

The European Union And The Twin Civil Wars In Syria-Iraq

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Is this one of those rare occasions where policymakers self-critically correct a gigantic blunder? Or is it a cold turn-about guided by pure self-interest? On August the 15th, the Foreign Ministers of EU-countries gathered in Brussels and decided that each would henceforth be free to supply arms to Kurdish rebels fighting Sunni extremists of ISIS in the North of Iraq. Even Germany which in the past had been unwilling to furnish military supplies to warring parties in 'conflict zones', is now ready to provide armoured vehicles and other hardware to the Kurds opposing ISIS' advance. The decision of Europe's Foreign Ministers may surprise some, for barely a year and four months ago, in April of 2013, the European Union had lifted a previously instituted ban on all imports of Syrian oil (1). Moreover, the lifting of this boycott was quite explicitly intended to facilitate the flow of oil from areas in the North-East of Syria, where Sunni extremist rebel organisations had established a strong foothold, if not overall predominance over the region's oil fields (2). ISIS was not the only Sunni extremist organisation disputing control over Syrian oil fields. Yet there is little doubt but that the fateful decision the EU took last year has helped ISIS consolidate its hold over Syrian oil resources and prepare for a sweeping advance into areas with oil wells in the North of Iraq (3).

The outcome of the recent Brussels' meeting thus appears to over-turn a disastrous previous decision. To underline the point it is useful to briefly describe the extent to which Sunni extremist rebels have meanwhile established control over oil extraction and production in both Syria and Iraq. The Syrian oil fields are basically concentrated in Deir-ez-Zor, a province bordering on Iraq. Whereas oil extraction in Syria has always been very limited in size if measured as a percentage of world supplies, - control over the Syrian oil wells plus its refinery has become crucial towards the financing of ISIS' war efforts. In neighbouring Iraq, oil reserves are not concentrated in one single geographic region as they are in Syria. The bulk of the oil wells are to be found in the country's South, at great distance from ISIS's war theatre in the North. Only a seventh of Iraq's oil resources are said to be located in areas controlled by ISIS on the one hand, and Kurdish fighters on the other. Nevertheless, recent reports indicate that ISIS controls at least 7 major oil wells in Iraq alone. Using expertise gathered after it established control over wells in Syria, the Sunni extremist organisation is able to draw huge profits from the smuggling and sale of oil. It is ISIS's oil-backed armed strength amassed in two adjacent civil wars that has now sent shivers throughout the Western world.

If the EU's April 2013 decision appears to have helped trigger ISIS's current success, the situation created is historically novel. To my knowledge, never before has a rebel force fighting a civil war in the Global South been able to base its war aspirations on control over oil. True, in most of the civil wars that have rocked Africa over the last thirty years, access

to raw materials has been key. Witness the cases of Angola, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Congo (DRC) and Sudan. It is also true that oil exports have been a specific mode of war financing, for instance in Angola and the Sudan. Yet in those cases the state remained in command of the oil wealth. In Angola, the rightwing rebel movement UNITA heavily relied on smuggling rough diamonds towards financing its war, while the country's oil fields were located at great distance from UNITA's war theatre. In Sudan, oil fields are concentrated in the country's South, i.e. close to and in the region which was disputed by the South's rebel movement. But the regime of Al-Bashir pursued an inhuman policy of depopulation through aerial bombardments, massacring hapless villagers and forcing survivors to flee. In the selfsame process the rebels were deprived of access to people and oil. Hence, strictly speaking there is no precedent for the oil-fuelled civil wars waged by Sunni rebels in Syria and Iraq.

Now, in turning from de facto supporters to opponents of ISIS, – Europe's Foreign Ministers have followed the US's lead, for the US had just initiated bombardments of ISIS position in Iraq's North. Though loudly defended on grounds of ISIS' relentless persecution of minorities, the US's renewed military intervention is not devoid of self-interest. Uppermost in the minds of Pentagon officials is the nexus between oil and arms. Shortly after Obama announced the withdrawal of US occupation forces from Iraq in October 2011, – the US clinched a huge deal for the sale of F-16 fighter planes and other armaments to Iraq's military, valued at 12 Billion US Dollars. At least 4 in 5 top US military corporations are beneficiaries of Iraqi purchases. Coincidentally, around the time when the US-Iraq agreement on arms' sales was sealed, the extraction of Iraqi crude was back to old level, crossing the threshold of 3 million barrels per day in 2012. As the Iraqi government's income from oil extraction and exports rose exponentially, American and competing Russian arms' manufacturers both lined up to bag the orders. And there is robust confidence that the oil-and-arms nexus can be sustained. For according to euphoric projections of the I.E.A., the body of Western oil consumer nations, Iraq holds the key to future increases in world production of crude!

Western policymakers are feverishly espousing the cause of Muslim Shias, Christians and Yezidis, who are persecuted in areas of Iraq controlled by ISIS, and yes, there is no doubt that the Sunni extremist force is guided by a Salafi ideology that severely discriminates against religious minorities, – whether Muslim or non-Muslim. But tell us: at what point in the past have Western states consistently defended religious minority rights in the Middle East? The idea seems to have emerged as an afterthought of the illegal US invasion of Iraq. But are Muslim and Christian Arabs in Israel, Muslim Shias in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain – to name just some of the groups mistreated by the West's close allies – likely to be charmed by the West's resolve to save the Yezidis of Iraq? In any case, it is high time the policy reversals in Brussels be questioned. To recall: a turnabout in relation to the twin civil wars in Syria/Iraq was staged twice. First, in September 2011, a general prohibition on investments in and exports of oil from Syria was imposed, affecting both Assad's government and Syria's opposition. Then, in 2013 the European Union shifted de facto towards a position favourable to Syria's Sunni extremist rebels. And although the EU's Foreign Ministers now appear to have realized their sin, – the damage can no longer be repaired without a complete overhaul of EU-policymaking towards the Middle East.

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References

- (1) see e.g. Juergen Baetz, 'EU Lifts Syria Oil Embargo to Bolster Rebels', Associated Press, Luxemburg, April 22, 2013
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- (2) see eg. Julian Borger and Mona Mahmood, "EU Decision to Lift Syrian Oil Sanctions Boosts Jihadist Groups", The Guardian, Manchester, May 19, 2013;
- (3) see e.g. Nayla Razzouk, 'Militants Hold Seven Iraq Oil Fields After Syria Blitz, IEA Says' - <http://www.businessweek.com/2014-08-12> ; also As-Safir, 'Who Controls Syria's Oil?'" - <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/07> .

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