Iraq’s political geography matters not only to students in the United States—given the U.S. occupation, thousands of lives lost and wounded, and financial expenditures in this tortured land. It matters also to those who live inside Iraq—Sunni Kurd, Sunni Arab, Shia Arab and others—and to the people of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Turkey and Iran—countries bordering Iraq. What happens within this oil-rich political geography of Iraq is of great significance to you and millions of others.

Keep in mind Iraq’s political geography by taking a look at Figure 8.3 (page 241 in the textbook). The black spots on the map indicate oil fields; dotted lines represent oil pipelines. Consider the following points about Iraq’s oil and its separate population groups:

- Most Kurds live in the north around Kirkuk, Iraq’s oil center.
- Shiites, Iraq’s majority population group, live in the south around Basra, Iraq’s second major oil area.
- Baghdad, located in the so-called Sunni Triangle where the Sunnis live, is poor in resources, notably oil. The Sunnis, who once controlled Iraq under Saddam Hussein, are a minority population in numbers and power.
- How to manage Iraq’s oil wealth leads to conflict among Kurds, Sunnis and Shias—as, for example, the discussed federal system, with the Shiites controlling the oil-rich south and Kurds controlling the oil-rich north. Sunnis resist out fear of being cut out of oil revenues. Under Hussein’s Iraq, Sunnis got the lion’s share of the revenue and the Kurds and Shiites were persecuted.

All this means that working out an acceptable legal distribution of Iraq’s oil will be difficult to say the least.

Iraq’s bordering countries are additional factors to examine in terms of Iraq’s absolute and relative location in the Middle East. Iran is Shiite and has a huge influence in what happens in Iraq, especially among Shiites in Iraq’s south. Saudi Arabia is Sunni and has a stake in the fate of Iraq’s Sunnis. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are oil producers. Turkey is worried about the Kurds, especially their wanting control of northern Iraqi oil fields in order to press for independence. Foreign oil companies would like to get their hands on Iraqi oil—including efforts to influence laws on the rights of foreign investors. Everyone seems to want some influence on the distribution of Iraq’s oil.

The key point is that an assessment of Iraq’s political geography illustrates why it matters to you. The U.S. may have thought that with its global military reach it could get there first. That did not happen.