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THE STRUGGLE FOR SYRIA IN CONTEXT OF THE GAS WAR

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The aim of this article is to expose the role of discovered gas and planned gas-pipelines-routes along the eastern Mediterranean in the Syrian war, which began in 2011 and has been ongoing until today. This article examines the importance of gas in the XXI century and the clash of interests between superpowers and regional countries, manifested in gas pipeline projects passing through the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR). The volume of natural resources found in Syria and the role of the gas factor in this crisis are also analyzed. It is emphasized that Damascus's position on Western projects like gas pipelines or the Greater Middle East contributed to the intensifying of the conflict. The discovery of new gas and oil fields in the SAR and the Syrian government's policy became one of the reasons for the intervention of several Western and regional countries to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad and thus control Syria and its wealth.

Key words: Gas War; gas pipelines; Nabucco project; Islamic gas pipeline; South Stream; Nord Stream; Turkish Stream; Russia; United States of America; Europe; Syria; Iran; Qatar; Turkey; Saudi Arabia.

БОРЬБА ЗА СИРИЮ В КОНТЕКСТЕ ГАЗОВОЙ ВОЙНЫ

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Раскрывается роль обнаруженного газа и запланированных газопроводов-маршрутов вдоль восточного Средиземноморья в сирийской войне, которая началась в 2011 г. и продолжается до настоящего времени. Рассмотрены значение газа в XXI в. и столкновение интересов между сверхдержавами и региональными странами (Турция, Израиль), результатом которого стали проекты газопроводов, проходящих через территорию Сирийской Арабской Республики (САР). Также проанализированы объем обнаруженных природных ресурсов в Сирии и роль газового фактора в сложившейся ситуации. Подчеркивается, что интенсификации конфликта способствовала позиция Дамаска по западным проектам относительно газопроводов или Большого Ближнего Востока. Открытие новых месторождений газа и нефти и политика сирийского правительства стали одной из причин вторжения ряда западных и региональных стран в САР для свержения президента Башара Асада и получения контроля над страной и ее ресурсами.

Ключевые слова: газовая война; газопроводы; проект Набукко; Исламский газопровод; южный поток; северный поток; турецкий поток; Россия; Соединенные Штаты Америки; Европа; Сирия; Иран; Катар; Турция; Саудовская Аравия.

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It is true the revolutions that have engulfed some Arab countries for over seven years were designed for bringing about political, economic and social changes in the region. However, geopolitics and control over enormous energy resources are the most important engines of this region's conflict. Economic experts assert that discovery of gas and oil in the eastern Mediterranean began in 1966, when British research vessels found gas fields in a mountain extending under the Mediterranean from the Lattakia cliff in Syria to northern Damietta in Egypt. In August 2010, just a few months before the Arab uprisings, one of the US ships – with the help of Turkey – conducted a geological survey and uncovered one of the largest gas reserves in the world along the eastern Mediterranean. It is a field of giant gas Vitan, equivalent to 23 trillion cubic feet. Since then, giant European and American companies have been racing to win contracts to extract gas and oil from the region. Economists suggest Syria has the potential to become one of the region's strongest economies as soon as conditions stabilize and work begins on the extraction of Syrian gas [1].

The aim of this article is to expose the role of discovered gas and planned gas-pipelines-routes along the eastern Mediterranean have played in the Syrian war, which began in 2011 and has been ongoing until today.

The gas-factor was the trigger of the Syrian crisis. This conflict, which began with demands of reform and ended with a civil war that displaced millions from their homes along with hundreds of thousands killed, was not reflected enough in studies and considered only internal factors as the main cause of the outbreak. This article sheds light on books and articles written by Arab and Western authors attempting to define the background of this problem.

