MIDDLE EAST

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RUSSIA'S MIDEAST ENERGY DIPLOMACY

Abstract: *This article concerns the issues of the Russian energy diplomacy in such sensitive region as the Middle East. There's a common perception that Russia's utilization of energy diplomacy is only directed against the EU, but that's actually not the case, since Moscow has been very busy in the Mideast lately in using energy deals as one of the silent driving forces of its regional strategy. Till now a few scientific articles not only in Russia but in the world were dedicated to this issue.*

This hasn't garnered much attention because Russia's energy ties with its Mideast partners aren't controversial like they are in the EU, where the West has sought to politicize the producer-consumer relationship between Moscow and the bloc in order to frame Russia as a "threat". In the Mideast, however, Russia isn't a producer but an extractor of natural resources, so the same "dependency" relationship doesn't exist in this region as it does in the EU. Furthermore, the attention that's been paid to Russia's military moves in this theater has largely overshadowed the various energy deals that it's clinched since the beginning of its 2015 anti-terrorist intervention in Syria.

Despite the relative lack of analysis concerning Russia's Mideast energy diplomacy in recent years, this vector of its grand strategy has been paramount to Moscow's rise as a Great Power and emergence as a formidable competitor to American influence in the Mideast. It's therefore necessary to acquire a deeper understanding of the nuances and strategy that drive Russia's energy diplomacy in the Mideast. Author of the article examines cooperation in energy sphere between Russia and Turkey, Iran, Syria, Israel, Iraqi Kurdistan, Qatar and Saudi Arabia and appreciates risks and advantages of such reciprocity.

Keywords: *Energy Diplomacy; Oil; Gas; Turkish Stream; Mideast; Russia; Pipelines; Qatar; Saudi Arabia.*

Most experts on energy geopolitics usually examine Russia's relations with the EU when discussing what they assume to be Moscow's politicization of its oil and gas resources, but all polemics aside about the veracity of that misleading presumption, what they really should be looking at nowadays is Russia's energy diplomacy in the Mideast. Unlike in Europe, Russia's energy ties with its Mideast partners aren't fraught with controversy, nor have they even attracted much attention in most cases. Part of this has to do with the fact that there is no clear 'dependency' relationship except in the instance of Turkish Stream (and even that's not what it might initially seem), and another reason is because Russia's energy deals in the region are naively thought by conventional observers to pale in importance to its military moves.

Balancing By Different Means

In reality, Russia's energy diplomacy in the Mideast is highly significant and serves as a strategic complement to its military activity. Moscow's anti-terrorist intervention in Syria shattered the perception of America's post-Cold War military hegemony in the region, but if Russia is to be successful in comprehensively promoting multipolarity in the Mideast, then it'll naturally have to leverage other dimensions of power aside from the military one, ergo the utilization of its diplomatic and energy components.

The first one is seen most powerfully through the Tripartite of Mideast Great Powers formed between Russia, Iran, and Turkey and directly manifested through the Astana Talks. This interconnected framework brings together Russia's Mideast 'neighbors' (if they can be called that) and the top two external parties most directed involved in the War on Syria, and it accordingly provides Russia with the springboard that it desires to more confidently guide regional events in its favor. For as influential of a mechanism as they are, however, neither the Tripartite nor Astana in their present forms advances Russia's interests with the more geographically 'peripheral' Mideast actors of the Gulf and "Israel", nor the Kurdish middle ground between all of them, ergo the need for Russia's robust strategy of energy diplomacy.

The point of this article is to present an overview of Russia's most influential energy partnerships in the Mideast and explain how they work towards promoting Moscow's grand strategy of positioning the country as the supreme balancing force in the Eurasian supercontinent. The geopolitics of the War on Syria makes it difficult for Russia to find any common political interests with the Gulf, and the Tripartite complicates Russia's historical relations with the Kurds. Under such conditions, Russia is compelled to utilize its world-class technical-strategic leadership in the global energy sector to pragmatically interface with the GCC states of Saudi Arabia and Qatar and enhance the prospects that it could reach a rapprochement with both. Moreover, while Russia's relations with "Israel" are already rock-solid, Moscow might be planning to institutionalize its ties with Tel Aviv through participation in the forthcoming Eastern Mediterranean Gas Pipeline[1].

Overall, Russia's energy diplomacy in the Mideast seeks to entrench the country's new leadership position in the region and diversify it beyond the headline-grabbing military component. Although much more subtle and less discussed than its anti-terrorist operations and conflict resolution initiatives, Russia's energy engagement might even in some cases be more important because it gives Moscow the opportunity to forge strategic inroads with the GCC countries that it would otherwise have nothing in common with. Ultimately, Russia hopes that the skillful practice of its energy diplomacy could help it reach a rapprochement with GCC leader Saudi Arabia, which in that event would confirm Moscow's balancing role in Eurasia. Energy diplomacy is quite important in such region as Middle East taking into consideration dependence of majority of the regional countries from the oil and gas revenues. The American researcher Andrew Scott Cooper underlined a role of energy diplomacy in his book "The Oil Kings. How the US, Iran and Saudi Arabia changed the balance of power in the Middle East". A.S. Cooper particularly wrote about the Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran: "While much scholarly focus has been on internal political, cultural and social origin of the revolution, the role of state finances – and the oil revenues particularly – has received far less attention… The underlying rationale for Saudi Arabia decision to torpedo the December 1976 oil price increase and particularly the Ford administration role in that decision was not explained until now"[2].

