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Afghanistan: The Saudi Arabia of Lithium?

Lithium, which is used to make batteries for everything from mobile phones to iPads, could transform the war-torn nation's economy.

Mon Jun 14, 2010 12:25 PM ET
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THE GIST

- Nearly \$1 trillion of mineral wealth has been discovered in war-ravaged Afghanistan.
- Lithium, gold, iron and copper are among the minerals identified.
- Little has been exploited because the country has been mired in conflict for three decades.

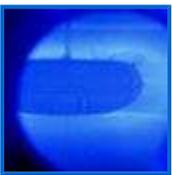


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Aside from massive lithium stores, iron and copper deposits are also large enough to make Afghanistan one of the world's top producers. [Click to enlarge this image.](#)

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Afghanistan has nearly \$1 trillion in mineral deposits, according to a study, but there are doubts the war-torn and graft-prone country can manage the windfall offered by the untapped riches.

President Hamid Karzai said in January that the deposits could help the war-ravaged nation become one of the richest in the world, based on preliminary findings of the United States Geological Survey.

The final results, reported in the *New York Times* Monday, found previously unknown reserves of lithium, iron, gold, niobium, cobalt and other minerals that the paper said could transform Afghanistan into a global mining hub.

"The natural resources of Afghanistan will play a magnificent role in Afghanistan's economic growth," Jawad Omar, spokesman for the country's ministry of mines and industries, told AFP.

"The past five decades show that every time new research takes place, it shows our natural reserves are far more than what was previously found," he said.

Afghanistan's potential lithium deposits are as large of those of Bolivia, which currently has the world's largest known reserves of the lightweight metal, the Times said.

There is ever-growing demand for lithium, which is used to make batteries for everything from mobile phones and cameras to iPads and laptops. Future growth in electric and hybrid cars could create still more demand.

Afghanistan has so much of the metal that it could become the "Saudi Arabia of lithium," according to an internal Pentagon memo quoted by the *New York Times*.

The iron and copper deposits are also large enough to make Afghanistan one of the world's top producers, U.S. officials said.

"There is stunning potential here," General David Petraeus, head of the U.S. Central Command which oversees Afghanistan, told the newspaper. "There are a lot of ifs, of course, but I think potentially it is hugely significant."

Little has been exploited because the country has been mired in conflict for three decades, and is today embroiled in a vicious insurgency by Islamist rebels led by the Taliban.

The country would have to find a way of bringing the minerals to markets but its infrastructure is rudimentary, with only one national highway connecting north to south and its ramshackle roads often targeted by Taliban bombs.

Analysts worried the country, hobbled by rampant corruption and a weak central state, was not ready to manage its potential mineral wealth.

"I highly doubt it will be able to either properly manage these resources or use the riches to build a more peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan for all Afghans," Janan Mosazai, a political analyst, told AFP.

"We have living examples of other countries where natural riches have actually turned into a curse for peace and prosperity for people," he said, citing Nigeria's endemic poverty and conflict despite vast oil exports.

The Afghan government has already reported large deposits of chromite, natural gas, oil and precious and semi-precious stones.

"The only significant new bit of information (this year) is the dollar figure, as Afghan and Soviet geologists already had evidence of the riches," Mosazai said.

China and India have bid for contracts to develop Afghan mines, with the Chinese winning a huge copper contract. An iron-ore contract is due to be awarded later this year.

A new minerals rush could pit U.S. and Chinese interests against each other. Some critics in Washington grumble that China is reaping rewards from the copper mine while U.S. troops are heavily committed against the Taliban.

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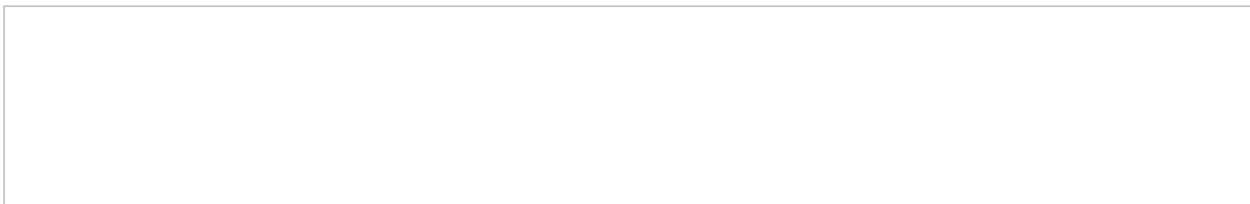
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HD Biker

It's nice to have the potential wealth. Give them something legitimate to produce instead of flooding the world with Opium. Unfortunately it will only provide something for them to fight over for another 2000 years.

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Don

How could they possibly build the mines to extract these resources in the midst of a war?

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Connor Shearwood

I think you underestimate what people are willing to do when faced with that much potential income.

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