

# Iraqi Sunni Lands Show New Oil and Gas Promise



Robert Nickelsberg/Getty Images, for The New York Times

Brig. Gen. John R. Allen, left, at a well atop a deposit of oil and natural gas in the desert of Iraq's western Anbar Province, near Syria.



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KARABILA, [Iraq](#), Feb. 18 — In a remote patch of the Anbar desert just 20 miles from the Syrian border, a single blue pillar of flanges and valves sits atop an enormous deposit of oil and natural gas that would be routine in this petroleum-rich country except for one fact: this is Sunni territory.

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Huge petroleum deposits have long been known in Iraq's Kurdish north and Shiite south. But now, Iraq has substantially increased its estimates of the amount of oil and natural gas in deposits on Sunni lands after quietly paying foreign oil companies tens of millions of dollars over the past two years to re-examine old seismic data across the country and retrain Iraqi petroleum engineers.

The development is likely to have significant political effects: the lack of natural resources in the central and western regions where Sunnis hold sway has fed their disenchantment with the nation they once ruled. And it has driven their insistence on a strong central government, one that would collect oil revenues and spread them equitably among the country's factions, rather than any division of the country along sectarian regional boundaries.

Though Western and Iraqi engineers have always known that there are oil formations beneath Sunni lands, the issue is coming into sharper focus with the new studies, senior Oil Ministry officials said. The question of where the oil reserves are concentrated is taking on still more importance as it appears that negotiators are close to agreement on a long-debated oil law that would regulate how Iraqi and international oil companies would be allowed to develop Iraq's fields. [Page A6.]

The new studies have increased estimates of the amount of oil in a series of deposits in Sunni territory to the north and east of Baghdad and in a series of deposits that run through western Iraq like beads on a string, and could contain as much as a trillion cubic feet of natural gas. The revised figures, though large, would not mean that deposits in Sunni territories could challenge the giant fields elsewhere in the country.

And while it would take years actually to begin pulling gas and oil out of the fields even if the area soon became safe enough for companies to work in, energy corporations have been excited about the area's potential, even if it falls short of reserves in the Shiite south and Kurdish north.

The analysis, still little known outside a small circle of specialists, is important enough that on Friday, Brig. Gen. John R. Allen of the Second Marine Expeditionary Force, who is deputy commanding general of Multi-National Force-West, which has responsibility for Anbar Province, made the long trip into the desert to visit the blue wellhead. General Allen's duties include promoting the economic development of the province.

The deposit beneath is the Akkas field, one of the beads on the string that runs from Ninewa Province in the north to the border with Saudi Arabia in the south.

"It's phenomenal standing here," General Allen said. "What this does is it gives Anbar and the Sunnis an economic future different from phosphate and cement," he said, referring to products of some of the aging factories in the area.

"This gives them a future and a hope," he said. Nearby, a few pieces of laundry flapped in front of one of the only structures in sight, a cinder-block shack probably belonging to a shepherd.

Iraqi oil production peaked at around 3.7 million barrels a day in 1979, as [Saddam Hussein](#) was coming to power, according to the [United States Department of Energy](#).

The figure rose and fell over the years and stood at 2.6 million barrels a day just before the 2003 invasion. Current production is less than the prewar figure, a major disappointment for the American and Iraqi engineers who have struggled to rebuild the national oil infrastructure.

That production has always been concentrated in the north and south. But at various times Iraq has drilled a few exploratory wells in the Anbar desert and in a series of deposits north and east of Baghdad, where there has also been limited production, Natik K. al-Bayati, director of reservoirs and field development at the Oil Ministry, said in a recent interview.

For all of its wells, Iraq has also collected seismic data — records of the tremors that ripple through the earth's crust and can be used like X-rays to investigate underground structures.