A Region's Worth Of Deals

Russia has recently cut a diverse set of energy-related deals with the most important Mideast actors, or in the case of "Israel", has the very high likelihood of doing so in the near future. Let's take a look at what they entail and the guiding concepts behind them:

<u>Turkey:</u>

[1] EU, Israel agree to develop Eastern Mediterranean gas pipeline. *RT*, 5 Apr. 2017. URL: www.rt.com/business/383410-eu-israel-mediterranean-gas-pipeline/ (дата обращения: 10.02.2018).

[2] *Cooper A.S.* The Oil Kings: How the U.S., Iran, and Saudi Arabia Changed the Balance of Power in the Middle East. N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 2012. P. 18.

Russia and Turkey have had excellent energy relations ever since the 2005 commissioning of the Blue Stream gas pipeline, and they've taken their partnership further by cooperating on the planned Turkish Stream gas project. This initiative is meant to replace the failed South Stream proposal which was originally supposed to provide Russian gas to the Balkans and beyond by means of an underwater pipeline to Bulgaria, but the US pressured Sofia to stonewall the project so Moscow naturally sought out Ankara as a replacement. If completed, then Turkish Stream will place both Great Powers into an increasingly complex system of energy interdependency, whereby the Turkish economy naturally grows even more dependent on Russian resources, while Russian energy and foreign policy in the Balkans becomes equally dependent on Turkey to behave as a responsible transit state for facilitating gas exports beyond its borders and not interrupting them like Ukraine did[1].

Turkish Stream is so important for Russian grand strategy that it wouldn't be an exaggeration to suggest that it's one of the main reasons why Moscow moved so rapidly to promote its surprising rapprochement with Ankara after the November 2015 shooting down of a Russian anti-terrorist jet over Syria. There were of course other factors at play as well, including the US' weaponization of the Kurdish issue and the Obama Administration's desire to carry out a coup against President Erdogan, but energy geopolitics presented the only visibly tangible win-win outcome of the rapprochement that both national leaders could immediately show to their people. Turkish Stream is also a powerful driving force deepening the partnership between Russia and Turkey because of the high degree of trust involved in this arrangement, which greatly helped to set the stage for Moscow to carry out its first-ever joint anti-terrorist operation with a NATO member in January around Al Bab[2] and to sell S-400 missiles to the country.

<u>Iran:</u>

Unlike with Russia's other Tripartite partner, Moscow doesn't have any signature projects with the Islamic Republic, though that doesn't mean that it's not an important player in the country's energy industry. Both sides signed a series of energy cooperation deals focusing on Russian technical investments in Iran's domestic sector following President Rouhani's trip to Moscow in March, which helped to temporarily soothe plausible fears that a post-sanctions Iran would emerge as a heated rival to Russia in the global marketplace. It's true that Tehran has the potential to do so in the future judging by its enormous energy reserves, but the political conditions are presently adverse to the scenario of Iran becoming a major non-Russian energy supplier to the EU and it also lacks the physical capabilities to do so because of its relatively poor infrastructure.

Iran needs billions of dollars in investments in order to even approach the point of competing with Russia in Europe, and from the Russian standpoint, it's best for Moscow to partially fulfill this need in order to keep tabs on its future competitor instead of being completely cut out of the loop. The situation is somewhat different when it comes to the Asian vector of energy geopolitics since Iran is already pretty solidly positioned to ramp up its sales to China and India, but what's most important for Russia in this context is Moscow's legacy of leadership in the European market. The Russian company "Gasprom" has been negotiated with authorities to invest in the North Pars field (a potential LNG development) and in the Farzad B offshore gas field with the stated intentions to provide gas deliveries to Pakistan and India which would offer another possible negotiating tool for Russia. Furthermore, Gazprom Neft has signed a memorandum of understanding with the National Iranian Oil Company for two potential oil field developments, while the Zarubezhneft and Tatneft companies have also inked two oil deals each with Tehran. At a

[1] *Касаев Э.О.* «Турецкий поток»: реалии и перспективы. Часть 1. URL: http://www.iimes.ru/?p=37821 (дата обращения: 10.02.2018).

[2] "Turkey, Russia conduct second joint air operation against Daesh in Syria's al-Bab." *Daily Sabah*, 23 Jan. 2017. URL: www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2017/01/23/turkey-russia-conduct-second-joint-air-operation-against-daesh-in-syrias-al-bab (дата обращения: 10.02.2018).

government level, the Russian Ministry of Energy has signed an oil-for-goods deal that should see it purchase 100,000 barrels per day of Iranian crude via its trading company[1].

