

2015/2/2: The Kurdish „black gold“ as a bone of contention

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According to an analysis by the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), the verified oil reserves in Iraq amounted to 115 billion barrels in 2011 and already 141 billion barrels in 2013, a fact which places the country worldwide on the fifth rank behind Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Canada and Iran. Iraq's enormous oil and general energy potential is responsible for an intensified competition, for a re-calibration of the energy-political power ratios between the established regional oil hegemonies Iran and Saudi Arabia, and for possible price fluctuations if the OPEC does not regulate the decontrolled worldwide oil quantities. The regional energy-political power ratios do not only take place economically; on the contrary, here a two-dimensional constellation of both ethnic group and denomination becomes prominent. From an ethnical point of view, the majority of the countries in the MENA region (Near East and North Africa) call themselves Arabian countries. Nevertheless, these societies contain a remarkable and recognized diversity of ethnic groups. In addition to that, two highly populated and energy-politically relevant states in this region are non-Arabic: Turkey, as one of the most resources-dependent countries of the world, and Iran. From a denominational point of view, the largest concentration of Shiite Muslims is in the Persian Gulf region. These make up more than 65% of the population in Iran, Iraq and Bahrain, 40% in Yemen, and 25 % in Kuwait, and in the rest of such countries as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates they represent mostly marginalized and discriminated minorities with 5 to 15 %. Here it is important to remark on adverse positioning concerning the denominational border lines of the richest countries of the region, Saudi Arabia (Sunni) and Iran (Shiite). The third in rank concerning oil resources, Iraq, is nationally distorted, as far as this denominational aspect is concerned. These conflict lines also shape the national political landscape of Iraq, where oil becomes a bone of contention between the central government in Bagdad and the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan. The disputes going off along denominational-ethnical demarcation lines concern all stages of petroleum operations, from prospecting new oil fields over extraction per se to transport, processing and extraction of refined derivatives and finally export and import. Due to its close economical interconnectedness and the interdependence of the actors, especially this last stage contributes to the reflection of the regional conflicts, so that a possible destabilization of Iraq gains global relevance. The collective actions of the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan have proved more successful than those of the central government. The reason for this success is the stability of its identity. The weaknesses and instabilities of the Iraqi central government come from the lack of visions how to let the different political identities in the country grow together. So far this has been considered a zero-sum situation. Iraq, which is weak anyhow, is additionally weakened by the events by Sunni extremists of ISIS/IS, and thus is diverted from the dispute over oil warrants. The capacity of the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan to support the dysfunctional Iraqi military is indicative of the possibility of a further basis of encounter. Although conflicts arising in the course of such encounters are always possible, the development of some common ground on which to base depends on perpetual interaction. Here the question arises whether it will possible in future that by appearance of a common adversary a consensus, and eventually a superior Iraqi identity, can be created.