What drives crude oil prices?

An analysis of 7 factors that influence oil markets, with chart data updated monthly and quarterly

January 12, 2021 | Washington, DC
Crude oil prices react to a variety of geopolitical and economic events

- Iraq invades Kuwait
- U.S. spare capacity exhausted
- Iranian revolution
- Arab Oil Embargo
- Iraq invades Kuwait
- Oil prices at $150 (real 2010 dollars)
- OPEC cuts targets 1.7 mmbpd
- OPEC cuts targets 4.2 mmbpd
- 9-11 attacks
- Asian financial crisis
- OPEC production quota unchanged
- Global financial collapse
- Global pandemic reduces oil demand

Sources: U.S. Energy Information Administration, Refinitiv
World oil prices move together due to arbitrage

Sources: Bloomberg, Refinitiv

January 12, 2021
Crude oil prices are the primary driver of petroleum product prices

Sources: EIA Short Term Energy Outlook, Refinitiv
Economic growth has a strong impact on oil consumption

Sources: U.S. Energy Information Administration, Oxford Economics
Changes in expectations of economic growth can affect oil prices

Note: Starting in January of each year, each line shows the expected forecast of GDP growth for the specified calendar year, which tends to move toward the actual realized growth outcome as the year progresses. Expectations continue to evolve into the next calendar year as revised GDP data become available (e.g., 2008 GDP expectations are revised even during 2009).

Source: Oxford Economics
In OECD countries, price increases have coincided with lower consumption

Sources: EIA Short Term Energy Outlook, Refinitiv
Rising oil prices held down global oil consumption growth from 2005-2008, despite high economic growth.

Sources: EIA Short Term Energy Outlook, Refinitiv
Changes in non-OPEC production can affect oil prices

Sources: EIA Short Term Energy Outlook, Refinitiv
Non-OPEC supply expectations indicate changes in market sentiment concerning oil supply

Note: Starting in January of each year, each line shows the expected forecast of non-OPEC supply for the specified calendar year, which tends to move toward the actual realized supply outcome as the year progresses.

Sources: EIA Short Term Energy Outlook
Changes in Saudi Arabia crude oil production can affect oil prices

Sources: U.S. Energy Information Administration, Refinitiv
Unplanned supply disruptions tighten world oil markets and push prices higher

Sources: U.S. Energy Information Administration
During 2003-2008, OPEC’s spare production levels were low, limiting its ability to respond to demand and price increases.

Sources: EIA Short Term Energy Outlook, Refinitiv
The years 2003-2008 experienced periods of very strong economic and oil demand growth, slow supply growth and tight spare capacity.

Sources: EIA Short Term Energy Outlook, Refinitiv
Inventory builds go hand-in-hand with increases in future oil prices relative to current prices (and vice versa).

Sources: EIA Short Term Energy Outlook, Refinitiv
Open interest in crude oil futures grew over the last decade as more participants entered the market

Source: Bloomberg

January 12, 2021
Physical participants’ (producers, merchants, processors, and end users) U.S. futures market contract positions

Source: Commodity Futures Trading Commission, Commitments of Traders

January 12, 2021
Money managers tend to be net long in the U.S. oil futures market

Source: Commodity Futures Trading Commission, Commitments of Traders
Crude oil plays a major role in commodity investment

Source: Bloomberg
Commodity index investment flows have tended to move together with commodity prices.

Source: Bloomberg
Correlations (+ or -) between daily price changes of crude oil futures and other commodities generally rose in recent years.

Note: Correlations computed quarterly.

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Note: Correlations computed quarterly.
Correlations (+ or -) between daily returns on crude oil futures and financial investments have also strengthened.

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Monthly Energy Review | www.eia.gov/mer

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