In any case, Russian investments in Iran's energy sphere satisfy a key demand at a very crucial time, since the Islamic Republic is striving to emerge from the so-called economic "isolation" that it experienced throughout the years of UNSC sanctions but is having difficulty doing so because of the hostile geopolitical conditions imposed on it by Trump.

It remains to be seen how the US will marshal its European allies behind yet another anti-Iranian cause or even whether it'll be successful in doing so following the recent signs of a US-German falling out, but the writing is on the wall and all indications point to Washington preparing to pressure its NATO vassals to downscale their planned post-sanctions investments in the Islamic Republic. This will inevitably put strain on the already weak Iranian economy, but conversely, it makes Russia all the more important of a partner for the country because Moscow is utterly undeterred by whatever consequences Washington might threaten it with. The more that the US campaigns for its underlings to instrumentalize their investments as a lever of influence against Iran, the stronger Russia's role becomes in the already asymmetrical (and sometimes unclear) relationship that it has with the country because Moscow then becomes Tehran's most reliable geopolitical pressure valve.

Iraqi Kurdistan:

The newest dimension of Russia's energy diplomacy in the Mideast has to do with the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq[2]. Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani visited Saint Petersburg in early June to attend SPIEF, where he met with President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov after signing a long-term contract on oil and gas. Barzani later told Kurdish media that this represented a "new stage" in his region's relations with Russia[3], and truth be told, it certainly does. Russia already enjoyed very warm relations with this ethnic group, especially in northern Iraq and even Turkey, though the latter has become untouchable for Moscow following the Russian-Turkish rapprochement. Even so, Turkey itself has excellent ties with the KRG because long-serving President Masoud Barzani is Ankara's ally and a bitter opponent of the PKK, so it can safely be assumed that Turkey doesn't have any objections to Russia's enhanced relationship with the Iraqi Kurds. Their Syrian brethren are an altogether different (though it can be argued, somewhat inseparable) story, but it's important to keep in mind the geographic convergence between Ankara and Moscow when it comes to Iraqi Kurdistan.

The KRG's independence referendum in September didn't result in a formal declaration of separatism, showing that they're playing coy in order to obtain the leverage that they need to reach a better post-war "federalized" deal with Baghdad, but either way, this move has drawn the suspicion of Russia's Turkish and Iranian Tripartite partners who are fearful of a "second geopolitical 'Israel'" rising up in the heart of the Mideast[4]. Moscow's two partners have very real security interests which could be jeopardized by this eventuality, and Russia – by virtue of its distant geography and historical friendliness with the Kurds – is best placed to serve as a balancing force between them, though provided that it can retain some sort of important influence over the post-independence Kurdish elite.

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[1] *Henderson J., Mehdi A.* Russia's Middle East energy diplomacy. URL: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2017-06-20/russias-middle-east-energy-diplomacy (дата обращения: 10.02.2018).

[2] "Rosneft gets access to vast oil transportation system in Iraqi Kurdistan." *RT*, 5 June 2017& URL: www.rt.com/business/390621-rosneft-iraq-kurdistan-deal/ (дата обращения: 10.02.2018).

[3] *Mewan D.* Kurdistan PM: New stage of bilateral relations begins with Russia. *Kurdistan 24*, 4 June 2017& URL: www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/0b6a7fe6-28b4-49ce-8782-b9535ea63185 (дата обращения: 10.02.2018).

[4] *Bozorgmehr S.* Iran vows to stand with Baghdad, Ankara against Iraqi Kurds' independence push. *Reuters*, 26 Sept. 2017& URL: www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-referendum-iran/iran-vows-to-stand-with-baghdad-ankara-against-iraqi-kurds-independence-push-idUSKCN1C11G7 (дата обращения: 10.02.2018).

It's fanciful to imagine that Russia can somehow replace the US as the "godfather of Kurdistan", or even that it wants to in the same geopolitical "Blood Borders" sense that Washington does[1], but just that Moscow hopes to exert a moderating influence of sorts on Kurdish decision makers and capitalize on the perception that it holds this power in order to become more valuable to its Tripartite partners. Moreover, reading into the decision to independently cut a major energy-related deal with Iraqi Kurdistan, it can be suggested that Russia implicitly believes that the region is forever outside of Baghdad's formal sway despite its nominal inclusion in "Iraq", as Moscow would otherwise have never have operated above the national sovereignty of the official governing center had it any faith that it could realistically reassert its authority over that territory.

It might look troublesome to observers that Russia would essentially contradict its long-standing positions on state sovereignty and "interfering" in the domestic affairs of others, but if one accepts that the post-war fragmentation of Iraq is inevitable (as Russia apparently has), then it's a rather wise move to "get ahead of the curve" since this scenario is already understood as a fait accompli. This move also lends credence to the assertion that Russian decision makers and strategists are nowadays guided by the "19th-Century Great Power Chessboard" concept whereby Russia prioritizes its engagement with similarly sized Great Powers at the perceived (key word) expense of its smaller- and medium-sized partners. In this example, Russia's grand strategic goal of balancing Mideast geopolitics, especially as regards its Tripartite Great Power partners, takes precedence over its historic relations with an ever-weakening and medium-sized Iraq which might ultimately dissolve into several smaller-sized states anyhow[2].