In Arab historiography, the writer and presenter on the channel *Al-Mayadeen*, Sami Kulib in his book "Al-Assad between departure or systematic destruction" reveals Syria's new underground wealth and its strategic position. The book also suggests that such a position can translate into taking over the dominant seat of a now weakened Iraq. It also discusses the planned transport of Qatari gas through Syria to Europe, and Damascus' choice of the Islamic gas pipeline connecting Syria, Iraq and Iran as the main reason why Qatar chose to support the Syrian opposition [2, p. 336; 3]. The Arab writer Ali Fawaz, in his article under the name "Hidden facts (the secret buried in Syria 1–2)", indicates that the conflict over Syria is a struggle for energy resources in the eastern Mediterranean and gas pipelines routes [4; 5]. Special attention is paid to Professor Imad Fawzi's interviews on the *Al-Mayadeen* television channel, confirming that gas and oil discovered by foreign companies in Syria as one of the main causes in the struggle for Syria [6].

In Western historiography, the Canadian writer Kamal Deeb in his book "The history of modern Syria" refers to America's role in the coup d'état that took place in Syria in 1949 when the Arab-American oil company *Aramco* presented its plans to build a pipeline connecting Saudi Arabia with the Mediterranean through Syria. He added, thanks to Washington's help, the company obtained licenses from Lebanon, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. However, the Syrian parliament rejected this. As a result, America encouraged the coup of the Syrian right carried out by Husni al-Zaeem, who signed the Tabline agreement. Deeb emphasizes the American Intervention in the internal affairs of countries and their work to destabilize them and control their sources of energy [7, p. 118]. Also, Dr. Deeb in his another book "Cain's curse: Gas wars from Russia and Qatar to Syria and Lebanon" indicates that the discovered wealth in Syria, the strategic location of Syria and the prevention of Damascus to be an oil and gas corridor to Europe are among the main reasons of the war against Syria [8, p. 249]. French journalist Terri Maysan in his article "Regional war over gas" confirms the aim of this war against Syria is to cut the Tehran – Damascus line in exchange for the opening of traffic corridors that would allow the delivery of Qatari gas (*Exxon Mobile*) and the Saudi gas (*Aramco*) to the Syrian coast [9].

Despite the importance of nuclear and non-nuclear military arsenal, strength factors are still concentrated in "energy resources" as they are the world's main life artery. The major economic powers have been seeking to acquire these resources throughout the ages from all parts of the earth, and have succeeded in obtaining them in various ways, sometimes through trade, other times by wars or various other plots. Since the Arab nations contain the largest reserves of oil and gas in the world, it is natural that the Western and Eastern industrial camps have sought to acquire these resources by controlling either their people or governments. As a result, the Arab nations ended up falling victim to either the East's or the West's ideologies. Plenty of Arabs got deceived by the American claims of democracy and freedom in a Greater Middle East, which found to attract some by exploiting the innocence of many, greed for money, promised power positions, and the social status that comes with power. Thus, energy resources have become a tool for domination and the major cause of ongoing conflicts in the Middle East in general and Syria in particular.

In 1992, at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, gas importance increased after the decisions and recommendations had been taken with regard to global warming and factory-generated toxins, which called for alternative energy [2, p. 106]. In Kyoto, Japan, on 11 December 1997, the major industrialized countries agreed to the Convention on the reduction of total emissions of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere at a level preventing damage to the global climate system. The industrial countries have tended to rely tremendously on energy generated from gas instead of oil as it is considered an alternative, renewable energy and friendly to the environment [10]. Of course, in that period Russia, Iran and

Qatar had considerable gas production. From here, we can appreciate the gas commodity, where it transformed Qatar's wealth and gave it an important regional role.

It is worth mentioning that the value of gas also arose after the Fukushima reactor disaster in 2011, which contributed to the disruption of plans in relying on nuclear energy, and reduced to a minimum [10].

As a result, the general trend among the superpowers is to rely on cleaner and less polluting to the environment gas, and reduce their dependence on oil and coal. In addition, gas prices are cheap if economic transport routes can be secured in one of two ways:

1) transporting the gas through pipelines (which is the cheapest option long term). This variant requires the provision of stability and safety for those pipelines;

2) liquefying, then filling the gas in huge containers transported by giant tankers at sea, which increases the economic cost.

Clearly, the extension of pipelines is the "best option" for the largest gas producing countries namely Russia, Qatar, Iran and recently Syria.

