, these countries, like Venezuela in Latin America, themselves lack the capital and the technicians to develop oil production. Even so, the financial position is not altogether a happy one, and dissatisfaction with it was expressed in the nationalization of Anglo-Iranian Oil Co. property in Iran in 1951. Oil production dropped almost to nothing in the following years and the Iranian oil industry has only been put on its feet again by the assistance of a consortium of foreign companies. A recent agreement between Italy and Iran, whereby Italy is to receive only 25 per cent of the profits of oil production, may eventually lead to a revision of the financial situation in the region. Japan, too, has ignored the traditional 50-50 basis of profit sharing by recently agreeing to pay 57 per cent in royalties on production in its concessions.

It is often pointed out that the companies build towns and roads, which will remain even when oil production has ceased. Obviously these are built largely to serve the oilfields, and whether or not they will have any other future use can hardly be expected to concern the oil companies. As in

all branches of mining, there invariably remains the question of finding employment for the workers if and when reserves are exhausted. At present this does not preoccupy the oil countries, for the industry is still expanding. A further question which is also of little concern to the oil companies, is the use made of the oil royalties. These may find their way into the pockets of a limited number of individuals or they may be spent on grandiose public buildings. They could more usefully be spent on works of construction to create alternative employment and a source of income for the government once the oil royalties begin to diminish.

The countries of Southwest Asia and Northeast Africa have almost no coal, and even very little timber for fuel. Educational standards are low and there is almost no tradition of manufacturing. Not surprisingly, then, there has so far been almost no development of industry on modern lines. Any future oil, development of industry might be expected to be based on oil, for the region is one of the least suitable parts of the world for the construction of hydro-electric power stations, unless costly storage reservoirs are provided. As in the oil industry, foreign equipment and technicians are needed if industries are to be established. At present Turkey is the only country producing steel, while Turkey and Egypt produce small quantities of cement and fertilizers, and some light manufactures. Israel also has some modern industries. Elsewhere there has been little modern industrial development so far.

The region as a whole is very poorly provided with communications, but the economy does not require the exchange of goods between one region or one country and another. Only oil is moved in large quantities - either by pipeline or tanker.

Living standards are low throughout the region except in Israel. Here large amounts of foreign aid have enabled the inhabitants, with their superior technical experience, to provide living conditions closer to those of Western Europe than to those prevailing in Southwest Asia. Cols VI to IX in table 13 help to give an idea of differences in material and cultural levels between the various countries. Undoubtedly Ethiopia and Afghanistan are among the poorest.

Almost no figures are available for Arabia. The oil countries must all have benefited from oil royalties, but it is impossible to assess precisely to what extent conditions have so far been improved. Turkey, Syria, the Lebanon, and Egypt, the countries closest to and longest influenced by Europe, are the most advanced economically, but hardly compare even with the poorest in Europe.

The problems of the region are many. In the end, aridity appears to be the greatest. If any significant improvements to be made in agriculture, then here, more perhaps than anywhere else in the world, large sums of money will have to be invested in costly irrigation works. It has not yet been decided who provide the necessary capital nor when it will be forthcoming but whoever wishes to bring better living conditions to the region should not forget that agriculture is the principal activity almost everywhere.

With regard to oil production, Persian Gulf oil is at present essential to the economy of non-communist Europe, or at least to certain branches of its economy. Other sources of oil in Algeria, Canada, or Latin America, for example could be exploited rapidly within a matter of a decade, and Europe might by then begin to reduce its dependence on oil from Southwest Asia. European politicians, with their habitual inability to understand the impact of what they say on non-Europeans, openly boast that their aim is to become independent of oil from this precarious

part of the world. They rarely express their indebtedness to Southwest Asia for the cheap oil received and they seem not to care if they suddenly cut off the one substantial source of revenue to these poorer countries by finding oil elsewhere.

In the field of world power politics Southwest Asia is a vacuum area, for although there are several great powers close to it there is no major power within it. Turkey, connected with NATO, is undoubtedly the strongest military power in the region. The Baghdad Pact countries, Turkey, Iraq, Iran (and Pakistan in South Asia), without the military backing of the U.S.A., have few resources to defend themselves, and the U.K., with so many financial and military commitments in other parts of the world, has in reality little to offer them.

The two outside powers now able to exert most pressure on the region are the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. Although the U.S.S.R. is so much closer to Southwest Asia than its rival, the U.S.A. benefits from its remoteness in one respect. Most countries would prefer to ally themselves to or receive aid from a distant power than one across their frontier or only a few hundred miles away. Turkey and Iran, the closest to the U.S.S.R., have certainly shown that this is true, and even Afghanistan has connexions with the U.S.A., though much of its foreign trade has for the last hundred years been with Russia.