Syria:

The fast-moving fragmentation process in neighboring Iraq will obviously have very powerful repercussions on Syria, though Russia appears to have foreseen that this would happen and therefore decided to preemptively mitigate any structural damage that this could cause for the Arab Republic by suggesting that it "decentralize". Moscow's controversial and unsolicited "advice" was contained in the Russian-written "draftconstitution" unveiled during the first Astana meeting in January of 2017, though disagreements over its details have led to the UNSC 2254-mandated process of "constitutional reform" being stalemated for the time being. The Syrians are very sensitive to any suggestion that they cede authority to the Kurds, though Russia habors no such reservations mostly as a result of its envisioned role as the Mideast balancer and because its chief geopolitical interests in the country wouldn't be threatened by this move anyhow.

Russia's two bases in Syria are located near the coast so it doesn't have to worry about anything happening to them in the event that Syria "decentralizes" or even "federalizes". As for Russia's other interest, energy, the reader needs to be reminded that the Arab Republic already gave Moscow the rights in 2016 to rebuild its oil and gas industries[3], which implies both the resources in or near the Kurdish-occupied northeast and offshore reserves as well. Russia is betting that its existing pragmatic relations with the Syrian Kurds and outward wooing of them through the controversial "decentralization" proposal that it made to Damascus will ingratiate them enough with its local/regional leadership that they'll respect the central government's energy agreement with Moscow and allow Russian companies to rebuild and operate Kurdish-controlled assets in a post-"decentralized"/"federalized" future.

This is admittedly a very risky bet because there's no guarantee that the pro-American Kurds will be able to resist their handler's pressure to go against this deal with Moscow, but for whatever

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[1] *Peters R.* "Blood borders." Armed Forces Journal, 1 June 2006.Web. 26 June 2014. URL: http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/blood-borders (дата обращения: 10.02.2018).

[2] *Idiz S.* Animosity toward US uniting Turkey, Russia. Iran in Syria. URL: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/02/turkey-russia-unites-against-united-states.html#ixzz574E0nhKS (дата обращения: 10.02.2018).

[3] Syria asks Russia to rebuild its oil industry. *Press TV*, 20 May 2016. URL: presstv.ir/Detail/2016/05/20/466598/Syria-asks-Russia-to-rebuild-its-oil-industry (дата обращения: 10.02.2018).

reason – whether it's because Russia believes that the fragmentation of Syria is just as inevitable as in Iraq, it doesn't want to commit the necessary military resources to reversing this, and/or perhaps another explanation – Russia is prioritizing a political solution to the War on Syria which favors some unclear degree of Kurdish "autonomy" over the energy-rich regions which they presently control[1]. If all goes according to plan, which is still very far from certain, it's believed that Russia might even possibly try to pair its Syrian-based but Kurdish-controlled energy assets with its newfound Iraqi Kurdish ones to lay the foundation for a transnational Kurdish energy network operated under Russia's aegis. Should it be successful, then this could give Russia the influence that it desires over the Kurds and also institutionalize Moscow's geographically central role in a reshaped Mideast.

As for the other vector of Russia's energy diplomacy in Syria, the country's offshore assets could potentially one day be connected to the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Pipeline but only in the major event that Syria and Israel normalize relations. It should be recalled at this point that the Russian-written "draft constitution" for Syria explicitly calls for the country to practice "good neighborliness" and "reject war"[2], which would in practice mean "recognizing" "Israel" and withdrawing the legitimate demand that Tel Aviv cease its occupation of Syria's historic territory in the Golan Heights. Furthermore, the introduction of "de-escalation zones" in the country, one of which abuts the occupied Golan Heights, greatly reduces the chances that Syria will liberate its land anytime soon, all of which works to confirm the observation that Russia is trying to "balance" between Syria and Israel by creating the conditions which compel the former to recognize the latter so that Moscow can sell its offshore resources to Tel Aviv's Eastern Mediterranean Gas Pipeline afterwards.

The author believes that it is highly counterproductive for Russia to employ such an approach because it irreparably damages Moscow's soft power standing in the Arab Republic no matter what "bigger picture" outcomes it eventually yields, though all personal judgement aside, this is nevertheless the strategic trajectory that Russia appears to on at the moment for the aforementioned reasons.

Israel:

Continuing along, Russia is on incredibly positive terms with Israel and relations have never been this good before in history. Considering Russia's comprehensive strategic partnership with Israel and Moscow's existing practice of energy diplomacy in the Mideast and beyond, it's no surprise then that it wants to find a way to participate in the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Pipeline which plans to transport Israel and Cyprus' offshore gas to the EU by means of Greece.