This torrent of gas created a major crisis called "corridors of energy". In order for gas or oil, to move from east to west or vice versa, there will be a need for a pipeline corridor. In order to pass the pipeline through a state's land means that all the partners and recipient countries will support the constancy of a state regime to ensure the stability of energy corridors.

However, the Syrian government's position on the Arab-Israeli conflict and its relations with Iran and Islamic organizations in Lebanon and Palestine made its continuity a threat to a Greater Middle East. Not to mention the fact that the discovered wealth in Syria will turn it into a country that will be more opposed to Western projects and support Arab causes, and more importantly the Palestinian issue. This explains the West's attempts to exploit the Syrian revolution to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and turn Syria into a pro-Western state.

Since the beginning of this century, a number of plans were put forth to extend gas pipelines, including those that had already been implemented, and those that are still being planned. Russia has implemented some of those lines to strengthen its political position long term in the European energy market. At the same time, Europeans and Americans supported other pipelines as a strategic option to reduce the dominance of Russia on the European and global energy market.

In regards to the Russian gas pipelines: Russia began construction on a number of pipelines to transport gas to Northern and Southern Europe, as well as to the Balkans and Turkey. The most prominent of these lines are Nord Stream, South Stream, and the Blue Stream heading to Europe via the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea.

The Nord Stream, which opened in 2011, runs across the Baltic Sea directly to Germany, with the length of 1224 km. It consists of two tubes, each with a capacity of 27.5 billion cubic meters per year. Thanks to that, Russia will be able to transfer gas to Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, Britain, France, Poland, the Czech Republic and other countries from Germany, subsequently gas will be distributed to some 26 million homes in Europe [10].

The South Stream was launched in June 2007 as a joint venture between Italy's *Enay* and *Gazprom* to transport Russian gas to Southern and Central Europe via the Black Sea and Bulgaria. The length of this pipeline is 900 km with a capacity of 63 billion cubic meters per year. It was due to be completed before the end of 2013 [11].

However, Sofia's refusal to allow it to pass through its territory, forced Russia to switch to the Turkish stream project (where the Russian gas is supposed to be transported via the Black Sea to the Turkish city of Samsun, from there to Ankara and then to Greece where a gas supply complex will be established for Southern Europe). Following the shooting down of a Russian fighter jet by Turkey in November 2015, the project was temporarily halted. Yet, Russia – Turkey relations were restored in the summer of 2016 and the intergovernmental agreement for the Turkish Stream was signed in October 2016 and the construction started in May 2017 [10].

Russia is currently the largest exporter of oil and gas resources to the EU countries. Russia is the source of 30–40 % of gas imports to the EU, which accounts for about 60 % of Russian gas exports. More than half of this export is transported through Ukraine and Belarus [12].

Based on this, we can imagine the extent of Russia's influence in the areas of passage for these pipelines and the pressure that could be imposed on the decision-makers in Europe due to the heavy reliance on Russian gas imports. Although the energy relations between Russia and the European Union since the Cold War enjoyed a kind of Security, the two parties have been at odds on most of the political issues. However, this did not prevent the European Commission in 2000 from issuing a green paper aimed at drawing attention to the high levels of European dependence on gas imports [12]. In 2004 the European Council adopted a directive which objectives were to ensure an adequate level of gas supply, especially in case of a major supply disruption, and contribute to improving the functionality of the domestic gas market. As a matter of fact, the 2006–2009 Russian-Ukrainian crises led to the first interruptions in the supply of Russian gas to Europe what launched again the debate on the issue of securing energy supplies to the EU [8, p. 244].

In 2014 the Ukrainian crisis was an important warning to decision-makers in Europe, where 49 % of Russian gas exports pass through Ukraine. In the wake of the conflict on the Ukrainian Crimea, Russia not only raised the price of gas exports to Ukraine, but also threatened a complete halt to the delivery of gas if Kiev did not pay its debts what could threaten to cut supplies to Europe. An undeclared war between the two

sides pushed them to find alternative supply pipelines preserving their interests and influences [12].

