



Some thoughts on <i>Syriana</i>

Posted by [Super G](#) on December 7, 2005 - 11:08am

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I recently saw *Syriana*, which is going to be in theaters "everywhere" starting on Friday. This will not be a comprehensive movie review, just a few thoughts about the film. I should say that the opinions here do not reflect the official views of The Oil Drum, only my personal thoughts.

This is a great looking, well-acted, big budget Hollywood production with some of the biggest movie stars around. It was directed by Steven Gaghan (who wrote the screenplay for [Traffic](#)) and written by Gaghan and Robert Baer, a former CIA agent. Some of the movie is based loosely on Baer's non-fiction book [See No Evil](#). If you come to this movie expecting an engaging political thriller, you will enjoy yourself. If you are expecting this movie to change the way everyday people think about the impact of oil on our lives, you will be disappointed.

Syriana examines our dependence on foreign oil from several interwoven perspectives, much like *Traffic* explored the U.S. "War on Drugs". The interconnected storylines feature an over-the-hill CIA agent (George Clooney), an ambitious and opportunistic energy analyst (Matt Damon), a lawyer for large U.S. oil company (Jeffrey Wright), a reform-minded Arabian prince (Alexander Siddig), and two Pakistani men who are laid off from their jobs in an Arabian oil field. If you think this plot sounds complicated, you are right. The plot of *Traffic* was similarly complex, but made excellent use of cinematographic effects to delineate the different storylines. *Syriana* does not use such techniques, and the result is a movie that is hard to follow. It strikes me as the kind of movie that is more enjoyable after a second viewing, but having only seen it once, I cannot say for sure.

Spoilers below the fold.

If you want to know the details of the plot, I suggest you see the movie or read another review. I will skip right to the take-home "messages" of the movie:

- Big Oil is hungry for profits and will engage in corrupt practices to secure them.
- The U.S. Government will make a show of reining Big Oil, but in the end they are complicit in corrupt practices, and in some instances will act as the military arm of Big Oil.
- The U.S. Government's rhetoric about spreading democracy and opening up free markets is empty. The U.S. will take actions against these ideals if it secures access to oil for the U.S.

This is a fictional movie, so it cannot be seen as a reliable depiction of anything that happens in the real world. It can only be taken for commentary and a starting point for discussion. This commentary is unlikely to change the views of people who already have opinions on these issues. If you think Big Oil and the Bush Administration are evil, this movie will reinforce those beliefs. If you think Big Oil is being scapegoated or that Hollywood liberals hate America, then this movie is evidence of that. Fine.

The big question is whether this movie will affect the way uninformed or non-ideological people think. I don't think it will. To them, this is just another spy thriller, albeit one that is hard to follow (just as [The Day After Tomorrow](#) was just another disaster movie, not a starting point for a discussion of global warming).

A film like this presents an opportunity to reach out to people who do not follow current events. It can be an effective medium for changing the way they think or live their lives, but only if the film can concretely link the viewer's actions to the "big picture". This movie did not attempt to make such a connection. That job has been safely off-loaded to a [website](#) set up by the production company. The website is better than nothing, but I don't think it will be nearly as effective as if the film itself had been more provocative. By itself, the movie leaves the viewer with a sense of hopelessness—Big Oil and the Government are going to do what they're going to do, and there's nothing you can do about it.

Finally, this movie does not address the concept of peak oil or oil depletion in any direct matter. Beyond comments like "Ninety percent of the world's remaining oil is in the Middle East," you will not hear any acknowledgement of oil depletion. Nor will you see the impact of the scarcity of oil on everyday people. Still the movie makes a decent enough starting point for a discussion about peak oil with your family and friends. Just don't expect it to get them thinking about peak oil on their own.

Previous discussion of Syriana [here](#) and [here](#).

P.S. In case you're wondering, the title is not explained anywhere in the movie. Here's an [explanation](#).

As to the film's title, Gaghan says that while "Syriana" is "a very real term used by Washington think tanks to describe a hypothetical reshaping of the Middle East," its use here is more generic, pointing to "the fallacious dream that you can successfully remake nation-states in your own image."



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