The idea here is for Russia to attain a strategic stake in this major non-Russian gas corridor to Europe in order to minimize the possible geopolitical repercussions that this could have on Moscow's foreign policy over time. Russia's technical expertise is the energy industry is world renowned and could greatly aid its Israeli, Cypriot, and Greek partners as they seek to construct the lengthy difficult underwater portion of this project, but there's always the possibility that the US may exert influence on these actors and press them to employ an alternative instead. Therefore, what Russia needs to do is offer something of irresistibly sustainable value to its prospective energy partners in order for them to allow Moscow onto the project no matter what demands Washington makes to the contrary, and the only way for this to happen is if Russia offers up Syria's offshore reserves[3] and proposes linking them to the pipeline.

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[1] *Cole J.* War in Syria is over at the centre but powers nibbling at the edges. URL: https://www.juancole.com/2018/02/center-powers-nibbling.html (дата обращения: 10.02.2018).

[2] Full Text of the New Syrian Draft Constitution. *Sputnik,* 31 Jan. 2017. URL: sputniknews.com/middleeast/201701311050216226-syrian-constitution-full-text/ (дата обращения: 10.02.2018).

[3] *Ahmed N.* "Western firms primed to cash in on Syria's oil and gas 'frontier'." *Insurge Intelligence,* 1 Dec. 2015. URL: medium.com/insurge-intelligence/western-firms-plan-to-cash-in-on-syria-s-oil-and-gas-frontier-6c5fa4a72a92 (дата обращения: 10.02.2018).

Damascus would never allow this to happen under the present circumstances no matter how thankful it is to Moscow for saving it from Daesh ("Islamic State") during its decisive anti-terrorist intervention in late-2015, which is why Russia is trying to shape the strategic environment through the combined approaches of implied "peace" with Israel in the "draft constitution" that it wrote for Syria and the "de-escalation zone" around the occupied Golan Heights in order to prompt this policy change. There's no chance of this happening under President Assad, but if he's "phased out" of power in an "orderly transition" (which is an option that Russia seems to be countenancing[1] as the ultimate 'political compromise'for ending the war), then it's conceivable that his successor might accept that these aforementioned Russian-initiated moves leave him little chance to ever liberate the Golan Heights and that it's "better" to "strike a deal", especially if the US succeeds in overseeing a breakthrough "Israeli"-Arab peace agreement which contributes to the Mainstream Media-driven perception that the "New Syria" will be "isolated" unless it follows suit.

Again, so that there's no misunderstanding on the reader's part, the author does not believe that this is the path that Russia should tread and is convinced that it would be a lose-lose arrangement for Syria, but having said that, the relevant "Israeli"-inferred clause in the Russian-written "draft constitution" and Moscow's idea of a "de-escalation zone" around the Golan Heights indicate that it's probably much more than a coincidence that events are drifting in this direction.

Qatar:

Russia's relations with Qatar have dramatically changed since the beginning of the theater-wide "Arab Spring" Color Revolutions when Doha's airport security assaulted Moscow's Ambassador to the country and prompted to a formal downscaling of diplomatic ties. The prevailing idea is that Qatar's late-2016 involvement in the purchase of roughly 20% of Russian oil giant Rosneft during its first-ever privatization sale proves that ties are definitely on the upswing and that both sides are able to differentiate between their geopolitical contradictions in the Mideast and joint convergences over the global energy sector. Their energy commonalities give rise to cautioned optimism that they can form the basis for more pragmatic and sustained political engagement over Syria, as Qatar is thought to be one of the main state sponsors behind the Al Nusra terrorist group there which is recognized as the most powerful anti-state fighting force behind Daesh[2].

Additionally, Russia's newly strengthened energy relations with Qatar and resultant two-way channels of influence on one another come at a crucial time because of the new Qatari-Saudi Cold War in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia and its regional allies accuse Qatar of once again supporting the Muslim Brotherhood despite its promise in late-2014 to abstain from doing so as part of a deal to end the first year-long round of tensions between Doha and Riyadh. In addition, the Saudis are reportedly also livid that the Qatari Emir spoke out against the "Arab NATO's" overt anti-Iranian agenda during the Trump Summit in Riyadh and had positive things to say about Tehran's regional role. The fact that this was briefly published in Qatari media and therefore made public – despite Qatar denying it all and saying that it fell victim to "hackers" – was so embarrassing for the Saudis that it warranted an immediate and strict multilateral response, ergo the current crisis.

Russia has thus far abstained from choosing sides and reiterated that it seeks peaceful relations with everyone, so in light of this, Moscow has just become disproportionately more important for Doha than any time before because it provides a pressure valve of geopolitical relief for the peninsular country just as it does for much larger Iran in a similar context[3]. There are obvious limitations to what Russia to can do help Qatar, but the simple fact that Moscow is

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[1] "Putin: Russia protecting Syria from dismemberment rather than shielding Assad ." *TASS*, 2 June 2017. URL: tass.com/politics/949508 (дата обращения: 10.02.2018).