Therefore, in 2002, Europe and America generated the idea of the Nabucco project, signed in Ankara in 2009. The project was designed to link gas reserves in Central Asia via the Caspian Sea to Europe through a pipeline crossing the Caspian Sea into Azerbaijan, to Erzurum in Turkey towards Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary and it finishes at a massive assembly station in Austria bypassing Russia. The Nabucco gas pipeline relies mainly on the export of natural gas from the supplier Turkmenistan, which has the fourth largest gas reserves in the world [3]. The construction of this line was based primarily on NATO's strategy with a view to liberating the former Soviet republics from Russian hegemony, to putting an end to Russia's monopoly on means of supply what will reduce the EU's dependence on the Russian gas supplies. The first gas due to be delivered to Europe via Nabucco was due in 2014 [3]. According to some strategists and study centers, the unavailability of Asian gas for the Nabucco pipeline will be offset by Mediterranean gas [12]. The information available so far shows that the Mediterranean basin is the richest in the world with gas, and Syria will be one of the richest country with its resources after Russia and Iran, and the node of the gas pipelines coming from the east [6]. That also applies to the Iranian or Qatari pipeline (or both) passing via Syria. However, the Syrian rejection to comply with the will of some Arab countries, the European Union, the United States and Turkey with the completion of this project in accordance with the western gas pipelines schemes, defense of its interests, and that of its Russian ally were the main cause of this conflict in Syria.

Russia confronted the Nabucco project with thoughtful strategic moves that led to the drying up of the gas supply line, provoking a real and irreconcilable legal dispute between the Caspian States over the legal character of the Caspian Sea under international law. Russia adopted the definition of the Caspian Basin as a lake renewable by the waters of the Volga River. Based on that, the international law gives Russia the right to share its water and wealth equally among the countries sharing it. The axis of the Russian strategy made it impossible to not only build the gas pipeline through the Caspian basin, but also even halt development of Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan to any gas fields on the coast of the Caspian Basin under this definition until it is recognized as a sea. On the other hand, Russia signed long-term purchase contracts with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the largest gas producers in Central Asia, where Russia purchased their entire gas production on a long-term contract ending in 2018. In light of this, they withdrew from any commitment to supply Nabucco. For its part, Turkmenistan announced, that even after the development of its gas fields and the excess gas from meeting its commitments to Russia and China, it will not sell gas to the Nabucco pipeline [12]. It is noteworthy that America and the West are trying to make Iranian gas the alternative to filling Nabucco pipelines after Russia dried up its suppliers in Central Asia, as we mentioned above, especially after the nuclear agreement with Iran and the lifting of sanctions. This option seems not to be preferred by Iran. As it will make Turkey the regional rival of Iran, the most important node in the supply of energy to the EU, which will expand its regional influence, contribute to the growth of its economy, strengthen its role globally, and raise its chances of joining the European Union, but, in accordance this option is not excluded by the Iranians [10].

The second step in the Russian strategy was to build the South Stream line mentioned above.

Apart from Moscow, there are other regional producers and exporters of competitive gas looking towards Europe. Turkey also has its aspirations and plans, which will get an annual return of 630 million dollars from Nabucco and benefit from its transformation to the gas pipeline node in the ongoing negotiations with Europe to join the European Union [12]. From this point, we can comprehend the Turkish position about the current events in the region and its support to the opposition from Tunisia to Libya, Egypt and then Syria.

Qatar is one of the world's largest liquefied natural gas exporters with the third largest gas reserves in the world. In addition to that, Qatar puts itself up as an alternative source for Russia to European continent. The US and the West support this Qatari approach, but Qatar has to liquefy gas before shipping it by sea to Europe, which drives up the gas per-cubic-meter cost in comparison with its Russian counterpart. At the same time, the gas-laden ships are forced to pass through three water straits, namely Hormuz, Bab al-Mandeb and the Suez Canal. Each one of them is located in troubled and politically unstable areas, which accounts for a weak point for the European decision-maker. This point pushed Qatar to consider the establishment of a gas supply pipeline extending from Qatar to Syria and from there to Turkey to meet the pipeline of Nabucco to Europe. This plan was opposed by Moscow. Taking into account its Russian ally's interests, Damascus opposed it as well. The Syrian position was one of Qatar's support factors for the Syrian armed opposition.

