Steve Yetiv’s “The Petroleum Triangle” argues that oil and globalization separately and together produced unique conditions for “transnational terrorist” organizations and Al Qaeda to evolve and enjoy unprecedented success. With oil, he emphasizes its critical role in transportation, in driving the U.S. presence in the Gulf, in backing repressive regimes, and in providing vast money to Saudi elites that have financed Wahhabi proselytizing, the Taliban, and etc. With globalization, he stresses its bringing U.S. culture to the MENA Region providing grist for jihadist indignation, and its providing terrorists with the internet, instant media notoriety, easier movement across borders, and etc. Taken together, Yetiv argues, these uniquely enabled a small group which “sees the U.S. presence” in the Gulf “thorough a distorted religious lens,” to become an unprecedented threat far beyond its home..

To prove this, Professor Yetiv assembles a prodigious array of sources in two parts: “Oil and Transnational Terrorism” then “Globalization and Transnational Terrorism.” These are often highly informative—especially on Saudi elite support for jihadi groups, financial flows, characterizations of globalization, and more. Yet, this reviewer is left unconvinced of the thesis. But, apparently, so is the author, who constantly uses very hedging language in stating how sources cited contribute towards his thesis, and ends the Conclusion saying:

“Although [Al Qaeda] has been diminished ... it may take years or even decades before we know [the outcome]... What happens in the Petroleum Triangle may well shape important contours of this unfolding tale.”

Hardly a ringing affirmation of the thesis. Does the “Petroleum Triangle” drive and “shape” modern-day Transnational Terror and Al Qaeda? Or is it merely that it “may well shape important contours” of these?

Indeed, spectacular petroleum rents reaped in Gulf and neighboring societies with long religio-cultural traditions of jihad and romantic memories of resistance to Christian crusaders have facilitated groups like Al Qaeda. But what of globalizaton’s supposed special role? Al Qaeda’s initial roots in the Afghan war of the 1980s are obviously very much a product of Cold-War superpower contention as opposed to globalization and its user-friendly IT aspects, which came about some years later, especially in MENA states. And, even as to oil as the key financial lubricant, in fact Bin Laden et al’s-jihadist incubation in Afghanistan was also strongly financed by U.S. money and weapons literally dumped there and in border tribal areas of Pakistan to defeat the Soviets. Indeed this came alongside Saudi oil money—but here too, the Wahhabi proselytizing impetus was synonymous with the Saudi Cold War-aims.

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As for Bin Laden’s later development within Saudi Arabia, this was actually facilitated by low oil prices of mid-1980s-90s, which brought economic, social and demographic crises to Saudi Arabia. These crises then joined with the affront to national/Islamic sensibilities felt by many Saudis from 1991 over the U.S. troops stationed there to contain Iraq’s Saddam. In any case, globalization-plus-oil seems thin to explain Al Qaeda in comparison to Cold War-plus-oil, if one had to name two factors.

Meanwhile, Yetiv gets right the contemporary petroleum system much more than most any other writer. He clearly recognizes the absurdity of saying particular importing states are “dependent” on particular producers in a market-centered system. Nowadays, importers’ energy security depends on market stability—and so on Gulf security where so much oil is produced. However, when Yetiv asks whether the money and efforts the U.S. has expended on policing the Region and fighting Al Qaeda is “worth it” he fails to consider a key geopolitical benefit of this system as versus the previous neo-colonial one. Geopolitically, the unified market provides collective energy-security because all consumers draw oil there from all producers, obviating Great Power contention for control of specific oil fields or supply routes. In 1991, S. Hussein, by grabbing Kuwait’s oil and threatening Saudi Arabia’s, was threatening this market and thereby the entire Pax Americana Energetica. Having exhausted effective Iraq-sanctions options, the GHW Bush administration opportunistically used the excuse presented by Al Qaeda on 9/11 to eliminate Saddam’s regime. But, this in turn let Al Qaeda re-group in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to franchise into Iraq, the Magreb, etc.. The fact is that oil, via U.S. oil-market security concerns, trumped anti-terror efforts for a decade.

Yetiv, to my mind, has produced a solid, in depth narrative about Transnational Terrorism’s relation to oil and globalization around the Gulf; but has not demonstrated the exclusion of other, perhaps more salient factors.