[2] *Abi Ramia J.* Syrie: Qui combat qui et ou. URL: http://www.lorientlejour.com/article/949941/radioscopie-du-sol-syrien-qui-combat-qui-et-ou.html (дата обращения: 10.02.2018).

[3] *Lons C.* Aux origins de la crise du Qatar: entre rivalite pour l'hegemonie regionale et enjeux de politique interieure. URL: https://www.lesclesdumoyenorient.com/Aux-origines-de-la-crise-du-Qatar-entre-rivalite-pour-l-hegemonie-regionale-et.html (дата обращения: 10.02.2018).

retaining relations with the Emirate while all other regional and nominally "allied" states are disowning it helps to counteract some of the "isolation" that the Saudis hope to impose on the Qataris. Seeing as how Russia, Iran, and Qatar account for three of the top four largest gas reserves in the world, there's the long-term possibility that they could coalesce into a "gas OPEC" if Doha is brave enough to continue with its geopolitical pivot and survives the expected Saudi asymmetrical (terrorist) onslaught for doing so.

Saudi Arabia:

Lastly, an energy-induced comprehensive rapprochement with Saudi Arabia is the elusive prize that Russia is pursuing in the Mideast. It's impossible for Russia to fulfill its grand strategic role as the supreme balancing force in the Eurasian supercontinent if it's at serious odds with any given Great Power, which is why Moscow wants to reboot its relations with Riyadh and move beyond the Syrian proxy war. It'll take a lot of work to get to this admittedly ambitious point, and Russia might even end up enacting some temporarily and perceptibly disadvantageous geopolitical concessions throughout the course of this 'courtship', but the "bigger picture" which would be advanced through the "19th-Century Great Power Chessboard" is attractive enough for Russian decision makers and strategists that they're willing to give it a shot regardless. Thus far, the most visible manifestation of this policy has been Saudi King Salman's historic visit to Moscow in early October, which demonstrated that Russia's policy towards the Kingdom is finally bearing some fruit.

Saudi Defense Minister Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, who is also in charge of the Kingdom's energy affairs, visited SPIEF and held a major meeting with President Putin where both sides celebrated the new stage in their relations. Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak disclosed at the time that his country's companies were considering up to 30 separate joint projects with their Saudi counterparts and even suggested that Russian investors could purchase some of Saudi oil giant Aramco when the company partially privatizes next year[1]. As can be seen, Saudi Arabia and Russia – in spite of historically being fierce energy rivals – are surprisingly cooperating with one another in order to stabilize the oil price which was severely offset by the large-scale introduction of US shale onto the market a few years back. Proceeding from there, the developing relations between both sides are rapidly expanding into the military field such as though Russia's sale of S-400 missiles to Saudi Arabia, which could potentially see Russia "requesting" that the "Arab NATO" play some sort "peacekeeping role" in the former Daesh-occupied majority-Sunni territories inthe country's east[2].

That proposal would open up a whole different set of scenarios which should be examined in a separate analysis, but redirecting back to the focal point of the present one, Russia's much more visibly positive relations with Saudi Arabia nowadays places it in the position to balance between the Kingdom and its Qatari rival. Neither of these Gulf States would defer to Russian mediation over that of their shared American ally, but it's just that Moscow could use its equally pragmatic and rapidly developing relations with both of these countries to confirm its role as a neutral balancing force in the region which could be relied on by all sides to diplomatically intervene if asked to. Likewise, by retaining such privileged strategic relations with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Russia could work to leverage these partnerships in such a way as to make itself the top energy superpower in the world because of the influence that it could have in coordinating oil and gas deals with each of them, respectively. This becomes even more pivotal of a role in light of the

[1] "Russian Oil Companies Discuss Cooperation With Saudi Arabia in 30 Various Fields." *Sputnik*, 1 June 2017. URL: sputniknews.com/business/201706011054179474-russia-saudi-arabia-oil-cooperation/ (дата обращения: 10.02.2018).

[2] *Bhadrakumar M.K.* What Saudi King's visit means for Russia. URL: http://blogs.rediff.com/mkbhadrakumar/2017/10/12/russia-wades-into-saudi-iran-rift/ (дата обращения: 10.02.2018).

reinvigorated Qatari-Saudi Cold War, and it's one which perfectly accords with Moscow's envisioned balancing responsibilities in the Mideast and Eurasia as a whole.

Crisscrossing Interests: Convergences And Contradictions

It's been thus far revealed that Russia has a series of crisscrossing energy interests all throughout the Mideast, but while some of these are unquestionable win-win convergences, others are obvious geopolitical contradictions which could present a challenge for Russia's regional balancing act. Here's how all of the aforementioned partnerships stack up when categorized as a convergence, contradiction, or uncertainty:

Turkey:

Turkish Stream is a clear convergence of grand strategic interests for Russia and Turkey because it intimately ties their countries together in a shared future. Russia needs Turkey in order to gain important energy access to the Balkans and thenceforth the freedom to more confidently exercise its foreign policy there, the same as Turkey needs Russia in order to do the same to a lesser degree through its irreplaceable transit role in facilitating this project. Both states need one another as regards their future Balkan policies, which may or may not convergence but nevertheless must remain predictably stable due to the common denominator of Turkish Stream between them. In addition, the existence of this project also makes both sides more flexible in dealing with one another in Syria, and was probably in hindsight the structural motivation behind their rapprochement.