Iran, on the other hand, is one of the candidate countries to play a strong role in drawing up the energy map in the world, especially after the signing of the nuclear agreement with the major 5 + 1 countries in Vienna in July 2015. This agreement will allow Iran to pump large quantities of raw gas to the outside world as soon as its infrastructure is restored. The Iranian reserves of natural gas is about 940 trillion cubic feet, equivalent to 15 % of the global reserve, the second in the world after Russia [13]. The majority of Iran's gas reserves is in the field of "Pars" which Iran shares with Qatar and located in Persian Gulf.

For Iran, the situation seems to be different from what it is for Qatar. Iran seeks to extend its influence

in the region. Iran is present in Syria after "the Arab spring" and Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Teheran also longs to be a regional power in the face of the Gulf States. It is in this outcome, in 2009 Damascus and Bagdad agreed on the construction of the Islamic gas pipeline with Iran on 8 August 2011 in the Iranian city of Bushehr. This gas pipeline will pass through Iran 225 km, Iraqi territory about 500 km and enter through Syrian territory 500 to 700 km. This is done for two reasons: the first is that a part of this line will go through the sea and the second part will return from Syria to Jordan to feed the Arab gas pipeline as well. According to the agreement, in 2014 and 2016, the Islamic gas pipeline needed to start out with 110 million cubic meters of natural gas per day, or 40 billion cubic meters of gas annually. Both Iraq and Syria will receive under the agreement gas for their needs of approximately 30.25 million cubic meters for Iraq and 20 to 25 million cubic meters for Syria. Lebanon would also get its needs for gas, amounting to 7.5 million cubic meters per day. Jordan will be supplied with Iranian gas via the Arab gas pipeline and Europe will receive 50 million cubic meters per day [8, p. 248]. Consequently, the survival of the Syrian regime is not only an important option for the Islamic Republic, but imperative to secure its strategic interests. Moreover, the continuity of this project and Iran's interests in Syria will also ensure Hezbollah's long-term political and security role in Lebanon along with the future vision to extend this gas pipeline to Europe. Therefore, Iran's increasingly threatened economic security makes Syria's energy security among Iranian policymakers a matter of national security.

It is here that a conflict of interests arises between Qatar and Iran, which explains their positions on the Syrian revolution. For Doha, the Syrian revolution is an appropriate opportunity to fail its Iranian rival project in Syria by supporting efforts to topple the Syrian regime. This will allow Doha to play a quasi-monopolistic role in exporting gas to Europe and a more pivotal role in the global energy market.

In this respect, there is a dispute over the road to the joint Pars field between Iran and Qatar. The road to Qatar's Pars field has only two routes, directly via either Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, and the sea, it is the shorter route, or Qatar agrees with Iran to have it pass through Iranian territories, Iraq, then to Syria. According to al-Shouaibi, in the first case, he assumes that Saudi Arabia would be ready to starve in order not to allow the Qatari gas pipeline to pass through its territories. That view has two reasons: First, it will increase Qatar's influence in the regional arena; second, because Saudi Arabia has a large reserve of gas in the Rub' al-Khali and al-Khwar region, so it wants to pass its gas pipeline directly through Jordan towards Syria [6]. This is one of the secrets of the current conflict over Syria. Some may question why Qatar does not send its gas pipeline directly across the sea and from there to Iraq and Syria. This option is not possible because the gas pipeline that passes through the sea must be at a high altitude close to the surface and this could lead to collisions with ships [6]. Imad Fawzi al-Shuaibi counts that for Qatar, gas transport through pipelines is cheaper because it will not exceed the 2000 km limit. Over 2000 km, the transport of liquefying gas is cheaper, but here the distance to the Mediterranean is problematic [6].