Iran:

Just like with Turkey, Russia and Iran enjoy a visible convergence of interests as it relates to Moscow's energy projects in the Islamic Republic. Russia keeps tabs on a future competitor (and do so in a friendly way), while Iran receives much-needed investment in this industry and its modernization. From a larger standpoint, Russia's measured assistance in helping Iran regain its former position in the global energy markets could even cynically be described as a Machiavellian ploy to downgrade Saudi Arabia's influence and therefore make Moscow the indispensable oil superpower because of the sway that it exerts over the Kingdom as per the OPEC deal and the Islamic Republic vis-à-vis its large-scale investments there. All in all, Russia and Iran both benefit from this relationship.

Iraqi Kurdistan:

There's no certainty whether Russia's energy investments in Iraqi Kurdistan will lead to a cohesive convergence of regional Great Power interests or contribute to the larger developing contradiction between them. If Erbil opts to use this as leverage in its post-war "federalization" negotiation with Baghdad and no resultant conflict ensues, then Russia's move will in hindsight be appraised as a stroke of genius in deepening Moscow's strategic (and subtle) involvement in Mideast affairs, but if a civil war breaks out in a newly independent "Kurdistan" between the ruling KDP and its PUK/Gorran/PKK rivals and/or an international conflagration is catalyzed by this time, then Russia stands to lose an enormous amount of money as its investments become hostage to battlefield dynamics over which Moscow would have no control.

More valuable than money, however, is the soft power and regional goodwill that Russia would lose if an independent "Kurdistan" (whether nominally at "peace" with its neighbors or at war with them) fulfills the US' hoped-for role in functioning as the "second geopolitical 'Israel'" by destabilizing its Turkish, Iranian, Syrian, and rump-state Iraqi neighbors. Granted, if the new "state's" elite adroitly balance between Russia and the US and don't act to the detriment of any other regional actor, then Russia will interestingly achieve an unexpected convergence of interests with Turkey, through whose territory Moscow's energy investments would have to pass en route to the global marketplace.

Nevertheless, it's beyond Russia's realistic capabilities to convincingly lobby the Iraqi Kurdish elite any more than it already has, and there's a fair chance that they'll follow the US' strategic-military "advice" while simultaneously enjoying pragmatic apolitical energy relations with Moscow, which in that case would ultimately lead to a contradiction because of the regional conflict of interests that it'll prompt with Russia's partners, not least of which are its two Great Power ones in the Tripartite. Overall, it's safe to say that there's no conclusive indication as of yet whether or not Russia's energy diplomacy with Iraqi Kurdistan will yield the expected strategic dividends, though it's also too early to outright discount it's possibility given how there might be some ongoing behind-the-scenes negotiations right now between all relevant parties in the Mideast in relation to this region's upcoming independence referendum.

<u>Syria:</u>

Russia could in theory leverage its energy diplomacy in Syria to reap a convergence of mutually beneficial interests between itself and the Arab Republic, though this is fully conditional on Moscow de-hyphenating the country's strategic energy significance from that of its Iraqi Kurdish and "Israeli" neighbors, which is something that Russia is unlikely to do. On the surface, Russia's world-class technical expertise will be instrumental in helping Syria's energy industry recover after the war and ensuring reliable access to it for all of the population, though Russia – being the aspiring Eurasian Great Power Balancer that it is – might be tempted to expand the scope of its post-conflict reconstruction plans to include the involvement of Syrian resources in the Iraqi Kurdish energy network and "Israeli" Eastern Mediterranean Gas Pipeline. The former scenario becomes much more likely in the event that the Syrian Kurds attain "decentralization", "autonomy", or "federalization", while the latter can only occur if President Assad is no longer in office and the specific "Israeli"-inferred clause of the Russian-written "draft constitution" is accepted.

In principle, Russia should be satisfied that Syria is allowing it to rebuild the country's energy infrastructure and should respect the host government's political sensitivities by not working to advance its own Great Power interests at Damascus' perceived expense, but then again, Russia is indeed operating according to the Neo-Realist and cynical principles of the "19th-Century Great Power Chessboard" paradigm and has already taken steps to "balance" Syria's interests with its Kurdish population and Israel through some of the clauses that it included in the "draft constitution". Instead of accepting more "localized" in-country benefits from its Syrian investments and enjoying a perfect convergence of interests with Damascus, Russia is slated to expand them regionally if given the chance to do so even in spite of this creating a contradiction with Syria, though with the intent that it would be for the "greater good" of "converging" Russia's interests with those of its "Israeli" and Kurdish partners.

For the above reasons and due to the present trajectory that it's on, Russia's energy diplomacy in Syria could be described as more of a contradiction than a convergence because of how it implicitly goes against Damascus' will. The paradox, however, is that Russia believes that its regional ambitions in this sector would lead to a greater overall convergence between all parties in terms of the "bigger picture". The most desirous outcome for Syria would be if Russia remained content with the rights that it was given and didn't seek to expand upon them in promoting its regional Great Power designs (no matter how "well-intentioned"), though this "happy ending" can't be counted upon at the moment.

<u>Israel:</u>

As was explained, Russia wants to become a formal stakeholder in the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Pipeline and will probably seek to leverage its offshore energy rights in Syria to do so, though granted that it's successful in managing its complex and interrelated "constitutional reform" and "de-escalation zone" initiatives in the country first. Ideally, it would be best if Russia found a way to involve itself in this highly strategic project without utilizing Syria's offshore resources (in which case it would be a pure convergence of interests for everyone), though the regional contradiction of doing so might ultimately be the only way that Moscow can "buy a stake" in the pipeline. Therefore, it's most accurate to categorize Russia's energy diplomacy with "Israel" as a contradiction because of the heightened odds that Moscow will be tempted to sell Syria's energy to Tel Aviv and therefore carry through with the aforementioned conflict resolution scenarios which work out to "Israel's" favor more so than Syria's in their present form and taken to their ultimate conclusion.

Qatar:

Russia has very high hopes that its energy diplomacy with Qatar will result in some tangible geopolitical outcomes, though it's way too early to assess their results right now. It's only been half a year since Qatar took partial control over approximately 20% of Rosneft, and the second round of the Qatari-Saudi Cold War will complicate the regional picture the longer that it drags on for. Moreover, both sides are capable of influencing one another – Qatar could politicize its investment in Rosneft to push Russia to enact concessions towards its allied proxy forces in Syria (except for Al Nusra), while Russia could maximize its role in helping Qatar escape its Saudi-imposed "isolation" in order to do the reverse by compelling Doha to make concessions to Damascus. Either way, there are a lot of dynamic variables influencing the situation, and it'll probably take at least another six months before anyone can dependably assess whether this vector of Russia's energy diplomacy led to more of a convergence than a contradiction, therefore making it uncertain at the moment.

Saudi Arabia:

Just like with Qatar, it's too early to gauge the results of Russia's energy diplomacy with Saudi Arabia, though they appear to be trending towards a convergence more so than a contradiction. Moscow and Riyadh are involved in rectifying the canyon-wide divergence over their respective political solutions to the War on Syria, and thus far it looks like Russia has obtained the upper hand and that it's now impossible for the Saudis or anyone else to force a violent regime change against President Assad. Therefore, one could assume that Russia is now in the position to call the shots as it relates to the on-the-ground situation in Syria, which implies that Moscow can squeeze Riyadh for concessions and not the other way around.

Having said that, Russia has reiterated time and again that its military involvement in Syria is strictly focused on fighting terrorism and has nothing to do with determining the political fate of the country's leader, which could hint that Moscow is open to a "compromise" whereby he's "phased out" of power in an "orderly fashion". If Russia does indeed move forward with this scenario for whatever its reasoning might be, then it would represent a fundamental contradiction with Syria even if the overall "well-intended" objective is to ensure a larger convergence of interests among all parties guided to that eventual destination by Russia's "balancing" influence. Thus, the prevailing uncertainty surrounding the geopolitical (but not necessarily geo-economic) success of Russia's energy diplomacy with Saudi Arabia means that it'll probably also take around another half a year to properly assess.

Concluding Thoughts

Russia's energy diplomacy with the Mideast is very robust and varied, adapting to the specific domestic and international circumstances of its many partners and seeking to pioneer innovative ways for Russia to capitalize off of them in furthering its grand strategic goal to become the supreme balancing force in the Eurasian supercontinent. Whether it's Turkish Stream or the OPEC output deal, Russia is employing a fast array of energy-related tools to promote its regional policy, however, these also carry with them certain degrees of strategic risk.

Investments such as those in Turkey and Iran are the most secure and are characterized by numerous win-win complementarities and convergences of interest, while the present interconnected trajectory of those in Syria and Israel are defined by contradiction and could lead to an unexpected reversal of Moscow's hard-fought soft power gains in the region if the "wrong move” is made. However, Russia’s decision makers and strategists might deliberately choose to gamble their strong reputational influence in Syria if they felt like the expected geopolitical benefits that this could (operative word) yield might more than “compensate” for any soft power offset.

In between these convergences and contradictions are Russia’s investments in the Gulf States and Iraqi Kurdistan, which have yet to definitively result in any tangible geopolitical gains but can’t be written off either because not enough time has passed for them to be properly evaluated. Altogether, the general pattern is that the partnersgeographically closest to Russia (Turkey and Iran) enjoy the clearest convergence of interests as it relates to Moscow’s energy diplomacy, while those immediately beyond it (Syria, “Israel”, and Iraqi Kurdistan) and further afield (the Gulf States) either have yet to prove their worth or risk sparking a serious contradiction in Russia’s regional policy.

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