Focusing on Syria and the discovered wealth there. It is important to note that in 2007, a Norwegian company named *INSIEN* surveyed the area from the highest peak of the Syrian coast to the Lebanese waters and found 14 of the richest oil fields. *INSIEN* also appealed to the Norwegian *SAGEC* company to also scan the region. They found three geographical blocks from the Syrian-Lebanese border to Lattakia containing 11 billion barrels of oil [6]. It is also mixed with gas because this is known to be a common area. In other words, there are 11 billion barrels in place and this allows Syria to export from this location approximately the production output of Kuwait. It means Syria can extract anywhere from 1.5 million to 2 million and 250 thousand barrels from this region [6].

A French-American Company with offices in London called *VERITAS CGG* later purchased the two Nigerian companies [6]. This can also explain the background of the American and French role in this conflict.

This discovered wealth (gas and oil) in Syria is located in the Syrian mainland and coast [5]. The land energy wealth is 62 % in all of Syria. It is distributed as follows: 47 % in Central Syria, 12 % in the East and that explains to us the American presence in the East Euphrates, 2 % in Aleppo, 2 % in the Syrian part of the Golan. The oil in the occupied Syrian Golan is equivalent to Saudi Arabia's oil production [6]. There are studies that Israel is digging now in the occupied Syrian Golan [6]. The gas and oil wealth in the coast account for 38 % or about 10.83 trillion cubic meters.

According to Dr. Shouaibi, the volume of wealth discovered in Syria is estimated to be about 28–33 trillion cubic meters, which puts it third place in the world after Russia, with 50 trillion cubic meters, Iran 38 trillion cubic meters and exceeding that of Qatar, which has 25.4 trillion cubic meters [6].

Therefore, every country gets involved only for geopolitics or energy interests, and both are plentiful in the region. There is a reason for the Americans to be involved. First, concerning geopolitics, the US began to feel that the Yalta agreement ended with the Russian presence and therefore wanted to make clear that this matter will not be swept under the rug. In light of this, the Syrian army sought, despite American opposition, to reach the area of Albuqmal to open the strategic road between Iraq and Syria. However, the presence of the Americans in al-Tanf (the US base in Southeastern Syria) and in the North is an attempt to besiege this

strategic line. Secondly, the United States is longing to acquire a share of the wealth in this region and also looking for markets for its shale oil and liquefying gas.

Hence, discovering the energy resources in Syria, the Western countries have been trying to exploit the Syrian revolution to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and elect a new pro-West president. An example of this was in August 2011, when an announcement by the Syrian government of the discovery of a huge gas field in the Syrian Desert the US position changed towards escalation against Syrian President by calling on him on to step down [11]. The West also wants to achieve the interests of some countries to ensure the passage of its gas pipelines through Syrian territory and then to Europe, to prevent Iran from exporting gas and to reduce the dependence of Europe on Russian gas. The position of Iran and Russia was clear, namely to support the Syrian regime politically, militarily and economically as the fall of Bashar al-Assad will reduce the influence of Iran in the region and Russia in the Middle East and Europe.

This article allows us to draw the following conclusions:

1. The Arab region has been and continues to be the scene of global geopolitical conflicts because of the natural resources it contains especially oil and gas.

2. It has become clear that control of natural gas resources and corridors has become an integral part of the geopolitical power standards of today's world.

3. The current war in Syria is viewed as one of the most bloody and complex conflicts in modern Arab history due to the internal and external factors, such as the gas war and the Greater Middle East.

4. Syria's important geo-strategic location on the Mediterranean Sea and its promising wealth made super and regional powers involved into the Syrian conflict. Moreover, the Syrian government's position on the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Greater Middle East explains the West's and some regional countries' attempts to exploit the Syrian revolution to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and turn Syria into a pro-Western state.

5. The twenty-first century is the era of "clean energy" and the alternative to the decline of oil reserves. Which means that control of the regions' "gas reserve" is a strategic goal in such international conflicts, which are emerging manifestations today regionally and as the optimal path to form a new world order. However, without an agreement between America and Russia to share the major gas markets the proxy war in the Middle East will go on.

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